

**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 – 29 JANUARY 2021**

Following our meeting on 27 January, I wish to raise the following matters on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. North Somerset Council joining WECA

Mayors and Leaders will be aware of our concern that it was not possible to take forward the proposition of North Somerset joining WECA in advance of the next WECA Mayoral election scheduled for May.

We have agreed that we will hold an additional meeting(s) specifically to discuss how North Somerset Council joining WECA could potentially be taken forward as soon as practically possible after the Mayoral election.

We note that all authorities concerned would need to agree to take this forward.

The specific questions and issues we wish to understand and explore, which we will hope will assist this process, are likely to include:

- how we can seek clarification from / lobby the government about the extent of additional resources and devolved powers that could be secured for the region through North Somerset joining WECA; and compare this with what each authority is seeking through further devolution.
- how to take forward discussions with government about this happening outside of the WECA Mayoral electoral cycle.
- in the meantime, how can we ensure the maximum degree of involvement of North Somerset in WECA arrangements.

2. West of England Housing Delivery Strategy (agenda item 12)

We recognised that the housing delivery strategy is essentially about how to accelerate the delivery of housing utilising the available tools, mechanisms and funding available to WECA and delivery partners.

We would like to emphasise though the critical importance of accelerating affordable housing across the region. This needs to be seen in the context that individual unitary authorities have more 'ambitious' affordable housing definitions than that defined through national planning policy. The local authorities need an agreed definition of affordable housing and this should be included as a definition in the housing delivery strategy to make it clear what is meant by these words. Implementing the strategy must help deliver these local ambitions by accelerating delivery and maximising new affordable housing.

We also noted that the strategy does not have formal, fixed targets but has been constructed to support existing Local Plans and the draft Spatial Development Strategy and updated/new Local Plans as they are developed.

3. Bus network recovery (agenda item 19) and Transport Decarbonisation study (agenda item 20)

Our Transport sub-group fed back comments following a detailed briefing given to them by officers on 21 January. See appendix 1 for a detailed summary of points discussed at that meeting.

At our meeting we also highlighted the following points:

* We would like to be kept informed of the position once a clearer view emerges from government about the National Bus Recovery Strategy and any proposed transitional arrangement e.g. a Bus Recovery Partnership with the Combined Authority.

* We note that as part of the previous Bus Strategy work, officers developed a framework to evaluate the relative costs and societal benefits of bus services and that an evidence-based tool has accordingly been developed that will help evaluate future tenders for bus services based on key principles included in the Bus Strategy. We note that the views of the Transport Board on this framework will be sought at their February meeting and welcome the offer that was made at our meeting to share this framework tool with us.

* In terms of the potential options that may be highlighted through the Transport decarbonisation study, and whilst recognising the significant scale of this challenge, we are particularly keen that as much as possible is done to help prepare for and enable zero-emission vehicle use into the future.

4. WECA annual business plan 2021-22

We generally welcomed the plan and the clarity of the information set out.

In terms of the four Business Growth objectives set out on page 12, whilst appreciating there is a lot of activity behind these objectives, we felt it would have been helpful to include specific objectives in terms of clean business growth.

In terms of the Corporate Risk Register at Appendix 2, we suggest that an additional risk should be added around the risk of extreme weather.

We also felt that it will be important to consider, in the context of WECA's business plan moving forwards (and the Climate Emergency Action Plan), the implications of 'The Sixth Carbon Budget' report (the UK's path to net zero) published in December by the Climate Change Committee.

5. Finance reports

We received a full briefing on the six finance reports and generally welcomed the proposals in the Investment Fund report. We noted that (as we approach the Mayoral election and with a longer break than usual between committee meetings) the finance reports seek approval of a number of delegations to officers to help ensure in particular that progress can continue to be made on projects included within the approved £350m investment programme – whilst we understand the need for this, we asked that we are kept informed about delegated decisions as they are taken.

In relation to Treasury Management, we would like to be involved in discussions around developing an ethical investment programme.

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

Appendix 1

WECA Scrutiny - Transport sub-group Summary points from meeting held on 21 January 2021

Members present: Cllr Gary Hopkins, Cllr Hal MacFie, Cllr Mike Bird, Cllr Huw James
Apologies: Cllr Mhairi Threlfall, Cllr Carole Johnson, Cllr Brian Allinson

The sub-group was briefed on the following reports included on the 29 January WECA / Joint Committee agenda:

Item 19 – Bus network recovery

Peter Mann provided a briefing on this report and responded to members' questions. There was general support from members for the report recommendations.

Main points noted/raised in discussion:

- * Bus patronage/demand is not expected to return to 100% of pre-Covid levels in the short to medium-term owing to the likely permanent changes in people's working behaviours and lifestyles.
- * It is difficult at this point to accurately assess how quickly bus patronage will increase as the Covid situation eases - the most optimistic view is that in 18 months - 2 years' time, there could be a return to 75-80% of pre-Covid levels.
- * The current bus strategy is due to be reviewed in any event by the end of 2021. This will present an opportunity to take stock of the impact of lifestyle changes since March 2020.
- * All authorities will need to take a full and very pro-active role in encouraging bus use as the pandemic eases and discouraging private car use, particularly in terms of the work commute. Potential congestion / pollution from increased levels of private car use is a serious concern.
- * The Government has committed to publishing a National Bus Recovery Strategy in the first quarter of 2021. The current understanding is that the government will propose a transitional arrangement (a Bus Recovery Partnership) as a bridge from the current emergency support to a longer-term delivery model for bus services such as an

Enhanced Partnership. This may involve an offer to devolve Government funding to mayoral combined authorities in the short to medium term. Details from the government are awaited – it is noted that the committee report proposes delegations to enable agreement to take place on devolved emergency funding to support local bus services and associated powers should a suitable offer be made by Government.

* Under any such government proposals, there will not in practical terms be an opportunity for public consultation to be undertaken given the timescale for taking action; although carried out pre-Covid, the consultation previously held on the bus strategy is still relatively recent and is a useful reference point. At this point, there is no certainty about the overall timeframe that the government may propose for any bus recovery partnerships.

* The issue of franchising was discussed - it was noted that taking up franchising carries significant risks to transport authorities in terms of 'certainty' about passenger numbers and revenue, particularly at this time. Some form of partnership arrangement is a more likely route and this seems to be the model most likely to be encouraged by the government.

* Given reduced patronage, it is inevitably the case that the pre-Covid bus network will not be sustainable and very careful consideration will need to be given to service changes. Close liaison is taking place with First group as the main operator to understand those services that are least likely to be sustainable.

* Moving forwards, it will be important for authorities to take the opportunity to consider and re-think how bus and rail services will co-relate in a post-pandemic world, taking account of changing behaviours – an integrated public transport offer must be encouraged.

Item 20 – Transport decarbonisation study

David Carter provided a briefing on this report and responded to members' questions. There was general support from members for the report recommendations.

Main points noted/raised in discussion:

* It was noted that the study will generate a set of options, each with a proportionate contribution towards the overall 2030 net zero carbon commitment, so that packages of options and their combined impacts can be considered. This will provide the evidence base for decision making on which strategic interventions to progress and take forward to design, consultation and delivery.

* The list of potential future strategic interventions for the study at appendix 1 was noted and generally welcomed. In terms of the reference in the first listed intervention to electric vehicles, it was suggested that it would be better to use the term "zero emissions" rather than "electric" as this, for example, will keep open the option of hydrogen solutions.

* In terms of emissions, the study/report will provide factual evidence and data about emission sources. There will then be choices to be made about options to reduce emissions. This will also help provide clarity about the actions that the Combined Authority can achieve but also about those actions where other organisations will need to take a key role.

* It was noted that the study will include the opportunities for delivering sooner on proposals for a West of England area electric vehicle charging network. It is anticipated that while the private market will meet part of the infrastructure requirements, there is likely to be a significant role for public bodies in ensuring a sufficient network coverage

to create confidence, ensure viability, and increase EV uptake. This will include investing in those sites that might not be the most financially attractive at the moment (potentially with funding support) but that will play an important role in the network and have the potential to provide better financial returns in the future.

In relation to this, there may be an opportunity for the unitary authorities to consider anticipating future developments by installing EV points for private car charging on a commercial basis in car park sites that they own.