

Public questions and replies

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**JOINT MEETING –
WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY COMMITTEE
& WEST OF ENGLAND JOINT COMMITTEE**

15 OCTOBER 2021

PUBLIC QUESTIONS & REPLIES

The following questions were submitted by the deadline (full details of questions are set out in the following pages):

- Q 1 Councillor Tim Rippington (Bristol) - Communications
- Q 2 David Redgewell - Department for Transport grant for bus services
- Q 3 David Redgewell - Bus Service Improvement Plan
- Q 4 Mike Birkin - Climate action

QUESTION 1

Question from: Councillor Tim Rippington (Bristol)

Subject: Communication

Question:

I would like to start by congratulating Mayor Norris on his election victory and thank him for the work he is doing to get the West of England Combined Authority working for everyone in the region.

As a Councillor for Brislington East, matters relating to WECA arise on a daily basis, especially relating to buses and transport. However, I have found communication with WECA officers to be less than satisfactory, with slow response times and often a lack of engagement. Your election presents a real opportunity to get WECA working efficiently and it would be a shame for this opportunity to go amiss. What can be done to improve the links between WECA officers and councillors who represent the areas that they are responsible for?

REPLY:

Thank you for your kind words and for letting me know about communication issues. I want the Combined Authority to be outward facing and to deliver for local residents. Please do let me know the specific details of any communication from the organisation that you feel has been less than satisfactory.

QUESTION 2

Question from: David Redgewell

Subject: Department for Transport grant for bus services

Question:

With the ending of the covid bus operator CSSG in England of £27.3 million a month and with covid 19 bus operators recovery grant of £226.5 from October 2021 to April 2022. **With service reductions in the West of England Mayoral Transport authority, what consultation has taken place with the combined authority councils over this funding issue?** - with the city and county of Bristol and the Bristol Mayor, South Gloucestershire Council and Bath and North East Somerset and North Somerset council; and parish and town council to reduce service reductions, and the funding issue as the metro mayor has no tax raising powers at present. But local authorities do, or a grant request can be made to the Department for Transport. On bus routes 18 Kingswood town centre, Warmley, North Common, Oldland Common, Keynsham town centre, Saltford, Newbridge Weston and Bath spa bus station Service 5 Downend, Bromley Heath, Oldbury Court, Fishponds, Stapleton village, Eastville park, St Werburghs, St Pauls, Bristol city centre. 672 Bristol city centre, Bedminster and the Chew Valley. What is the level of grant for the Department for Transport and from the 3 local authorities have to commission bus services as at present, the Department for Transport are still funding bus operators with support from the West of England combined authority.

REPLY:

I have written a cross party letter to transport minister Baroness Vere to express my concern at the sudden reduction of bus funding when passenger numbers have not returned to pre covid levels. The funding reduction has led to cuts and I will continue to press government for more resources.

The West of England Combined Authority has been allocated £909k from the government's £226.5m Bus Recovery Grant to provide financial support for its own bus service contracts through to the end of the financial year. This is because passenger numbers and farebox income remain below pre-Covid levels. This is not new money to provide additional services; nor is it available to support previously commercial services that have been reduced or withdrawn. Given the specific purpose of the funding, there is no requirement to consult on how it is used.

Emergency Covid arrangements have allowed bus operators to make short notice changes to their services, in response to passenger numbers and, more recently, driver shortages. This has restricted the ability of the Combined Authority to consult and consider a response. It is expected that these emergency arrangements will come to an end soon when operators will again be required to give a full 70 days' notice of service changes, allowing more opportunity to respond.

As referred to in the committee report on Supported Bus Services Procurement, the funding available from government and through the Transport Levy is in the region of £4m p.a.

QUESTION 3

Question from: David Redgewell

Subject: Bus Service Improvement Plan

Question:

With the importance of the National Bus Strategy and the West of England mayoral combined transport authority and North Somerset Council:

What plans does the Mayor have to consult passengers and stakeholders before the Draft is sent to central Government Department for transport bus minister Baroness Vere of Norbiton?

And in view of the importance of the West of England mayoral transport authority function, will the Mayor travel on the West of England bus and rail network with the councillors responsible for transport in Bristol, Don Alexander, in South Gloucestershire, Steve Reade, Sarah Warren in BaNES and Don Davies, leader of North Somerset council on cross boundary service to talk to passengers and bus, coach, rail and ferry companies - this is the practice of Andy Burnham, Mayor of Great Manchester, Steve Rotheram, Mayor of Liverpool city region and Mayor Andy Street in the West Midlands.

REPLY:

I would welcome an opportunity to travel on public transport across the region and speak directly to passengers. Consultation is covered in Section 2 of the report to the Joint Committee on the Bus Service Improvement Plan (item 12 on the agenda). The final version will be published and submitted to government by the end of October.

QUESTION 4

Question from: Mike Birkin

Subject: Climate action

Question:

Public Question on behalf of Climate Action West of England

We applaud the declaration of intent by the metro mayor to make the response to the Climate and Ecological Emergencies central to WECA's programme, and the support expressed by Council leaders for this.

We do not wish to cast doubt on the sincerity of these words since we all know that this is the "code red" moment for Humanity.

We recognise the difficulty faced by the combined authority which was never set up as a body with a mission to decarbonise the West of England. We also understand there are good reasons for the Climate Emergency Action Plan to be scaled up and revised

However, we are concerned to note that the resolution of the meeting in June to revise the emergency plan set no timescale. Nor was it laid out in the principles for a refreshed plan at the Extraordinary Meeting in September.

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 20 September state that the new Climate and Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan will be delivered in "Spring 2022". This causes us some concern as "Spring" lasts from March until June, meaning that it could be almost three years between the declaration of an Emergency and the adoption of a workable plan.

We ask therefore:

* May we please see a timeline for the steps to revision of the Climate Emergency Action Plan?

REPLY:

I agree that we need urgent action on climate change to meet our ambitious net zero targets.

In order to ensure that the revision of the Climate and Ecology Strategy and Action plan is meaningful, we will draw on the latest evidence base and engage with partners across the region to ensure views are heard and opportunities to drive action are maximised. A Spring 2022 timetable is realistic to allow that to happen, we intend to take a revised plan to the April meeting of the Combined Authority and Joint Committees.

It is important to note that, whilst the revised plan is in development, work is still ongoing to address the climate emergency. This includes but is not limited to:

- * developing a retrofit accelerator programme to significantly increase the pace of retrofit across the region;**
- * commissioning a Transport Decarbonisation Study to determine what action needs to be taken when, in order to meet our 2030 net zero carbon ambition.**
- * running 'Solar Together', a group-buying Solar PV scheme which over 5,500 of the region's residents have registered for;**

We are not letting the commitment to a refreshed ambition and the development of a revised plan delay us from taking action.

Once approved, the Environment Director role will be the driving force behind delivering on the refreshed ambition to addressing the Climate and Ecological emergencies across the region, which will include working in partnership with the Mayor's new Climate Action Panel and the region's unitary authorities.

*** Can the Authority set out the ways in which you will engage the communities, workers, and businesses of the West of England in the revision of the plan?**

REPLY:

The Mayor's Climate Action Panel will bring together stakeholders representing a diverse range of voices from across the region including community groups, trade unions, businesses and universities. It will act as a sounding board and its initial focus will be working with the Environment Director to help inform the revision of the Strategy and Action Plan.

All projects funded through the Green Recovery Fund will be subject to full business case appraisal in line with our standard investment decision making processes and will be overseen by the appointed Environment Director and developed in consultation with the unitary authorities.

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