

COMMENTS TO THE COMBINED AUTHORITY COMMITTEE FROM THE CHAIR OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIP

Bus Service Investment and Subsidy

It is with a great sense of privilege and responsibility that I have the opportunity to address the committee of the Combined Authority.

I represent the Local Enterprise Partnership and we are a broad constituency from across the city region that includes the Combined Authority, the Local Authorities, large enterprise, SME's (Who I represent), universities and more recently with the addition of a Senior Union Leader a clearer understanding of the needs of workers across our region.

What is really clear for all of us representing those groups and organisations and indeed as political leaders your constituents, we are facing many wicked issues.

We are familiar with the cost of living crisis, but there are huge inflationary pressures on the cost of delivering services, in wage inflation, and in providing many of the critical services that support our citizens, and the discussions today bring all of these challenges into stark focus.

In dealing with these wicked issues, we feel that transport is one of the key ways in which the Combined Authority can leverage its powers and authority that on a day to day basis can potentially make the biggest impact at the moment in whether our businesses and citizens can either 'thrive or survive'.

In our devolution settlement one of the really significant opportunities, and indeed challenges, is the power to create an Integrated Transport Authority. Whilst that is not for debate today, Chair, it is for you and partners in the Combined Authority to decide where you sit on that spectrum. We would like the Committee to consider moving forwards with these powers and the possible opportunity for taking precept powers.

What the issues that are being discussed today do highlight though, is that our ambitions for creating mass transit for key routes across our region, and for working with partners to invest and deliver in modern mobility solutions is critical in meeting the needs of citizens to connect to jobs, services and leisure activities that sustain their economic status and improve their quality of life.

We are delighted that significant sums of money are coming into the region and particularly the CRSTS, and Bus Service Improvement Plan are two areas with a transport focus, that we think can start to make real inroads in shaping our future transport services.

It is of course the topic of buses that we are here to try and resolve. How do we fund and prioritise the bus services across our region?

What is clear in the discussions that I have been having with union leaders and business representative groups, that whilst we completely understand all of the pressures that the public sector are facing with their finances, funding and budgets. We also note that it is those residents who are most reliant on our buses and public transport to access the essential jobs and services, and the needs of businesses to connect workers to those jobs, who will be most affected by the likely reduction in bus services that are being discussed.

We would therefore like members to consider the following opportunities to help mitigate the difficult decisions that are likely to be made today:

1. We are pleased that the CA have found additional funds to help compensate for the significant operator cost increases, but can we consider how those can be applied to preserve current service as much as possible, whilst we work with operators, mobility providers and local authority colleagues try and bring forward new measures from say the BSIP, and other solutions that help to support and connect citizens to jobs and services.
2. In making decisions to cut services, can we work with unions and business representative organisations to consider which services might need to be prioritised to support workers and business.
3. Can we also agree that we will formulate engagement plans with not just citizens but principal stakeholders, as well as unions and business representative groups in managing the implications and mitigation measures for decisions being made today, where those affect the provision of bus services.