

STATEMENTS RECEIVED – WECA AUDIT COMMITTEE – 25 FEBRUARY 2021

1. Cllr Stephen Clarke (Chair of WECA Overview & Scrutiny Ctte) – WECA scrutiny views on WECA expansion (North Somerset)

STATEMENT TO WECA AUDIT COMMITTEE – 25 FEBRUARY 2021

Statement from Cllr Stephen Clarke on behalf of the WECA Overview & Scrutiny Committee

WECA scrutiny views on WECA expansion (North Somerset)

Dear WECA Audit Committee members

Introduction

The WECA Overview and Scrutiny Committee has recently been giving further consideration to the issues around how North Somerset Council might join WECA at a future point. We agreed at our most recent meeting that it would be appropriate to inform the WECA Audit Committee of our views for members' information.

Background

We established a sub-group of WECA scrutiny members to examine how WECA Scrutiny may be able to encourage the expansion of WECA to incorporate North Somerset as a constituent council. A report produced by the sub-group is included as an Appendix to this statement.

Our views on WECA expansion to include North Somerset

WECA scrutiny members retain the strong view (which we have reported previously to the Mayors and leaders of the West of England authorities) that every effort should be made to facilitate the expansion of WECA to include North Somerset.

WECA scrutiny members fully endorse the report of the sub-group as set out in the appendix.

In particular, we wish to highlight the following points:

* We note that last summer, a draft prospectus was produced setting out the anticipated regional benefits that could arise from North Somerset joining WECA which also included a number of key 'asks' of government. We also note that there has been no clear indication from Government about its financial offer to support expansion.

* Moving forwards, we feel that if all authorities could agree, there is scope for a future 'twin-track' approach, through which Mayors and Leaders seek a firm commitment from government about the resources that could be available, but also be prepared to negotiate on the basis of an updated, ambitious regional prospectus.

* Our strong view is that it would be beneficial to the region for North Somerset Council to join WECA, as it is clear to us that the Combined Authority should align with the West of England's functional economic area.

* We also feel that certain aspects have moved on since last summer that strengthen the case for an expanded WECA even more:

For example:

- From an economic perspective, a Freeport bid has been submitted which, if successful will strengthen the region (including the North Somerset area) economically and enhance what the region can offer in terms of helping the regional economy to recover post-Covid.

- WECA also now has a climate emergency action plan in place with an ambitious overarching target to secure net zero carbon by 2030 – a fully unified combined authority across the functional,

regional economic area will surely be better placed to secure a fully integrated approach to tackling this critical agenda, and could, for example, see all authorities working better together to implement the guidance offered through the 'The Sixth Carbon Budget' report (the UK's path to net zero) published in December by the Climate Change Committee.

* We fully recognise that all authorities concerned will need to freshly agree to open discussions with the government about expanding WECA to include North Somerset. Whilst it was not possible to secure agreement across authorities prior to this year's Mayoral election, we will continue to argue the case. To that end, we intend to actively engage again with Mayors and leaders as soon as possible following the May WECA and Bristol Mayoral elections.

Cllr Stephen Clarke
Chair of WECA Overview & Scrutiny Committee

APPENDIX

REPORT TO INFORMAL MEETING OF WECA OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 FEBRUARY 2021

Report back from Scrutiny sub-group – 3 February 2021

Introduction

1. As requested at the meeting of the WECA Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 27 January 2021, our sub-group met on 3 February to hold an initial discussion on how WECA Scrutiny may be able to encourage the expansion of WECA to incorporate North Somerset as a constituent council.
2. The members in attendance at our sub-group meeting were:
 - Cllr Winston Duguid
 - Cllr Hal MacFie
 - Cllr Huw James
3. We agreed that it would be appropriate to report back to an informal WECA scrutiny meeting in the first instance, and to invite the WECA Chief Executive and statutory legal and finance officers to attend that meeting.
4. We preface our comments with the full recognition that all authorities concerned will need to agree to open discussions with the government about expanding WECA to include North Somerset. Whilst it was not possible to secure agreement across authorities prior to this year's Mayoral election, we strongly encourage taking forward actions to enable North Somerset to join WECA as soon as practically possible after the Mayoral election.

Issues considered

We looked in particular at the 3 questions highlighted in **BOLD PRINT** below and have set out some suggestions under each question for the wider committee to consider.

Question 1

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?

Our comments:

We note that during the summer of 2020, a draft prospectus was produced.

We note that the draft prospectus set out the anticipated regional benefits that could arise from North Somerset joining WECA and set out a number of key 'asks' of government.

One option moving forwards could be **to ask the authorities to consider updating the prospectus so it could be used as a potential negotiating tool with government?** – some aspects have moved on since last summer which we feel strengthen the case for an expanded WECA even more:

For example:

- From an economic perspective, we understand a Freeport bid is being submitted which, if successful will strengthen the region (including the North Somerset area) economically and enhance what the region can offer in terms of helping the regional economy to recover post-Covid.
- WECA also now has a climate emergency action plan in place with an ambitious overarching target to secure net zero carbon by 2030 – a fully unified combined authority across the functional, regional economic area will surely be better placed to secure a fully integrated approach to tackling this critical agenda, and could, for example, see all authorities working better together to implement the guidance offered through the 'The Sixth Carbon Budget' report (the UK's path to net zero) published in December by the Climate Change Committee.

We wish to take a 'forward look' on regional expansion rather than spend time analysing past events – nevertheless, we are aware that an important point raised by the Bristol Mayor previously was that there was no clear indication from Government about its financial offer to support expansion.

If all authorities could agree, perhaps there is scope for some form of 'twin-track' approach? i.e. try to seek a firm commitment from government about the resources that could be available, but also be prepared to negotiate on the basis of an ambitious regional prospectus.

The committee may wish to write to current Mayors and Leaders (with a follow-up after the WECA and Bristol mayoral elections) suggesting that they should take forward a 'twin track' approach as suggested, to bring benefits for all the authorities' residents.

We would also particularly encourage the North Somerset Council Leader to take the initiative in liaising with the authorities' Mayors and Leaders to again advocate the case for WECA expansion.

Question 2

How to take forward discussions with government about WECA expansion happening outside of the WECA Mayoral electoral cycle?

Our comments:

We would like to know definitively whether there is realistic scope for not having to wait until 2025 to bring North Somerset into WECA. At the same time, we recognise that there is a potential issue / argument around a 'democratic deficit', i.e. if North Somerset joined before 2025, the Mayor would have no mandate from North Somerset voters before the 2025 election.

Question 3

In the meantime, how can we ensure the maximum degree of involvement of North Somerset in WECA arrangements?

Our comments:

We note from a recent media report <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/minister-offers-path-north-somerset-4960958> that Luke Hall, Regional Growth and Local Government Minister has written to South Gloucestershire Council indicating that *'if agreement can be secured between partners locally, there is scope for North Somerset to become a 'non-constituent' member of the combined authority, subject to the same legal process at any time, albeit without full benefits of being included in the area of the combined authority.'*

This may be an interim option that we might wish to support but we would like to understand exactly what practical benefits will arise if North Somerset were to become a 'non-constituent' member, over and above the current arrangements.

We are aware, for example, that a number of measures are already in place to encourage effective collaboration with North Somerset, including:

- North Somerset is a full member of the Local Enterprise Partnership and is also a voting member of its accountable body, the West of England Joint Committee.

- Since January 2020, the WECA Committee and West of England Joint Committee have met as a single joint meeting, rather than holding entirely separate meetings – voting has to be carefully handled but, as far as possible, agenda items are considered jointly. Although not having voting rights on WECA Committee matters, in practice the Leader of North Somerset is often given the opportunity to speak at meetings on 'WECA' items of business where there are overlaps with Joint Committee matters.

- Similarly, although North Somerset members of WECA scrutiny are technically 'observers' for WECA matters, they are in practice permitted to speak on most items of business – a member of the public watching the meeting is perhaps unlikely to observe that NS members have 'secondary' status at meetings.

- North Somerset Cabinet portfolio holders sit on the WECA Boards.

So, we are not sure that North Somerset joining WECA as a 'non-constituent' member will take us very much further.

Conclusion

We will welcome a wider discussion on our above thoughts at an informal Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the first instance, and suggest that the WECA Chief Executive and statutory legal and financial officers attend if possible to respond to any member questions. It will also be useful to see if any other combined authorities are facing this issue.

Cllr Winston Duguid
Cllr Hal MacFie
Cllr Huw James