

## **Feedback from West of England MCA Overview and Scrutiny committee 22/01/24**

### **Overall**

It was good to see Mayor Norris back in attendance to answer unscripted questions from the O&S committee.

We note that significant progress is being made with the Transformation Programme, initiated in response to serious flaws identified by the 2022 audit, and several actions can be closed. However, we note that the tangible progress has been made by officers, whereas the most critical and impactful work – to define the role and purpose of the Combined Authority (MCA) amongst the political leaders - has not made the progress anticipated in the original timetables. As a result, this year's formal External Audit remains incomplete awaiting further progress regarding Governance matters.

We are concerned that the long-awaited mediated conversation between leaders has not yet taken place, and is due to take place in March, which is right at the end of the outgoing Bristol Mayor's tenure. Although it might have been preferable to wait until May, we are aware that this is a tension with our frustration with the current slow progress; however, we are satisfied that MCA staff leading this process are aware that the views of the new administration will need to be sought. We hope that the outgoing Mayor will be able to contribute some historic learning and insight, which may assist the incoming administration and the overall process.

As well as a fundamental review of the constitution, there are several procedural areas within it which need tweaking and clarifying; we would suggest that achieving some quick wins in these areas might be a way to build trust and generate momentum for the more fundamental review needed.

The structure and remit of Advisory Boards still needs work to ensure that agendas are collaboratively agreed and their relationship with O&S and Audit committees needs to be clarified. The integration of the LEP as a Business Board should be seen as an opportunity in this context.

The O&S committee wish to do more than simply scrutinise the published committee papers, and that for this oversight to take place a suitable Forward Plan is needed. The current Forward Plan needs more work, as it is currently not representing the many timescales we heard of, regarding work underway and planned for completion in the summer or autumn.

### **Bus Services**

We heard again from members of the Ashton Vale community as to the effect that the lack of a bus service is having on many of its residents. We were pleased to hear the MCA Mayor committing to meet with the campaigners alongside the Managing Director of First Bus in Bristol.

### **Bus Service Improvement Plan**

We discussed a report from a Task and Finish Group (TFG) set up in response to concerns about BSIP operations and governance, which has been published [here](#). We are grateful to the officers involved for their full and frank participation in making the TFG work.

Decision making: Many of the tensions as to the delivery of the BSIP programme, between Unitary Authorities and the Combined Authority, mirror wider governance and decision-

making issues, within a structure that grants a very high level of delegation to the WECA Director. Despite the best efforts of MCA staff to communicate there is a palpable feeling that this is not sufficient or early enough, and we welcome the news that a Member and Officer Working Group is to be set up; however, we are unclear as to its constituents, remit or its relationships with other groups such as the Transport and Housing Advisory Board or the current BSIP working groups. We note that communication within UAs also needs to be addressed as part of the improvements needed.

Birthday Buses: There appears to be little evidence for this initiating this innovative scheme, and we are sceptical that the recent increases in patronage can be attributed to it. We are especially concerned that the initial evidence suggests that it is accessed by the richest 10% significantly more than the poorest 10%, with the other deciles being roughly equally distributed. We also note the complaints from the UAs that there is little benefit to the many areas which have had their bus services removed.

We agree with the DfT that it needs to be kept under regular review, not least as it is at best innovative, and it will have significant and unpredictable impact on budgets (being demand led).

Westlink, Demand Responsive Transport Service: There is a consensus that this service is not operating well and that significant amendments will be needed, even without the need to respond to the Traffic Commissioners findings, which will fundamentally impact the service design. There are some examples of success in some geographic areas, but the service is then apparently finding it difficult to cope with the resulting demand.

Significant decisions to come: We note from the Forward Plan, that there are several delegated decisions due imminently, and that several of the existing initiatives will require decisions, especially the birthday buses and the Westlink service. We also note that as part of this the DfT are requiring a refresh of the overall BSIP strategy.

We strongly advise that local ward members affected by changes to Westlink, or a loss of critical bus services (such as in Ashton Vale) are engaged as they will have useful information to input. We also strongly advise that all evidence and options for making all changes to the current funding or overall strategy should be aired early and comprehensively with the proposed new Member and Officer Working Group, potentially including the less significant “in-flight” monitoring and adjustments.

Clarity about success: In making these decisions both the Scrutiny and Audit Committees wish to see clarity about what represents success; value for money and cost per passenger journey need to continue to be a metric, but in addition to the current strategic BSIP objectives, other clear measures could be considered, for example the social costs of isolation and the carbon costs of what appears to be often under-occupied buses. This might be considered in the strategy refresh due in June

## **Feedback on Committee Papers**

Budget: It is good to see the current balanced budget and that this has been achieved without an increased levy. We note the pressures on the levy to come in future years and the probable impact on bus services, which may be exacerbated by the ending of the BSIP grant. We hope to see progress being made on filling this gap in due course, and indeed that the 2.5% inflationary uplift built into the current bus contracts will be enough to maintain the contracts.

The other key issue is the increase in staff, amounting to approx. 75 FTE. We note that where these are not directly supporting delivery, that this is the result of a growing organisation and reflects the need to have adequate corporate, programme assurance and commercial services in place.

We note that 10% of the staff budget was withheld at the start of this year and that this has been absorbed. However, we recommend that this provision is not put in place again this year.

We note the Treasury Management report continues to say that Environmental, Social and Governance scoring of investments is still developing and are therefore not used to guide investment decisions. There is a risk that these investments may run counter to the overall MCA strategies and agrees that the MCA needs to “further enhance its efforts through its investment decisions and activity” – especially in the context of carbon accounting becoming a routine part of all decision making.

Temple Quarter: This is a very large and long-term regeneration project with the potential for benefits across the West of England.

Critically, we advise that a wide definition of benefits and success needs to be embedded in the Joint Venture, whilst still bringing in a private sector partner, including a focus on affordable housing and ensuring that the benefits and jobs are shared by the population living close to the zone, which includes a very significant area of multiple deprivation.

Good community engagement will be essential to ensure local benefit and democratic accountability, and the governance arrangements need to ensure this is “baked in”, including clear, transparent and regular monitoring and reporting. South Glos and BNES councils may be vicariously exposed to risk from this project and we trust that they will receive regular reports through the MCA and also recognise the potential for wider economic benefits across the whole area.

The use of an independent chair’s casting vote may be pivotal in ensuring that the current proposals for two local democratically accountable partners (MCA and Bristol CC) are balanced with the equal votes of two national Government agencies.

Transformation programme: The wider fundamental issues have been discussed above and the O+S committee intend to focus on these issues and hope to assist in the improvement process in the forthcoming year, including through further work with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

We look forward to the refreshed Regional Economic strategy and how it may affect the current Investment Programme. We also note the more commercial approach to MCA investment, moving away from simple grant giving in some areas.

Transport Infrastructure: We support a focus on rail, especially electrification and improved accessibility of stations. Electrification is critical to the decarbonisation of rail transport and we accept the approach of using local funds to make the electrification case to Central Government, as the investment required is likely to be very significant. We note some concerns about the accessibility of rolling stock for some travellers.

We note that that the ZEBRA bus programme is currently only benefitting First Bus and advise that work is undertaken to make the inclusion of other operators feasible in the event of future funding opportunities of this sort and subject to being able to provide some match funds.

The planned intervention in the EV charging market should be geared towards ensuring equitable benefits and interoperability for consumers. We are unclear how the financial revenues will be used.