

David Gibson  
Strategic Director of Infrastructure  
West of England Mayoral Combined Authority  
70 Redcliffe Street

Bristol  
BS1 6AL

22 December 2023

Councillor Sarah Warren  
Deputy Leader of Bath & North East Somerset Council  
Lewis House  
Manvers St  
Bath  
BA1 1JG

Sarah\_Warren@Bathnes.gov.uk

Dear Councillor Warren,

### **Response to Statement at Overview and Scrutiny Task & Finish Group - 20 November 2023**

Thank you for taking the time to share your detailed perspective on the challenges surrounding the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and the broader governance issues within the West of England Combined Authority (Combined Authority). I appreciate the thoroughness with which you have outlined your concerns. As discussed at our recent meeting, I undertook to respond to your statement. You will already have received the terms of reference and papers for the BSIP Board, of which B&NES officers are members.

It is evident from your letter that effective communication, collaboration, and meaningful consultation are vital components in the successful implementation of programmes like BSIP. I share your commitment to ensuring that decisions, especially those with a significant impact on communities, are made in a transparent, consultative, and equitable manner.

Governance structures are fundamental to the success of any programme, and BSIP is no exception. All decisions within the BSIP framework are developed by the project team in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including Unitary Authorities (UAs). These decisions are then transformed into Officer Decision Notices (ODNs), signed by the 3 Directors identified in the July 2022 Committee. The transparency and openness of this process are further emphasized as all ODNs and the Forward Plan are shared with UA officers at the BSIP Programme Board, actively seeking their comments and input. Furthermore, the public release of ODNs with appropriate background papers, such as Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs), underscores our commitment to accountability and transparency.

The headlines of the BSIP programme reflect a significant investment of over £30 million in the local bus service, a landmark achievement, and a substantial public sector investment. The core objective of the BSIP is to restore patronage to pre-COVID levels by 2025, and current data indicate that we are on track to achieve this by 2024. The multifaceted measures implemented by the programme not only demonstrate its efficacy but also pave the way for collaboration with operators to reinstate missing services across the region, thereby alleviating pressure on public sector budgets. The utilisation of the KPMG framework to inform budget decisions, and the Department for Transport (DfT) requirement to see evidence of all local, non-BSIP related budgets in January, underscore the strategic financial planning integral to the programme's success.

WESTlink represents another significant aspect of our commitment to comprehensive transportation solutions. The ongoing review of the service, based on 9 months of usage data, aims to propose changes that ensure a long-term sustainable service. WESTlink was launched at pace, involving an engagement campaign to inform key stakeholders how the system worked. Officers met and presented to key stakeholders across the region, backed up with a 'how to use' leaflet which was widely distributed. We have had numerous requests for changes to the system. Some of these have happened, some cannot because they are not possible either technically or financially, and some may be implemented in the future, but will take time. Some will be rolled into the larger review taking place. WESTlink is not designed to replace supported services that have been cancelled, it is designed to connect those in rural communities with hubs to get them into centres of population. I can assure you that change is imminent.

The Birthday Bus Offer, initiated by the Mayor, is having a positive impact on deprived areas, with 8% of users from the most deprived wards and 43% from the most nationally deprived areas, underscores its effectiveness in fostering network growth and addressing the cost of living. The existence of a £1.8 million marketing and communications budget within the programme is vital for promoting offers and growing the patronage of existing services, a stance supported by North Somerset Council (NSC).

It is essential to clarify that BSIP funding cannot be used to replace local funding for previously delivered services, adhering to the programme's core objective of strengthening the commercial network to reduce pressures on local budgets. Wage inflation and the cost of fuel and servicing have all impacted, making supported services extremely expensive and less good value for money. Unfortunately, that does not necessarily make the case for using BSIP monies to replace levy funding, which is expressly forbidden by DfT and subject to audit.

I would like to address some of the specific concerns you raised:

**KPMG Report:**

The KPMG report, a technical piece of work conducted within a tight timeframe of 6 weeks, was essential to ensure readiness for the October Committee. Its scope was non-controversial and designed to ensure that officers can make strong value-for-money decisions. The professional opinion of respected consultants underscores its significance and impartiality.

**Formal Decision-Making:**

Efforts to explore mechanisms for UAs to request agenda items at both the West of England Combined Authority Committee and the Housing & Planning and Transport Board are acknowledged as a reasonable suggestion. The Mayor, as chair, manages a large agenda with limited time and not everything can be discussed, including standing items. Elected members should make the argument for inclusion of items and can bring forward motions to amend proposals. With respect to BSIP, decision-making has been delegated to officers, who consult widely across the region, including with your officers. With a range of political opinion, as I know you appreciate, it is not always possible to achieve unanimity.

**Consultation with Unitary Authorities:**

Advocating for meaningful consultation with UAs on BSIP decisions aligns with the principles of collaborative governance. Establishing a formal process for soliciting and incorporating the views of UAs is an essential step. The BSIP team is committed to developing the stakeholder management plan with input from UA officers. We seek to involve the UAs throughout our decision making: BSIP Board, RDT (Regeneration, Development and Transport) Group, Infrastructure Directors and at a recent Infrastructure Directors' bus workshop.

**Equality Impact Assessments:**

Your concern regarding the Public Sector Equality Act and our compliance with it is valid. EQIAs are conducted on every decision, using a standard template designed to demonstrate consideration of the impact on diverse groups. We acknowledge the importance of integrating equality considerations into the decision-

making process, and while we currently do not employ an Equalities Officer, there is an intention to do so in next year's budget.

### **Budget Oversight and Transparency:**

Your emphasis on investigating the oversight mechanisms for the BSIP budget and advocating for increased transparency is noted. While communication of changes in budget projections is critical for scrutiny, it is essential to highlight that fiscal management of the budget is sound, and each initiative is a trial aimed at increasing ridership. BSIP funding cannot be used to fund things which were previously delivered using local funding. It is about strengthening the commercial network to reduce pressures on local budgets. DfT has made 2 late and partial changes to how BSIP funding can be used. This has meant last-minute changes to the programme. We have raised this issue with them both in writing and verbally. The reason the BSIP finance figures changed so late ahead of the October Committee was that DfT issued a change in guidance in late September. This was not Mayoral Combined Authority poor management, but poor communication from DfT to the Mayoral Combined Authority and all other Local Transport Authorities (North Somerset were not aware until November).

### **Citizen's Panel**

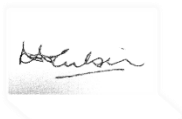
You have raised the issue of the Citizens' Panel separately.

- The project is being managed by my Transport Operations team in conjunction with our Communications team.
- We have appointed a highly experienced supplier, TPXimpact, to develop and manage the Citizens' Panel, with The Sortition Foundation providing recruitment services. Both these companies have worked extensively with local and combined authorities on similar projects.
- The question that the Panel will be asked to consider is "How do we decide which bus services to fund?". The intention is to hold 2 in person sessions in February with the Panel.
- We are currently working with our suppliers to develop the content. They will be seeking UA input about possible speakers representing targeted community groups to participate in the Panel sessions.

They will also be presenting at an Infrastructure Directors' meeting in early January, where the project will be outlined in more detail.

I hope this response addresses your concerns in a transparent and collaborative manner. The complexities of the issues at hand necessitate ongoing dialogue and collaboration. I remain open to further discussions to ensure the effective representation of all communities in our decision-making processes.

Yours Sincerely,



David Gibson  
Strategic Director of Infrastructure  
West of England Mayoral Combined Authority