

Questions and Responses - Extraordinary Combined Authority Committee Meeting – 1 December 2023 - Public Questions

Under the constitution, public questions are accepted at extraordinary meetings of the committee, but they must relate to the business for which the committee has been convened which, in this case, was whether the spend in question was unlawful, and what action (if any) is proposed as a result. The committee did not consider the relative merits or prioritisation of different transport initiatives.

It is important to note that questions are to the committee, and not the Metro Mayor who did not play a part in this committee process. Under the constitution, these responses are sent under the direction of the Chair which, for the purposes of the meeting in question was Cllr Kevin Guy.

Under the constitution, responses are to be sent in writing within 10 working days of the conclusion of the committee meeting, with questions and answers published on the website as soon as possible thereafter. The committee concluded its business on 14 December 2023, giving a response deadline of 2 January 2024. However, given leave commitments over the winter break, this was extended to Monday 15 January 2024.

Question 1

What action will be taken by WECA to reclaim the £10,000 from Mr Norris for his 'unlawful spending' of taxpayers' money to paste several huge photos of him and a dog on the sides of a bus, and how will the reclaimed money be better spent?

Response

No action is currently proposed to seek to recover this sum from any individual as the resource required to pursue any such action is likely to be disproportionate.

Question 2

What steps is WECA taking to ensure there are no further breaches of the Code of Practice for Local Authority Publicity - such as instructing Mr Norris to remove the WECA-funded photos that currently feature on his personal/ political @votedannorris Twitter (X) feed (see attached photographic evidence) - as this is not an official corporate communication channel for the post of West of England Mayor?

Response

The steps the authority is taking (and has taken) to improve the internal control environment and reduce the risk of a similar issue occurring again are set out in the committee report. In addition, the committee resolved to implement a code of practice or protocol to be followed in all mayoral

marketing and communications activity. That protocol is to be informed by a review of spend against the mayoral budget in the 22/23 and 23/24 financial years. Where other instances which indicate a possible breach of the Code come to light, including the images you have provided, they will be carefully considered, and appropriate action will be taken.

Question 3

At a West of England Scrutiny meeting on 12th December 2022 I asked the Metro Mayor directly about leaflets that had been distributed to households with energy saving advice. The leaflets included his name in large letters and an image of him and his dog which was very similar if not identical to the one which this report finds is “a personal brand”, used “to promote (or seek to affect public support for) the Metro Mayor personally”. I was concerned that these leaflets amounted to using public funding for political promotion and may therefore be unlawful, exactly as has now been found for the planned bus campaign. The Metro Mayor dismissed my concerns. Will the Authority now investigate whether these leaflets also constituted unlawful expenditure?

Response

The authority does not propose to revisit historic matters. Instead, it intends to focus on ensuring that there are appropriate internal control mechanisms in place, including clear guidance, and that those controls and guidance are followed in future. Where other, current, instances which indicate a possible breach of the Code come to light they will be carefully considered, and appropriate action will be taken.

Question 4

Since this story came to light, I have been told about other publicly funded promotional materials bearing similar images. Will the Authority carry out a wider review of its published materials to identify any other potential cases where the public benefit was incidental to political promotion of the Metro Mayor?

Response

The authority does not propose to revisit historic matters. Instead, it intends to focus on ensuring that there are appropriate internal control mechanisms in place, including clear guidance, and that those controls and guidance are followed in future. Where other, current, instances which indicate a possible breach of the Code come to light they will be carefully considered, and appropriate action will be taken.

Question 5

Can the chief executive explain how this one item meeting has been call and has their been a political request for such a meeting by an councillors of combined Authority committee. Could not this item be brought forward to the next committee

meeting? to save Taxpayer money on a single item meeting in view of the £105 million pounds awarded to the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council for the Bus service improvement plan. By the Department for transport. And the local council talking about 114 notes We note the urgent westlink 20 min zones item is not included on the agenda.

Response

The extraordinary meeting was called to comply with the duties of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer to report unlawful expenditure. The date was chosen to comply with statutory timescales. Extraordinary meetings are usually convened to as single agenda item meetings.

Question 6

The west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council Transport Authority. Have a Duty with the Elected metro mayor Dan Norris to promote and provide the city Region bus and public transport Network. In the case of buses this is through an enhanced Partnership with bus operators, including First Group plc Wales and West buses Division West of England buses, stagecoach west buses and Rapt Bath other operators, including Abus, Favesaver big Lemon buses Libra Travel ect with local stakeholders and passenger and councillors through a Enhanced Bus service improvement Panel and Enhanced partnership Board. With a target to restore passengers numbers to pre covid levels, At the time of the promotion discussion the Bus Depots in Greater Bristol of First Group plc and stagecoach west were work carrying 70 % to 75 % of pre of covid levels and similar in Bath and weston super mare In Somerset and Wells Depot serving Banes, and Mendip region at 65 % to 70 of pre covid levels So scheme had to been put together to Promote bus travel ,the Birthday card bus free travel for care levers , and any other way a marketing campaign lead by the Metro mayor Dan Norris could get passengers on to buses urgently So at bus services advisory panels meeting of the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council Transport Authority theses issues were discussed and at work party's of the Bristol city council One city Transport board and marketing strategy including wrapping buses bus shelters we also had a driver Shortages which ment First group plc Wales and West buses Division and Stagecoach west were struggling to recruit Drivers as community champions and cutting timetables and routes So with the operators it was decided to To have a mass advertising campaign for Drivers on bus stop, shelters and buses. The mayor is the democracy Elected head of the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority was going to lead the campaign why at any point in these working parties or bus service improvement plan meeting did any west of England mayoral combined transport Authority or North Somerset council officers not say that any of the plans to marketing bus service or wrapping buses or westlink buses was in any not a legitimate spending of Taxpayer money or to put a a picture of the Democracatly Elected metro mayor Dan Norris who run the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority on the side of a bus promoting in the public

interest the need for drivers to drive our buses and coach services or to try to win back passengers on to the public transport bus network in the Greater Bristol and Bath city region and North Somerset bus network. With bus operators cancelling service due to driver shortages and emergency timetables in place. A target set by the Department for Transport and UK government in England in bus service improvement plans No such action has been taken against mayor Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester for promotion of the Beeline Network or mayor Steve Rotherham in the Liverpool City Region by their office for the new Merseyrail promotion on new trains. So what is this meeting and action achieving in run the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council public transport Network for passengers. and improvemening the bus network.

Response

As it is currently understood, the question is asking why advice was not given by Combined Authority or North Somerset Council Officers, in the run-up to the launch event, that the proposed wrap would amount to unlawful expenditure if paid for from public funds. That question is answered in the committee report. There appears to be a second question in respect of the mayors of other Combined Authorities outside of the West of England. Those questions would be matters to put to the Combined Authorities in question, but the West of England Combined Authority is not aware of any comparable situation having occurred in any of the other authorities mentioned.

Question 7

I write to ask why WECA are using public money for the advertising of Mr Norris and his dog on a bus and also the offer of free Birthday Bus travel. This could have been used to help keep rural bus services around the Bath area in operation instead of closing the routes down of which some have already happened and seems more are on the way.

Response

The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. In respect of the wider Birthday Fares initiative, that is a "fares package" initiative designed to increase patronage of bus services which has been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport as part of the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan initiative. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the Birthday Fares fare package, or the wider BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation of the Birthday Fares

initiative against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 8

Could the WECA Mayor please explain how he can easily find thousands of pounds taxpayers money on an obviously political self promoting pictorial campaign when he flatly refuses to find any monies to support essential rural regular service buses which are vital for the thousands of people in NE Somerset whilst at the same time wasting millions on the proven failure that is Westlink?

Response

The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. In respect of the “Westlink” demand responsive transport service, that is a transport initiative which has been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport as part of the Government’s Bus Service Improvement Plan initiative. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the Westlink initiative, or the wider BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation of the Westlink initiative against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 9

Why does mayor Norris deem it appropriate to spend public money on self promoting pointless gimmickry such as his picture on a bus (thankfully not to be seen by the public as in any case the bus would not be seen along his cancelled routes!)

Why was his other spending on silly short term gimmicks promoting bus services (or himself) would it not have been better spent on restoring lifeline routes for the residents without alternative transport.

Is mayor Norris aiming for a place in the jungle in 'I'm a celebrity, get me out of here'?

Response

Transport initiatives under the Government’s Bus Service Improvement Plan scheme have been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in

the report. The relative prioritisation of BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 10

Why are we being forced to make a 25 min. walk along unlit, unpaved country roads to our nearest bus stop several times a week.? Is it to ensure there is enough money saved, by putting our lives at risk, to cover essentials like the bus "wrap", free birthday buses and free buses to urban residents? -who probably enjoy the luxury of street lights and pavements, which we, the forgotten country dwellers, do not.

Response

Transport initiatives under the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan scheme have been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation of BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 11

I wish to express my concern and seek clarification regarding recent reports alleging the misallocation of £10,000 of public funds for a bus wrapper featuring an image of Councillor Dan Norris and his dog to promote the Birthday bus scheme.

These reports have raised questions about the responsible allocation of public resources, particularly in light of the cutbacks to bus services that have affected thousands, of people in our rural communities. It is outrageous that money is being frittered away on these unnecessary vanity projects when people are suffering huge negative impacts from WECA's determination not to provide funding for essential public transport services, but instead to spend it on these ridiculous initiatives. The impact of such decisions on the community's trust in public officials is considerable.

Response

Transport initiatives under the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan scheme have been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation of BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee. The report committee report and resolution deal with the weaknesses in the Combined Authority's internal controls that this incident has brought to light.

Question 12

I am outraged on reading what Dan Norris has been doing with public monies (our money!). How can he have any justification for this spend when he has claimed for months that there is no cash available to support rural bus services leaving thousands of tax payers many being disabled and elderly and school children having to walk miles to get to and from school because of his actions in cutting any form of timetabled public transport in many rural areas. I call for this 10K along with other money that the Government has said over and over again is available to support these vital public bus services, I further call for Dan Norris to fully explain, in public, what he means when says this cannot be done as 'the devil is in the details' ?

Response

Transport initiatives under the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan scheme have been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation of BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 13

As a resident of Camerton, B&NES, how can Dan Norris justify, both morally and legally, spending money on both the promotion of and the implementation of a scheme which favours urban areas that have regular bus services when, because of the withdrawal of bus services and the failure of WestLink, rural residents are facing social isolation and potential poverty due to less accessible job prospects, especially for those young people who are unable to secure a driving test at present, to say nothing of the difficulties faced by those trying to access hospital appointments? This is not an inclusive policy as no thought has been given to those adversely affected ie the elderly, the disadvantaged, the disabled and those who cannot drive/do not have a car.

Response

The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. In respect of the "Westlink" demand responsive transport service, that is a transport initiative which has been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport as part of the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan initiative. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the Westlink

initiative, or the wider BSIP scheme. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation of the Westlink initiative against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 14

Given the above how is Dan Norris's stance helping to promote a green agenda as residents in rural communities are being forced to use cars and being hit by Clean Air Zone and other charges. Where's the joined up thinking? Who does he take advice from or are these autocratic decisions?

Response

The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The relative prioritisation or environmental credentials of transport initiatives is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 15

I would like to know who how 10 million pounds was agreed to be paid for a very large photo of Dan Norris and his dog promoting the birthday bus scheme?, and why it was agreed to pay this when the village I live in has no bus service (Tunley). 10 million could provide a lot of buses to the rural community.

Response

The sum in question is £10,000 (ten thousand pounds) not £10,000,000 (ten million pounds). The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. The relative prioritisation of transport initiatives is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 16

I strongly object to the profligate spending of tax payers' on this vanity project. At a time of financial hardship felt by so many in the area, this expenditure is totally inappropriate.

Response

No question is identified within the text provided.

Question 17

When are people in rural communities going to be listened to and their views actioned?

Response

The question does not relate to a matter considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 18

When is Dan Norris going to repay the £10K that he spent for his political gain?

Response

The public questions facility is provided to enable members of the public to ask questions of the committee. Whether Mayor Norris considers it appropriate to reimburse the public purse is a matter for Mayor Norris, not the committee.

Question 19

Please provide a breakdown of all BSIP-funded promotional or advertising expenditure that has featured images of the WECA Mayor and his dog or that has featured the name "Dan Norris" in writing larger than that used for the term "BSIP" (as was carried on every bus and bus stop at the time of the £2 fare launch).

Response

Your question is considered to amount to a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and has been passed to the appropriate team for consideration.

Question 20

Please provide a breakdown of the number of staff and how many were permanent and how many interim during the course of the decision making on BSIP and inform us how many people from each of the Mayor's office and the Transport team signed off on each decision to spend BSIP promotional monies.

Response

Your question is considered to amount to a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and has been passed to the appropriate team for consideration.

Question 21

What the take-up of the birthday bus offer has been since its inception and how much it has cost to provide?

Response

The question does not relate to a matter considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 22

Who thought it was a good idea and then authorised the painting of the buses with the Mayor and his dog on them?

Response

All of the information that the Authority is able to provide on this issue is contained within the report to the Committee.

Question 23

What will happen to the £10K+ apparently spent illegally on publicising Dan Norris' free birthday month bus travel offer? Will Dan Norris be told to replace this wasted money from his income?

Response

Whether Mayor Norris considers it appropriate to reimburse the public purse is a matter for Mayor Norris. There does not currently appear to be a proportionate basis upon which to seek reimbursement of these costs from any individual.

Question 24

How large CAN a picture of the WECA mayor be, advertising bus services? It seems quite inappropriate to me, whatever the size.
While I am writing I would like to point out the folly of spending money both on the birthday month offer and, worse, on the on-demand bus system intended to help people in the rural areas. I live in Freshford. The obvious place I would go to shop / see a film / go for a meal is Bath - yet on demand bus services from the villages to Bath are not even on offer! Was ANY market research carried out before putting so much money into these schemes, at the cost of a bus network?

Response

The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. In respect of the Birthday Fares and Westlink initiatives, they have been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport as part of the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan initiative. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of those initiatives. The only issue before the extraordinary committee was the use of public funds to apply the particular wrap in question to the bus which is considered to be in breach of Circular 01/2011 as set out in the report. The

relative prioritisation of the BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 25

How many complaints have to be made about Westlink not being fit for purpose before we get our 768 bus back providing a service for Camerton?

Response

The question does not relate to a matter considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 26

How can the WECA justify wasting ten thousand pounds of public money on novelty schemes such as pictures of Dan Norris on buses while refusing to help all the rural communities who are losing their rural.

Response

The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. The relative prioritisation of the BSIP initiatives, including the “Westlink” demand responsive transport service, against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 27

Could the West of England Mayor explain why the proposal submitted to him several months ago that would restore a number of ESSENTIAL rural bus services was vetoed as an unsuitable use for funds, but an expensive political campaign that incorporates the unpopular birthday bus scheme is an acceptable use of BSIP funding?

Response

The bus wrap in question did not come about through a considered decision of the West of England Combined Authority. The report to the committee explains the circumstances in detail and why, in the view of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Section 73 Officer, that course of action amounted to unlawful expenditure. An evaluation of the proposals that you refer to was not a matter considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 28

Were the CA's statutory officers satisfied that all payments relating to BSIP publicity, other than the bus-wrap, fully complied with the code of practice on local government publicity and the standing orders of the authority related to expenditure?

Response

To the best of its knowledge, yes.

Question 29

Has the Mayor issued any instructions during the current financial year to officers which overruled reservations expressed by senior officers about expenditure or publicity?

Response

The issue in the report, to which questions under this process must relate, is in relation to expenditure that was considered to be unlawful, not expenditure that proceeded despite reservations senior officers may have had. Whilst no data is held in a way that can be meaningfully interrogated to answer the question, it is not unusual for political decisions to be made by elected representatives (in any public authority) to spend money in circumstances where senior officers may have reservations. Unless what is proposed is unlawful, political leaders/committees have a democratic mandate to proceed with proposals even where senior officers may have reservations.

Question 30

We know that the Mayor's office staff, at the behest of the Mayor, ignored expert advice from the marketing and transport teams in WECA, and went ahead with spending £10,000 on the Birthday Bus "wrap", which broke codes of conduct and fiscal rules. Because it should never have been a BSIP expenditure, it was disguised under "printing" in the Mayor's budget. This is of particular concern when there have been such as notable turnover of staff including a significant number of senior interim posts (including CEO, CFO and Monitoring Officer) whose role it should be to keep a good eye on governance and the proper use of public funds. What other public funds might have been misused and spent via the Mayor's budget for personal promotion for political ends.

Response

Sound organisational governance is everyone's responsibility, but the officers you identify (one of whom is now a permanent employee) have particular statutory duties, compliance with which has led to this report to the committee. The committee resolved to implement a code of practice or protocol to be followed in all mayoral marketing and communications activity. That protocol is to be informed by a review of spend against the mayoral budget in the 22/23 and 23/24 financial years. Where other instances which

indicate a possible breach of the Code come to light they will be carefully considered, and appropriate action will be taken.

Question 31

The Mayor put his office staff in an extremely difficult position when he insisted verbally that they go ahead with spending the £10,000 on the Birthday Bus “wrap”, and also go ahead with the launch of the Birthday Bus scheme, despite the express written instruction not to do so by the interim CEO. Yet in the report, the Mayor did not take responsibility, but said he fully expected those officers to follow due process in carrying out his instructions. The Mayor must have been aware that his staff could not do so if they followed his direct instructions. Did the Mayor not believe that he is also liable to follow due process or owes his staff a duty of care?

Response

The mayor’s stated position in this matter is set out in paragraph 65 of the committee report. The committee is not able to answer any questions going to the Mayor’s thoughts or beliefs under this process.

Question 32

How can Dan Norris justify the illegal spending of 10k pounds for photos of him on a bus? (which he still has having taken ours away)

Response

The mayor’s stated position in this matter is set out in paragraph 65 of the committee report.

Question 33

How can Dan Norris think that it is OK to provide free buses for urban residents but leave rural residents stranded and unable to travel except by car? This is particularly unfair for elderly residents living in rural areas and students trying to get to school/college

Response

Birthday Fares initiative is a "fares package" initiative designed to increase patronage of bus services which has been approved by the Combined Authority, North Somerset Council and the Department for Transport as part of Governments Bus Service Improvement Plan initiative. The “Westlink” demand responsive transport service, also an approved BSIP initiative, is designed to supplement traditional scheduled routes. There are no issues of lawfulness in respect of the Birthday Fares fare package, Westlink or the wider BSIP scheme. The relative prioritisation of the BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 34

Do you not find it disgraceful that you have allegedly spent £10K illegally when rural bus services like the 768 have been axed without any reliable alternative?

Response

The committee's views are recorded in the minute/resolution of the meeting in question. The mayor's stated position in this matter is set out in paragraph 65 of the committee report. The relative prioritisation of the BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.

Question 35

Do you not find it disgraceful that given the sums being spent on your birthday bus gimmick, we in we in Clandown are now cut off and Westlink have cancelled 11,668 bus trips due to a lack of buses and drivers

Response

The committee's views are recorded in the minute/resolution of the meeting in question. The mayor's stated position in this matter is set out in paragraph 65 of the committee report. The relative prioritisation of the BSIP initiatives against bus service subsidies is not a matter that was considered by the extraordinary committee.