

Overview & Scrutiny Committee 22 September 2022 – comments submitted to West of England Combined Authority Committee on 23 September 2022

Cllr Duguid, Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee will attend the meeting to report the O&S Committee's comments.

Introduction:

The meeting started with a 45 minute Q&A session with the Metro Mayor. Most of our discussion, prompted by the written statements of David Redgewell and others, was about the bus emergency.

The committee felt that a cliff edge on the buses had been waiting to happen since last Christmas and yet it was only in the last 10 days or so that the unitary authorities, the Combined Authority and the bus companies had reacted to the real threat of losing some routes and looking at creative ways of keeping them or redesignation of routes. The Metro Mayor went through the difficult issues including inappropriate funding levels and the shortage of bus drivers. He believed that we would be in a much better place come next April when BSIP kicks in, but recognised that the current cuts were causing real distress to some households.

The other issue discussed was the Transport Board. The observation by committee members was that the Business & Skills Board, as well as the LEP Board, seemed to be clear in purpose and functioning well, the Transport Board was not. The Metro Mayor was requested to look at the Board's core purpose and how he could get more meaningful discussion and early engagement from specifically the unitary authority cabinet members for transport.

It was felt that a lot of the friction in the relationship at senior level between the Combined Authority and Unitary Authorities was about the big issue of Transport. This is the same in other combined authorities and is not surprising. By deliberately over-managing the Board issue in the very short term, it could bring big gains in the overall relationship and better outcomes for transport. It was recognised that the statutory responsibility of the WECA Transport Board was different from that of other combined authorities.

The following comments were made on the items to be considered by the Committee:

Item 10 - Investment Fund Programme

Cllr Weston asked about the infrastructure and why there is no recommendation around the arena infrastructure package, although it was noted that the authority was awaiting the full business case and was expecting this to come forward for the January 2023 committee.

Cllr Plowden raised concern about the underspend on the Transforming Cities Fund as this was time limited to March 2023. Currently it looks as if we are going to have to hand back £25m underspend. The Director of Investment outlined that work was being undertaken to try and make sure that some of this sum would be rolled into other programmes.

Cllr Plowden requested that lessons be learned for some of the larger schemes coming forward (eg CRSTS) so that we do not end up having to give money back on those schemes.

Cllr Smith was concerned that a high proportion of the fund programme was going to consultants. The Director of Investment noted that concern and it was acknowledged that we were at a stage of the programme where consultancy work was important at the inception.

Item 12 - Infrastructure Directorate Transport Update

The officer reminded us of the three goals of Simplification, Collaboration and Acceleration and that the biggest challenge right now was setting up the capacity to deliver. There are enormous amounts of money at stake and collaboration with the UAs appears to be good and constructive. Sensible discussions have taken place about resource allocation with UAs recognising in some instances that the Combined Authority is better placed to deliver on human resource. It was pleasing to hear that 6 months has been taken off the original project time-line by the success of collaborative working which has enabled the Combined Authority to go to full business case.

Cllr Plowden was concerned about so much being required to be delivered in next 2-4 years and collectively did we have the resource to do this?

Cllr Weston was surprised that in MetroWest Phase 2 there was not more prominence given to Rail as it appeared very bus orientated.

Items 13 & 14 - Green Recovery Fund Update & Update on Progress Towards Climate Ecological Strategy

The Committee took the Green Recovery Fund update together with an update on Climate & Ecological Strategy and Action Plan Update.

The committee were pleased to see an outline of what had been agreed and the action to-date. However it did raise several questions such as how likely are we as a region to reach net zero by 2030? It was suggested that we need more emphasis on time lines between now and 2030 – so where are we going to be in 2025 and 2028 on progress for 2030 net zero? The need for government to set up and support increased retro fitting and ease planning rules for energy generation was discussed. Some areas where we are clearly ‘red’ rather than ‘amber’ or ‘green’ for instance the question of the Bristol E-bikes. Councillor Plowden urged that a lot of the emphasis seemed to be on economic development rather than a triple bottom line approach that includes social and environmental matters. And he urged that the Green Book be used more as a basis for making the strategic case.

Specifically on the Green Recovery Fund, the Committee questioned whether the current divide for the Built environment, the green environment, low carbon transport and renewable energy and capacity was better than going for a ‘big bang approach’ on one project with greater and quicker return? The officer explained that the strategy was to try and cover different segments and that this scale was probably more attainable rather than a big bang approach on one much larger project.

CESAP – the collective view of the committee was that this was a good reference point to where we are now but a greater sense of urgency needs to be included to realise what the shortfall is to getting to Net Zero by 2030. There is a need to embed sustainable development in the culture of both the Combined Authority and the Unitary Authorities – which will not be easy.

Item 15 – West of England Combined Authority & Mayoral Forecast 2022/23

The Mayoral Forecast Outturn paper was noted and some discussion took place about the level of reserves.

Item 16 – Headline Assessment on Inflationary Pressures & Mitigations

The paper was noted and it is important that this is regularly updated as we are in such a fluid situation. The committee realised that several big issues still need to be decided upon such as the level of pay in the public sector.

Item 17 - Combined Authority Internal Approvals

There was discussion about final sign-off at the highest authority levels and it was requested that the Interim Director of Legal & Democratic Services would do some benchmarking with some other combined authorities and would clarify what is in place now and whether he is content in the light of this information on what is proposed.