

COMMENTS FROM CHAIR OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

COMMENTS TO BE SUBMITTED TO: WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY COMMITTEE and WEST OF ENGLAND JOINT COMMITTEE 28 JANUARY 2022

I wish to present the following comments on behalf of scrutiny members:

1. Relationship between Metro Mayor and unitary authority Leaders

We were pleased that the Metro Mayor again attended our meeting and that he has given an ongoing commitment to engage with scrutiny.

We were also pleased to welcome Cllr Toby Savage, Leader of South Gloucestershire Council to the meeting. We are very happy to extend an invitation to all Mayors and Leaders to attend our future meetings, with a view to enabling us as scrutiny members to raise issues with them and ask questions of them about forthcoming decisions.

It is clear to us that it is now absolutely vital that Mayors and Leaders resolve their evident 'differences' (for example, around their differing views about the merits of pre-agenda briefings/meetings involving Mayors and Leaders to discuss committee reports as part of the governance arrangements) as a matter of urgency and find a workable way forward that recognises the need to collaborate and work collectively in the best interests of our region's residents.

If this is not resolved urgently, we fear reputational damage for the region may prevail. Given the context of the imminent Levelling-Up white paper, we need to demonstrate that the region is ready to deliver.

We eagerly await the outcome of the work being undertaken by Professor Steve West in liaison with Mayors and Leaders to unlock and understand the issues that need to be resolved and help find a constructive way forward.

We urge that public discussions between Mayors and Leaders are held in a mutually respectful manner and in the spirit of collaboration – as in other combined authority areas, there will inevitably be areas of political disagreement from time to time – the key challenge is to overcome this and focus on delivery across the areas of agreement.

We note that the Audit Committee is intending to review governance matters at their meeting on 1 March, particularly in terms of addressing the potential risks that the current political situation may have in relation to the Combined Authority's governance and ensuring sound and secure decision-making. We sincerely hope that the Audit Committee will, by 1 March, be in a position to

assess that real progress is being made in terms of the working relationship between Mayors and Leaders.

2. Specific comments on the 28 January Combined Authority Committee reports:

Some of the reports were considered by our Transport sub-group at their meeting held on 17 January and comments from Cllr Ed Plowden, Chair of the sub-group are set out at Appendix 1.

Specific comments on reports:

a. Agenda item 9 - Mayoral and Combined Authority budget 2022/23 and medium-term financial forecast

*The figures that jump out are on page 46/47 in Appendix 1. Staff costs would appear to go from a budget of £8,098k in 2021/22 to a budget of £9,646k in 2022/3, a 19% increase. The detailed narrative and answers from the section 151 officer gave good insight. The Corporate and Democratic Core costs of operating a Combined Authority are rising by just over 3%, whilst CA support services rise by 14%, reflecting the need to maintain back office services, particularly in ICT, where the growth of development of digital tools, corporate websites as well as data warehousing and geospatial infrastructure are needed. In essence therefore an outturn of £8,471k this financial year rises by 7% to £9,051k and then a figure of £631k has been added in SDS to fund housing and planning staff.

* Members stressed the importance of delivering the Portishead railway line and are appreciative of officers' ongoing efforts to resolve this.

* We noted and supported the proposal to transfer £950k from the 2021/22 Transport Levy to a specific earmarked reserve to fund the anticipated additional costs of maintaining continuity of bus services prior to the re-tender of major bus routes in August 2022.

* It will be important to maintain a close watch on the impact of inflation on key activities and projects.

* We noted and are supportive of the Financial Reserves Policy.

b. Agenda item 10 – Capital Strategy

* We noted the updated Treasury Management and Investment strategies.

* We are supportive of the specific Highways and Transport Capital Grant allocations totalling £25m to the constituent councils for 2022/23. We noted that the Department for Transport had adjusted the West of England allocation with a significantly reduced highways capital maintenance element of £14.6m and we welcome the fact that through the use of the CRSTS, we are now able to provide greater certainty for the constituent unitary authorities to help them better plan their highways capital maintenance over a five year period, through this proposal to raise the annual allocation to £25m per annum.

c. Agenda item 11 – Investment fund programme

* We noted this report and welcomed the £2m for Strategic Masterplanning from the Investment Fund headroom – we would like to be kept informed about the specific allocation of this funding in due course.

d. Agenda item 12 – Investment Fund – change requests

* We noted this report but asked that officers send us some further information:
- on the latest position on the timeline for producing the Spatial Development Strategy.

- to explain the delay in taking forward the specific housing delivery programme through the North Keynsham Land Acquisition Fund.

e. Agenda item 13 - Regional recovery and adoptions fund

* We support the proposal to allocate £5m to this fund and will be interested to receive further background information from officers on the detail / evidence on those sectors of the economy that suffered the greatest impacts through the pandemic.

f. Agenda item 14 – Green Recovery Fund

* We were pleased to see this initial report. In relation to retrofitting of buildings to achieve carbon reductions, it will be important to be mindful of value for money considerations. It was suggested that opportunities around private investment /placemaking initiatives could be explored.

g. Agenda item 15 – City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement

* We were supportive of the proposed submission and note that the proposals build on and take account of existing plans including the bus strategy.

* In terms of liveable neighbourhoods, early and sustained local engagement within communities will be critical.

* Whilst we support the emphasis on Sustainable Transport Corridors, it will be crucial that walking and cycling schemes are integrated into scheme development.

h. Agenda item 16 – On bus ‘tap on, tap off’ project

* We were very supportive of this report, noting that Phase 1 of the project will deliver an individual operator contactless ‘tap on tap off’ facility, with capping for adult tickets, on all buses in the West of England. We also encourage the widest possible future extension of this into the future, e.g. linking in with the regional rail network.

i. Agenda item 17 - Enhanced partnership plan and schemes for buses

* We were supportive of this report – please refer also to the comments of the Transport Sub-Group at Appendix 1.

* As a specific issue, it was suggested that the lack of a bus service to/from Avonmeads retail park represents a deficiency in the current bus network.

j. Agenda item 18 - Supported bus services procurement

* We were supportive of this report – please refer also to the comments of the Transport Sub-Group at Appendix 1.

* Noting that the issue of procuring a Cribbs Patchway Metrobus Extension will be taken forward, it was suggested that the option of a Metrobus route serving the South Bristol Link should also be considered again.

k. Agenda item 19 - Adult education budget – approach for the 2022/23 academic year

* We were supportive of this report, noting that the approach will be sufficiently flexible in helping to meet individuals' skills needs as the economy continues to move into recovery.

* We also welcome the fact that outcomes are being tracked through a 'dashboard' approach; the Skills scrutiny sub-group will be keen to receive a more detailed briefing on this.

l. Agenda item 20 – Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel

* Clearly this is a matter for the Combined Authority to determine based on the independent panel's recommendations. A number of members did suggest, however, that given the range of responsibilities of the Metro Mayor, it would not in their view be unreasonable for the Metro Mayor's remuneration to be at least the equivalent of an MP's salary.

* Members also felt that a careful assessment should be made of the risks of not meeting the requirement that a Deputy Mayor should be in place and noted that the Audit Committee will review this as part of their governance discussions on 1 March.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Appointment of interim Monitoring Officer

* It was suggested that, as a point of governance / public transparency, it would be appropriate for the appointment of the Combined Authority's interim Monitoring Officer to be ratified formally by the Combined Authority Committee.

Committee reports:

* Following a point raised by Cllr Gollop, it was agreed that it would be useful for the scrutiny committee members to be supplied with a description of the report preparation process, including any discussions/liaison that takes place through the governance process at officer groups / Boards.

3. Comments on the 28 January West of England Joint Committee report:

Agenda item 9 – Local Enterprise Partnership revenue budget setting report

* There were no particular comments on this report.

Councillor Winston Duguid

Chair

West of England Combined Authority Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Appendix 1

Comments from Chair of Scrutiny Transport sub-group (arising from meeting held on 17 January 2022:

Bus strategy and Enhanced Partnerships:

* We note the considerable work undertaken to create a Bus Strategy and an Improvement Plan, and to lay the groundwork for an Enhanced Partnership (which is the local delivery model for the strategy and plan).

* We fully support the focus on improving and harmonising ticketing, capping fares and cleaning up the emissions from buses.

* Given the Government will announce the revenue funding in February and has extended the overall deadline, we fully support the approach to tailor the next steps to that funding package, also noting the significant focus on corridor improvements in the CRSTS.

*** More details will be needed in due course about how operators will be encouraged to match the corridor investments with their own investment in increased frequency.**

*** We would like to be able to revisit the proposals once officers and operators have refined them following the announcement of funding.**

Supported Bus services:

* We note that all current supported bus services will be tendered, and following discussion with operators, some of the commercial services at threat will also be included in the tender.

* We have previously heard about the lobbying to extend the current Bus Recovery Grant beyond the end of March, and note that there is no news on this at present.

* We support the use, if necessary, of the underspend on the concessionary fares budget to protect services between end of March and the commencement of the new services at the end of August.

* We note that the current budget will not support all the services that will be tendered, and that the timescales are tight; as such delegated authority will be sought to decide how best to use the investment.

* We note that this decision will be based on a range of factors including viable alternatives and the impact of losing the services.

*** Whilst we understand that delegated authority is needed and have been assured that political input will be sought in making these tough decisions, we would like to see a clear timetable for including the involvement of Scrutiny in this process and a timely date for a meeting of the transport sub-group.**

Communications:

* Officers advised that problems contacting Bristol Councillors are being resolved to ensure timely and direct communications. In the meantime Bristol Councillors noted that Cllr Don Alexander has recently been prompt in forwarding this information.