

**COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM THE COMBINED  
AUTHORITY'S OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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## Feedback from Scrutiny Committee to Combined Authority Committee

### Overall:

The committee was not quorate, being one member short. Nevertheless this feedback has been shared by email with the whole committee with the opportunity to comment with changes made as a result

### **Urgency and transformation**

Across all programmes we have concerns about slippage, including the Governance/Transformation agenda.

The internal transformation programme appears to be progressing at officer level and following feedback from Audit committee there are more timebound milestones appearing to replace the overuse of the word “ongoing”. However, we are still not seeing significant progress on the two key Statutory recommendations, as evidenced by the need to have three options for a decision about how to proceed on Future4West (mass transit).

At the start of September Combined Authority staff informed us that there were some procedural, “low-hanging” improvements that should be made to the constitution to improve clarity about decision making and delegated authority arrangements. These are in the gift of the Committee to expedite separate from more fundamental issues that need to be addressed. We are concerned that these have not been progressed, which appears to be evidence of the ongoing and urgent need to build trust between the Authorities. This is a recurring theme of the feedback from Scrutiny and Audit committees ever since the Audit report was received, and we remain seriously concerned about the slow progress at political level and the resulting overall risks to the fundamental purpose of the Combined Authority.

We see a great deal of slippage across the capital programme. We accept that this it is positive that the delivery assurance and other initiatives are introducing more rigour into the programmes meaning that slippage maybe being identified earlier. However, there are some ambitious time-limited programmes like CRSTS, which appear to be at considerable risk despite the rebaselining.

We welcome the capacity building of project officers across the Combined and constituent Authorities, and this appears to be a worthwhile investment. We would like to see a programme-level analysis of the sequencing of projects to manage contractor availability and impact of transport initiatives on the overall transport network.

### **Transparency**

A recurring theme throughout is the high level of delegations to officers, often moving millions of pounds under delegated authority. Clearly there needs to be the ability to deliver at pace, especially time-limited grant-funded programmes, but there is a risk of lack of transparency and proper oversight.

BSIP is a good example of this, where the programme needs to be delivered at pace and in an agile way, but at the same time very significant financial movement within the programme is entirely delegated to officers meaning significant changes have been introduced with limited information being publicly available. We appreciate the briefings from officers to take us through the changes that have been made within BSIP, and look forward to a rapid review of Westlink.

## **Ambition**

We are concerned that some of the inherent assumptions of some transport programmes, and indeed the public feedback, are based on a relatively constant level of car use. In order to meet our carbon objectives, the programmes should fundamentally assume that they will be reducing, rather than simply displacing overall traffic, by providing alternatives to single occupancy cars. It is therefore positive to see acknowledgement in the A4 consultation that difficult decisions are needed, which may disadvantage some.

## **Carbon Accounting**

We note that each Unitary Authority and the Combined Authority are attempting to capture methods for assessing the carbon impact of all projects and programmes alongside well-developed financial accounting methods. Analysis of the potential for embedded carbon in construction projects to outweigh the benefits appears to be currently underdeveloped; progress on this front is urgently needed as part of the Future4West appraisals, and across the board as part of the strategy refresh and resulting programme review.

## **The bus market and franchising**

In the public forum we heard many very difficult stories of the impact that the current withdrawal of so many bus services is having on people. Although not part of the paperwork for this committee, one of the public statements noted that the recently announced work to be done on franchising is welcome, but hopes that it represents genuine progress and initial steps on the journey to franchising, not simply “a way of keeping us [the campaigners] at bay”.

It is important that the ambitious future plans do not distract us from the immediate problems faced by many of our communities with the inadequacy of the bus service.

## **Capacity of Scrutiny and Audit committees**

We are grateful for the additional capacity being put into the Scrutiny work programme, with 3 additional meetings this year to support us being proactive in our role, rather than simply meeting shortly before Committee meetings and commenting on the published paperwork. We also look forward to the forthcoming training for Scrutiny and Audit members to improve our understanding of how we can be effective.

We need to consider how to make scrutiny effective and efficient across the West of England, for example in monitoring delivery that has been delegated by the Combined Authority to Unitary Authority level.

## Specific Feedback on 6/10/23 agenda items

### **Delivery Assurance and Investment Fund programme:**

It is good to see that capacity is being built via training of project officers across the Combined and constituent Authorities, and this appears to be a worthwhile investment.

As mentioned, there is a concern as to the level of slippage and the potential for programmes to be competing for resources. Portfolio and programme level management is needed to build on the improved project management capacity to ensure that individual projects are not competing with one another, for example for contractor availability.

We recognise the need to collaborate with Unitary Authority scrutiny arrangements, especially in monitoring projects that have been delegated to Unitaries to deliver. We will need to get the level of detail right, ideally with an accessible dashboard of information and exception reporting that could be shared across all relevant scrutiny arrangements.

### **Climate and Ecological Strategy Action Plan**

We welcome the initiative to integrate Climate into all activities of the CA and hope that this can progress rapidly, and need some clear carbon metrics to be agreed as soon as possible to aid both decision making and communication with the private sector and the public.

The Action Plan is a large and comprehensive programme, and once again getting the right level of delegations will be critical. It would be useful to grade each of the 105 actions/projects to ensure differentiated focus on those that will have the greatest impact.

We agree that one of the greatest opportunities is to decarbonise energy at source and accordingly one of the most impactful risks is the substantial delays to connect to the National Grid; this is a key area where political leadership, pressure and advocacy is needed

Working with the Private sector is going well and although most large corporates are focussed on this agenda, it would be helpful if the programme might include “sticks” as well as “carrots”, and it is important to be mindful of the whole supply chain and ensuring that SMEs are able to be supported to play their part.

### **Adult Education**

Overall, this is a relatively stable sector with progress being delivered against the agreed plan, with the key feedback being the uncertainty caused by DofE annual rather than longer term budgets causing some uncertainty.

The committee mentioned the need for a focus in improving the levels of SEND young adults who are in employment with the current levels being below 10%

### **Transport Projects**

CRSTS: The committee was pleased to hear that the programme of Low traffic neighbourhoods is part of the agreed programme with DfT and the current review announced by the Prime Minister is anticipated to apply to future DfT funding. It is also good to hear that the level of over-programming

is increased to de-risk the current programme and create a pipeline of potential projects for CRSTS2. This is particularly the case given the M32 programme is an expensive line item with a high degree of risk. There is some concern that worthwhile Active Travel projects that may be lower risk have been removed from the programme.

The A4 corridor programme; we were reassured that this is progressing and that the longer-term vision will potentially form part of a future programme. We were further reassured that this is aligned with the Future4West programme and there is joint modelling taking place with the Temple Quarter master-planning programme. There is concern that the immediate deliverables will have limited impact given that the aim is for only a 10% reduction in journey time.

It was noted that more quantitative analysis up front may have helped with the A4 consultation, especially for the Keynsham bypass.

Future4West: Given the ambitious programme and the amount of work already undertaken it is very disappointing that there is no carbon analysis; it is not at all clear as to the net cost of the embedded carbon implicit in some of the options.

We debated as to whether any more time and effort should be invested in unrealistic options, that appear prohibitively expensive and appear to assume that tackling car dependency will not be possible. We are reassured that the additional marginal time and effort in pursuing all options is small and that this will ensure that the assessment is sufficiently robust to survive any future challenges.

The other key issue is the meanwhile issue; this programme is long term and we heard throughout the public forum of the immediate and severe impact on people's lives right now of the withdrawal of services across the region. The public are more concerned with the current, apparently vicious circle of decline than long term plans.

## **BSIP**

There has been a change in guidance that allows the programme to be extended by an additional year; this is positive, but in the absence of additional funding this has meant that the current contracts will absorb much of the remaining funding leaving little headroom to restore service, even those that offer good value for money.

We welcome a rapid review of Westlink operations and boundaries to improve its effectiveness and note that this is now even more urgent due to a recent Traffic Commissioner ruling. However, given that the delegated authority to make changes to the programme appears to be absolute we would like to see more transparency in how and when these decisions are made, accepting that the programme needs to be agile.

## **Budget Forecast:**

We share the concerns that the level of reserves is comparatively low and the current trajectory is unlikely to bring us up to the target level of reserves. We note that supplies and services appears under profile but this is due to additional in-year income.