

**Joint meeting - West of England Combined Authority Committee and
West of England Joint Committee**

19 June 2020

Agenda item 10

Comments from Combined Authority Boards

AGENDA ITEM 10

JOINT MEETING - WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY COMMITTEE & WEST OF ENGLAND JOINT COMMITTEE

19 JUNE 2020

COMMENTS FROM COMBINED AUTHORITY BOARDS

Meetings of the Combined Authority Boards were held during May-June 2020.

A summary of comments from the Boards specifically about items included on the 19 June joint meeting committee agenda are set out below:

UPDATE ON RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC (agenda item 11)

Comments from the Transport Board:

* See comments below re: item 16 on bus network issues.

Comments from the Business Board:

The Board was briefed in particular on the role and planned activity of the Regional Economic Recovery Taskforce and commented as follows (noting that the Board will be kept regularly updated):

* It was suggested that there should be a long-term focus on encouraging employers to fill posts wherever possible. It was noted that a range of activities were envisaged to retrain and upskill individuals, in liaison where appropriate with the universities and colleges.

* It was essential to align the activities and focus of the Taskforce with the local economic renewal activity being taken forward by the unitary authorities.

* The opportunity should also be taken to promote business productivity improvements – this might include looking to increase ‘working from home’ opportunities for some employees, though mindful also of employer needs. The region needed to position itself to maximise innovative opportunities as lockdown eased, to support the economic recovery.

* The Board was also briefed in detail on the specific work being taken forward at this point, led by the Combined Authority’s Enterprise, Inward Investment & Trade and Innovation & Sector Development teams.

Comments from the Skills Board:

* The Skills Board was updated on the role / activity of the Regional Economic Recovery Taskforce, noting also that the Skills Advisory Panel was fully involved as part of the recovery planning activity. The Board would be kept regularly updated.

* The Board noted and welcomed the emergency decision, taken at an early stage of the lockdown, to safeguard funding for adult education providers.

* The Board also welcomed the action taken to refocus existing interventions in light of the pandemic, e.g. the refocus of Future Bright to include helping residents whose jobs and income have been affected by the Coronavirus situation.

* The Board also welcomed the proposals for the Workforce for the Future programme, noting that this will play a fundamental role in supporting SMEs respond to the crisis, whilst also helping connect individuals with new training and employment opportunities.

INVESTMENT FUND (agenda item 15)

Comments from the Planning & Housing Board:

* The Board was supportive of the proposed award of £2m to support the development of the Spatial Development Strategy/Local Transport Plan Evidence Base.

Comments from the Skills Board:

* The Board was supportive of the Careers Hub and Enterprise Adviser Network (EAN) Full Business Case and the proposed award related to this of £174k. It was noted that the Careers Hub and EAN currently supports 76 schools and colleges in the region – this proposal sought funding to build on the progress achieved to date by continuing the current delivery for a further year as well as extending the offer to the remaining special schools and pupil referral units not currently benefiting, thus reaching a total of 95 schools and colleges.

COVID-19 BUS NETWORK RECOVERY (agenda item 16)

Comments from the Transport Board:

* The Board noted the dramatic fall in passenger numbers, down to 10% of passenger numbers pre Covid-19, during the initial weeks of the lockdown period.

* The Board also noted that an emergency decision had been made to continue to support bus operators financially through tendered contracts and to reimburse operators for concessionary fares at pre-Covid levels. Payments for those functions would continue through to the end of June (the June committee report seeks approval of the continuation of concessionary fare reimbursement payments to bus operators at pre-Covid levels for a further 3 months to the end of September 2020).

* Given the limits on bus capacity, the Board recognised the importance of encouraging / capturing positive public behaviours around walking and cycling as the region moves out of lockdown.

* It will be essential to manage effectively communications to the public around the ongoing availability of bus services.

* It was noted that all potential funding sources are being actively pursued through the Urban Transport Group and the M9 group of Mayors in ongoing discussions with the government / Department for Transport.

* Concern was expressed about the impact on demand for bus services when the university terms start in the early autumn.

* The Board noted that the Combined Authority and the unitary authorities are actively planning / implementing Emergency Active Travel Measures and pursuing the related DfT funding.

* It was suggested that e-scooter trials should be encouraged, as should schemes to incentivise individuals to acquire bikes.

WEST OF ENGLAND BUS STRATEGY (agenda item 17)

Comments from the Transport Board:

- * The Board was generally supportive of the Plan, noting that the key principles of the strategy would still be applicable in a lockdown easing/post-Covid situation.
- * It was also felt that, given the pandemic, the strategy should be reviewed within 18 months in order to ensure its continued alignment with the future operating landscape at that stage.
- * The Board also requested that full liaison take place with the respective unitary authority planning departments in terms of relevant aspects of the design of schemes, e.g. Park and Ride site design in rural settings.

BUS INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT (agenda item 18)

Comments from the Transport Board:

- * The Board was generally supportive of the proposals.
- * The Board noted Bristol City Council's priorities in introducing a bus priority route over Bristol Bridge and at the entrance to Baldwin Street (the routes to be closed to general through-traffic).

WEST OF ENGLAND LOCAL CYCLING, WALKING AND INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN (agenda item 19)

Comments from the Transport Board:

- * The Board was generally supportive of the Plan but noted that the area to the east of Bath was not included.
- * Schemes to incentivise individuals to acquire bikes should be encouraged

STRATEGIC RAIL INVESTMENT (agenda item 20)

Comments from the Transport Board:

- * The proposals were generally supported.
- * It was noted that the strategic rail investment included the Yate to Gloucestershire line, and Charfield; the proposals being taken forward were as per Joint Local Transport Plan 4.
- * It was suggested that work should continue to find a solution for a Saltford station as swiftly as possible.

STRATEGIC PLANNING UPDATE (agenda item 21)

Comments from the Planning & Housing Board:

* The Board noted that following the unitary authorities formally withdrawing from the Joint Spatial Plan (JSP) process, two respective strategic plan making processes were being embarked upon currently, which would culminate in two strategic plans, a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the WECA area and a North Somerset Local Plan. The Board was briefed on how joint working would be undertaken to ensure alignment between the plans and processes. This followed on from all the unitary authorities formally withdrawing from the Joint Spatial Plan (JSP) process.

a. Comments in relation to the broad timeline:

* It was noted that the draft programme for the SDS would be subject to ongoing review and currently made the assumption that there was sufficient resourcing and that an 'ask' would be made to the June 2020 WECA Committee for £2m from the Investment Fund with a further allocation to be requested in October 2020 once the timetable for plan development had been confirmed.

* It would be important to keep to the set timescales, mindful of the resources available and any practical issues that may arise in compiling the evidence base work.

* The proposed request for funding from the Investment Fund, which would assist delivery against the timeline, was supported. It would be important to demonstrate value for money in the use of resources and to develop a more detailed risk register.

* In developing the evidence base, it would be critical to 'future-proof' plan development.

b. Comments in relation to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Statement of Common Ground (SoCG):

* It was noted that the SoCG would be a 'live' document, subject to ongoing development and adaptation through cross-authority agreement.

* It was suggested that the reference to Clean Growth within the MoU should be more explicit.

* It was noted that it will be important to ensure sustainable development goals are included / referenced in the MoU to help guide and inform the plan. It was suggested that the UN Sustainable Development Goals, or another suitable alternative should be included / referenced in the covering report.

* The report to be submitted to the June committee should include an example of a SoCG contents page.

c. Comments in relation to formal consultation and on-going non-statutory engagement:

* It was noted that the Phase 1 consultation would involve engagement on plan preparation and the evidence base. This would ensure that key evidence was developed in a collaborative manner, drawing on expertise, knowledge and input from relevant stakeholders.

* It was noted that the Phase 2 consultation would be the Statutory Consultation on the proposed Plan. The regulations required an SDS to have one round of formal public consultation for 12 weeks. This was proposed to start in June 2021.

* The important of engaging communities effectively was highlighted, and the need to raise awareness around the challenges faced and the potential opportunities / solutions to accommodate housing growth.

* It was noted that following the June committee, it was proposed that officers would work with the Planning & Housing Board and the Transport Board to develop and agree the ongoing non-statutory engagement programme for the SDS and report back progress to a future WECA/Joint Committee.

Noting/subject to the above comments, the Board endorsed the onward submission of the report for committee approval in June 2020.

UPDATE ON CLIMATE EMERGENCY PLANNING (agenda item 22)

Comments from the Transport Board:

* The update was noted; ongoing collaboration was taking place across the authorities and this would be fully referenced in the June committee report.

Comments from the Planning & Housing Board:

* The update was noted; it will be critical to move at pace in delivering the Climate Emergency Action Plan once it is in place.

Comments from the Business Board:

* The update was noted, noting the collaboration across the authorities.

* The importance and seriousness of achieving carbon neutrality in the region by 2030 was emphasised; increasing the number of carbon neutral homes would be critical to this.

Comments from the Skills Board:

* The Board noted the processes and timetable for producing the Climate Emergency Action Plan. It was noted that the longer-term impact of the Covid-19 crisis would need to be carefully assessed, e.g. in terms of future levels of private car and public transport usage, and any increased uptake in walking and cycling.

WEST OF ENGLAND JOINT GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY (agenda item 23)

Comments from the Planning & Housing Board:

* The Board noted that the strategy would assist the Combined Authority to plan and deliver a network of green infrastructure that will have multi-benefits, which will include helping the authorities to tackle the climate emergency; the strategy identified a framework and a consistent process for identifying projects through collaborative work

with officers across all the unitary authorities. A programme of work had been agreed and there was strong engagement with the Environment Agency, Natural England, West of England Nature Partnership and Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership.

* It was noted that the report recommended the establishment of an Environment Officer steering group and that this group would report into the Planning & Housing Board.

* The issue of resources to implement the strategy was discussed and recognised as an ongoing issue moving forwards. In addition to resources available through the authorities, opportunities to work with other organisations (e.g. the Woodland Trust) should be explored, noting that some partner organisations may be well placed to deliver particular elements of the action plan. It was noted that having a strategy and clearly defined action plan in place was important in terms of the potential for leveraging in funding from different channels.

* It was suggested that it would be useful to include a reference to linking into education through the curriculum at primary and/or secondary education level.

* Noting/subject to the above comments, the Board endorsed the Joint Green Infrastructure Strategy for onward submission for committee approval in June 2020 and also endorsed the proposed arrangements for the Environment Officer steering group.