

NOTES FROM THE INFORMAL MEETING OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY  
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 16 JANUARY 2023 AT 10:30AM

The Committee met to add any further comments on the bus report to be considered by the West of England Combined Authority Committee on 18 January 2023. The report has changed in emphasis since Christmas, with DRT taking a much more prominent role at the expense of standard services. The changes are significant in terms of number of services lost but also the dependence of a new alternative in DRT at such short notice. There is a huge education campaign to be done at short notice and some members of scrutiny were concerned about a big bang approach on April 2<sup>nd</sup> and hoped for a longer transitional phase.

Money, or lack of it, against a backdrop of huge bus inflation were the factors driving this need for radical change and it was understood that the authorities had not followed through on raising their levies by up to 10% - indeed the figures show that the authority contribution through levy stays static over the four year period.

**Supported Bus Services: Contract Decisions**

The Committee thanked Metro Mayor Dan Norris for his attendance at the first part of the meeting. The main points raised were as follows:

- Members noted that in the absence of any additional levy that there will now be a very heavy reliance, at short notice, on the DRT approach that has met with limited success to date in the UK. Officers responded that the contracts will be a mix of DRT, supported services and enhanced services (the latter supporting evening and weekends on otherwise commercial services). DRT is designed to connect people to the main corridors where the commercial services will continue to operate, and this model may even give those services a boost.
- The Committee wanted reassurance that the Demand Responsive Travel (henceforth DRT) proposals would learn lessons from similar schemes that had taken place with mixed success. There were also lessons to be learnt around the 'extra mile' exercise that had taken place in Bristol, especially around marketing and access to information;
- The Authority were asked to be mindful of 'digital poverty' e.g. those with the greatest need of public transport were often those with the least access to technology so there should be other contact means available other than through smart phones; officer confirmed that bookings will also be taken by phone.
- There was concern that DRT would not be sufficient to meet demand at peak times, such as college students and school students competing with rush hour demand in the mornings. Officers did state that there would be the availability of different sized vehicles which would themselves be demand responsive with Service Level Agreements set and agency drivers being used. Operators would be asked to prioritise students. A consultant had done modelling work to assess the likely level of demand;
- The Metro Mayor acknowledged that bus stops needed to be upgraded with digital signs that worked properly and offered clean, dry and safe spaces to wait for bus services and enabling the use of contactless technology;
- In respect to specific routes, some routes would not have their supported bus services renewed as it was planned DRT would be a replacement to those. Some other services may change and some may become commercially viable again;

- Members asked about break clauses in the contracts and if there are any triggers for services to become commercial – officers confirmed that 6-month break contracts are part of the contract but given the short contract duration it is unlikely they will be used.
- Officers did acknowledge that the information provided in the report could have included information on different categories of funding; Scrutiny requested that a full list of routes, including those that will be lost, and how each was funded be produced.
- Officers were asked for reassurance regarding the level of collaborative working between WECA and the Authorities that had gone on to reach this point. A summary of the consultation process was set out in section 8 of the report;
- Members expressed concerns that agile and collaborative working will be required to be able to learn lessons and make course corrections rapidly in light of learning, and asked if there is flexibility between the DRT zones; officers responded that the granular data about demand for bus services will be invaluable and confirmed that the boundaries of the zones, covered by two contracts can be kept under review and may be tweaked in light of this information
- Members also asked for reassurance regarding whether the law had been met on public consultation exercise. This would be confirmed.
- Members asked how much flexibility and agility could be used in the way forward.e.g. if concessionary travel stays flat can some of that saving be used on supported services. It was confirmed that this approach can be taken
- Members asked how community transport is going to be included as part of the mix, but officers stated that the community transport provision will be kept separate from this, and will continue to thrive alongside and after these contracts, as it serves a different market.
- Members asked if CRSTS, identified as part of the solution to reliability and potentially frequency on the main corridor, would now be more focussed on buses than Active Travel but were reassured that a holistic corridor approach would be taken, and that Active Travel is a vital part of the future modal mix

In summary:

- Members were very concerned about the considerable loss of bus services and the lack of increased funding for a levy
- Members were further concerned about the resulting reliance on an unproven DRT model, with extremely short lead in times and heavily reliance on a two year government grant for the finances.
- Some initial information and marketing campaign approaches have been scoped out, but this decision needs to be formally agreed before they can be developed in earnest, leaving very little time for the introduction of a revolutionary new system for public transport.
- Members suggested that monitoring and rapidly incorporating learning into the service configuration will be vital and that this will require the proactive, regular and effective work by operators, officers and politicians working collaboratively.