

**COMMENTS FROM COUNCILLOR STEPHEN CLARKE,
CHAIR OF WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

**COMMENTS TO BE SUBMITTED TO:
JOINT MEETING OF WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY COMMITTEE
AND WEST OF ENGLAND JOINT COMMITTEE – 4 DECEMBER 2020**

Following our meeting on 2 December, I wish to raise the following matters on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. WECA and North Somerset

Mayors and Leaders will be aware that I wrote to you on behalf of the scrutiny committee on 20 November – see letter at Appendix 1. I have now received a reply from Mayor Bowles writing in his personal capacity as West of England Mayor, but I await a response from other members of the WECA Committee.

We are aware of the motion passed at the Bristol City Council meeting on 25 November.

We have asked for clarity from WECA officers about the options that may still be available and the processes and timeline that would need to be followed to enable North Somerset Council to join WECA.

We stress that in our view, you need to discuss this issue urgently as Mayors and Leaders and try and ensure that our region, including North Somerset, has the ability to speak with one voice when decisions are being made by central government that impact on all our citizens. It remains our understanding that if this issue cannot be resolved urgently, then North Somerset will not be able to join WECA until 2025 at the earliest. This is unacceptable in our view.

2. Strategic Rail Investment (agenda item 11)

The committee was broadly supportive of the 10 year rail plan and strongly support all measures that can be delivered as part of this plan in terms of electrification of rail and ensuring fully accessible stations. We noted that the Strategic Outline Business Case for mass transit will be completed in 2021, and that, depending on the outcome, this may ultimately result in some future adjustments being required to the rail plan.

3. Investment Fund (agenda item 15)

The committee was supportive of the proposals being brought forward through this report, including the creation of the Development Infrastructure Fund and the Housing and Regeneration Enabling Fund.

A specific query was raised regarding how the WECA £10m allocation for Walking and Cycling is reflected in the report - subsequent to our meeting, we have received clarification from officers that £1.1m is allocated for 'Business Case Development' (p107 of the 4 December WECA Committee agenda pack - Appendix 1 of the Investment Fund

report), entitled “Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure”, with the remaining £8.9m included within the Transport Infrastructure projects ‘tail’ of £47.445m (as detailed on p108), and we note that this sum will be drawn down upon completion of relevant business cases.

4. Adult Education Budget – approach for the 2021/22 academic year (agenda item 16)

The committee was supportive of these proposals and received an update from the Scrutiny Skills member sub-group which has looked at this issue in depth and highlighted the following points:

Members particularly welcomed:

- * The commissioning of adult education providers that will work towards the region’s Industrial Strategy, Employment and Skills Plan, and economic recovery from Covid-19.
- * WECA’s joined up approach to the Adult Education Budget, encouraging the sharing of provider delivery plans to avoid duplication within FE Colleges.

Members also encouraged:

- * More working with overview and scrutiny in this area, in particular to review performance data for the Adult Education budget.
- * That FE and HE providers work closer together to work towards our Climate Emergency targets, seeing the green industrial strategy as a possible future impetus for greater joint working to achieve our low carbon aims.

A full report back from the group on their meeting is included at Appendix 2.

At our committee meeting, we also noted and welcomed that WECA has invested in the We Work for Everyone project to improve employment outcomes for people with learning disabilities across the region.

5. Report back from Scrutiny Transport sub-group

We received a report back from the Transport sub-group which has recently been updated on the development of the Future Transport Zones programme, the current e-scooters trial and the situation regarding the Covid impact on public transport.

In terms of the ‘Dynamic demand responsive transport’ project, it was suggested that issues around affordability for users must be considered; lessons could also be learnt from a previous pilot in the Henleaze area of Bristol.

Cllr. Stephen Clarke
Chair, West of England Combined Authority Overview & Scrutiny Committee

20/11/20

Dear Mayor Rees, Mayor Bowles, Cllr. Savage and Cllr. Romero

North Somerset and WECA

I write this letter as the Chair of WECA Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Please note however that it has been agreed by the other members of that committee of all political parties and all geographical locations (as listed below).

We note with some dismay the contents of the recent letter addressed to Mayor Rees from the leaders of the other authorities which comprise WECA, and North Somerset. We only know the details contained in that letter and subsequent statements from Mayor Rees so it is possible that we are not in possession of some of the relevant facts.

In principle, it makes complete business, geographical and environmental sense that North Somerset be part of the combined authority and indeed we understand that was the original hope and intention. For whatever political decision made by those in power in North Somerset at that time, this did not happen.

In questions of transport, housing and the environment our region must ideally be considered as an entity including North Somerset if the full benefits of devolution are to be realised, and we recognise that new investment is essential to achieve this. It is nonsense for example that half of Bristol Port is geographically in WECA and half is not and that a major piece of transport infrastructure such as Bristol Airport has no political links with the region it primarily serves.

We note that all constituent authorities support – in principle – the expansion of WECA to include North Somerset. We also note that Mayor Rees has stated that the challenges to this progress is due to a lack of financial detail from Westminster.

We understand that if this issue cannot be resolved urgently then North Somerset will not be able to join WECA until 2025 at the earliest and this is not acceptable. Therefore, we ask that all parties meet to discuss this urgently and try and ensure that our region has the ability to speak with one voice when decisions are being made by central government that impact on all our citizens.

We request to be updated on the progress including process, governance and financial details so that we can adequately scrutinise this issue.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Clarke, Green Party, Bristol City Council. Chair of WECA Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Winston Duguid, Lib Dem, BANES.

Hal MacFie, Lib Dem, BANES.

Geoffrey Gollop, Conservative, Bristol City Council.

Gary Hopkins, Lib Dem, Bristol City Council.

Brenda Massey, Labour, Bristol City Council.

Carole Johnson, Labour, Bristol City Council.

Mhairi Threlfall, Labour, Bristol City Council.

Huw James, Lib Dem, North Somerset Council.

Mike Bird, Independent, North Somerset Council.

Peter Crew, Conservative, North Somerset Council.
John Ashe, Conservative, South Glos Council.
Brian Allinson, Conservative, South Glos Council.
James Arrowsmith, Lib Dem, South Glos Council.

Appendix 2 - Adult Education Budget sub-group notes

Councillors in Attendance: Brenda Massey, Peter Crew, Huw James, and James Arrowsmith

Officers in Attendance: Stephen Bashford, Naomi Logan, Henry Laws, Tim Milgate

The WECA Skill Sub-Group:

- **Note and agree:** with the recommendations, and thank the Adult Education Team for meeting with us and discussing their work plan.
- **We particularly welcome:**
 - The commissioning of adult education providers that work towards the region's Industrial Strategy, Employment and Skills Plan, and Economic Recovery from Covid-19.
 - The West of England Combined Authority's joined up approach to the Adult Education Budget, encouraging the sharing of provider delivery plans to avoid reduplication within FE Colleges. Traditionally, there has been lots of reduplication and FE colleges worked together where there was commercial benefit, rather than for the good of West of England learners. Using public funding more openly to deliver the best value.
- **We encourage:**
 - More working with overview and scrutiny. In particular it would be good to see more performance data for the Adult Education budget.
 - FE and HE providers to work closer together to work towards our Climate Emergency Targets, seeing the green industrial strategy as a possible future impetus for greater joint working to achieve our low carbon aims. There's certainly the physical infrastructure to do this within the construction sector of adult education – there just needs to be some money to incentivise joint operating models.

Summary of Meeting:

Henry Laws introduced councillors to the Adult Education Budget Report.

Key Points were:

- Adult education funding is typically targeted towards over-18s who have not picked up an academic or vocational training – often providing Level 2 or 3 training.
- Years 19/20 were focused on continuity, 20/21 will introduce measured changes, including curriculum delivery plans that will be linked to grant funding allocations, new performance management objectives, and a new commissioning approach linked into the Local Industrial Strategy¹ and Employment and Skills Plan^{2,3}

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818989/1907_VERSION_West_of_England_Interactive_SINGLE_PAGES.pdf

² <https://www.westofengland-ca.gov.uk/employment-skills-plan/>

³ https://www.westofengland-ca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/190320-Employment-and-Skills-Plan-Evidence-Base-June-2019-FINAL_compressed.pdf

- As such, the 20/21 AEB will feature much more change than in the previous year and will require a greater focus.
- WECA has 29 Adult Skills Funding providers – this includes some very small contract allocations. £600 to multi millions, FE Colleges, Charities, Local Authorities – some local some further afield. A new Minimum Contract Value should change this so that 19 of our 29 providers will be removed (amounting to £1.2 million in contracts).

Clarifications:

1. **Could you explain the difference between workforce for the future funding and the adult education budget and how the spending is used?** Workforce for the Future Funding is targeted at SMEs and their Workforces, focused on diagnostics and in-work upskilling, whereas the AEB is targeted at residents and focused on their needs.

Questions:

- a) **How many people are benefitting from this at the moment?** On an average year 15,500-16,000 it is postcode restricted to people within the WECA region. We don't have exact data as its just come in however they will have a clearer picture within a few weeks.
- b) **What has been the funding impact this year?** The government are starting to realise that AEB is an area that requires extra funding, and covid-19 has brought extra funding for specific areas. £600,0000 for sector based worked academies with high value to our community. This will be administered within the way the government recommend.
- c) **How will our use of Online and Distance Learning change?** This year's AEB hopes to reduce reduplication in Distance Learning and to end the use of low-quality distance learning that adds little value for learners. Future funding will be prioritised towards locally-focused providers, OR, whatever optimises community need – disadvantaged communities are most likely to respond to face to face learning rather than distance.
- d) **Questions surrounding the DIT, and how to encourage growth within FE Colleges – particularly the City of Bristol and, South Gloucestershire and Stroud Colleges.**
- e) **Will the Minimum Contract value drown our smaller, more niche and tailored providers?** The majority of smaller providers did not add much value towards the region. There are exceptions for example, there's one provider who offered supported internships. Additional funding will be invested to fill gaps in the strategy. – these smaller providers should end up being part.
- f) **Business West and the IPPR say that ESOL training for immigrants and residents who are not fluent or proficient in English Language Skills will play an essential part in providing the West of England Labour market with the workforce it needs following the proposed migration changes. What is the provision of affordable or free training like currently and what's the ambition there?** We offer free training to some groups, others will have to pay (No Recourse Rules). Lots of work on restructuring to make provisions more efficient, for example reducing reduplication within geographic locales –

however there's no national funding focus on this. Cllr Massey has invited West of England to meet the key providers who have created a strategy together. We need to think about who needs provisions but doesn't get any.

Overview and Scrutiny West of England Scrutiny Meeting:

- g) **Learning Difficulties** – We Work for everyone fund aims to support 2,000 people with learning difficulties across the region – this goes live soon.
- h) **How do people who are low income and unemployed find out about these Adult Education Schemes?** DWP, Future Bright, and redundancy rapid response.