

West of England Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Member's Report

Written 21/12/2020 for the North Somerset Full Council Meeting on 12/01/21

There have been a lot of developments since the previous WECA Overview and Scrutiny Report. This report will update members on progress to proposals to extend the West of England to North Somerset, alongside updating members on strategic rail, investment funds, and the Adult Education Budget.

Mayor Tim Bowles

Overview and Scrutiny Members and Local Authority Leaders were notified by Mayor Tim Bowles that he is planning to step down from the role when his term ends. We would like to thank him for his service as the first Combined Authority Mayor for the West of England.

North Somerset and WECA

Overview and Scrutiny members have pushed for clearer information about the process of North Somerset to join the Combined Authority.

The advice from MHCLG regarding the process for North Somerset to join the Combined Authority has remained that we needed to have completed a public consultation on governance arrangements by the end of November 2020. This timetable would have allowed for the process required for Government to pass legislation in time for North Somerset residents to take part in elections for a regional mayor in May 2021. On January 5th, West of England Overview and Scrutiny Members will meet informally to discuss this further – if there are any updates arising from this they can be addressed orally.

Bristol City Council passed a motion in an Emergency Full Council showing their support for North Somerset's Membership of the West of England Combined Authority. This did not extend to starting a public consultation before the November deadline; therefore, the deadline was missed, preventing North Somerset from joining the West of England Combined Authority before May 2021. The Mayor of Bristol has published his view of events, including a timeline of events on WECA expansion, trail of correspondences and draft prospectus regarding the North Somerset in this blog 'WECA, WECA, WECA, tell me more, tell me more' on December 16th¹. Bristol City Council's Growth and Regeneration Scrutiny Commission will be meeting on Wednesday, 6th January 2021 3.00 pm to examine these decisions, and alongside the potential for North Somerset to join and for a new deal for the West of England.

North Somerset's Parliamentarians have told us that they will contact ministers to see how North Somerset will be able to access a range of funding streams outside of WECA.

West of England Mayoral Elections

Cllr Dine Romero, Leader of Bath and North East Somerset Council, asked about the technical requirements for delaying the West of England Combined Authority Elections, should it be necessary during the Combined Authority Committee Meeting on 4 December 2020.

Shahzia Daya, WECA Director of Legal Services, replied that at the moment the elections are scheduled for May 2021. Local Authority Leaders can request to delay the elections till 2021, however that would be at the discretion of central Government. This has been done by local authorities such as Somerset County Council in anticipation of future local government

¹Rees, M 'WECA, WECA, WECA, tell me more, tell me more' (2020) The Mayor of Bristol Blog. <Accessed on 21 December 2020: <https://thebristolmayor.com/2020/12/16/weca/>>

reorganisations.

The West of England Combined Authority have appointed Shahzia Daya as the Returning Officer for the 2021 Combined Authority election. North Somerset Council's election team will assist the Combined Authority election Returning Officer in the delivery of this election as necessary.

2 December 2020 Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting

1. WECA and North Somerset

The West of England Scrutiny Members have written a letter to the four local authority leaders alongside the West of England Mayor Tim Bowles regarding proposals to extend the Combined Authority Membership to North Somerset Council, contents of this can be found in Appendix 1.

The Scrutiny Panel Members urged officers to clarify options that may still be available and the processes and timeline that would need to be followed to enable North Somerset Council to join WECA.

The Scrutiny Panel urged Mayors and leaders to get together to speak with one voice to ensure that the West of England Combined Authority includes North Somerset. It was the view of the Scrutiny Panel that it was unacceptable for membership to be delayed until 2025, and all possible options much be considered to expediate this so that we can properly address our joint problems.

Many Scrutiny Panel members, including those from North Somerset supported delaying the West of England Mayoral election if it would give all parties time to create the necessary governance arrangements and financial deal for the West of England.

2. Strategic Rail Investment

The Committee were broadly supportive of the 10-year rail plan for the West of England, particularly in terms of electrification of rail and ensuring fully accessible stations including those in North Somerset. The committee drew attention to the Strategic Outline Business Case for mass transit will be completed in 2021 – which is likely to benefit North Somerset residents and strategic locations like Bristol Airport.

3. Investment Fund

The Committee was supportive of proposals being brought forward through the investment fund, including the ambitious Weston General Stores proposals and investment into Weston College.

4. Adult Education Budget

The committee examined proposals in depth, welcoming the way that the Adult Education Budget was tied into the region's Industrial Strategy and Employment and Skills plan. We welcome the way that the budget brings together all local FE colleges, including Weston College to work jointly together through shared provider delivery plans to reduce the amount of reduplication of work using public money. We deeply regret that this item will not directly affect North Somerset.

Further Information:

- Mass Transit Project: If you wish to be kept up to date with the Mass Transit project, please subscribe here for updates: <https://www.westofengland-ca.gov.uk/mass-transit-project/>

- For more details about the West of England Combined Authority Committee and West of England Joint Committee Meeting on 04/12/2020: <https://westofengland-ca.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=192&Mid=448>

Appendix 1: Letter from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel regarding North Somerset and WECA

Dear Mayor Rees, Mayor Bowles, Cllr. Savage and Cllr. Romero,

I write this letter as the Chair of WECA Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Please note however that it has been agreed by the other members of that committee of all political parties and all geographical locations (as listed below).

We note with some dismay the contents of the recent letter addressed to Mayor Rees from the leaders of the other authorities which comprise WECA, and North Somerset. We only know the details contained in that letter and subsequent statements from Mayor Rees so it is possible that we are not in possession of some of the relevant facts.

In principle, it makes complete business, geographical and environmental sense that North Somerset be part of the combined authority and indeed we understand that was the original hope and intention. For whatever political decision made by those in power in North Somerset at that time, this did not happen.

In questions of transport, housing and the environment our region must ideally be considered as an entity including North Somerset if the full benefits of devolution are to be realised, and we recognise that new investment is essential to achieve this. It is nonsense for example that half of Bristol Port is geographically in WECA and half is not and that a major piece of transport infrastructure such as Bristol Airport has no political links with the region it primarily serves.

We note that all constituent authorities support – in principle – the expansion of WECA to include North Somerset. We also note that Mayor Rees has stated that the challenges to this progress is due to a lack of financial detail from Westminster.

We understand that if this issue cannot be resolved urgently then North Somerset will not be able to join WECA until 2025 at the earliest and this is not acceptable. Therefore, we ask that all parties meet to discuss this urgently and try and ensure that our region has the ability to speak with one voice when decisions are being made by central government that impact on all our citizens.

We request to be updated on the progress including process, governance and financial details so that we can adequately scrutinise this issue.

Yours sincerely Stephen Clarke, Green Party, Bristol City Council. Chair of WECA Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Winston Duguid, Lib Dem, BANES. Hal MacFie, Lib Dem, BANES. Geoffrey Gollop, Conservative, Bristol City Council. Gary Hopkins, Lib Dem, Bristol City Council. Brenda Massey, Labour, Bristol City Council. Carole Johnson, Labour, Bristol City Council. Mhairi Threlfall, Labour, Bristol City Council. Huw James, Lib Dem, North Somerset Council. Mike Bird, Independent, North Somerset Council. APPENDIX 1 Page 5 Peter Crew, Conservative, North Somerset Council. John Ashe, Conservative, South Glos Council. Brian Allinson, Conservative, South Glos Council. James Arrowsmith, Lib Dem, South Glos Council.

Appendix 2: Letter from Mayor Tim Bowles to WECA Overview and Scrutiny

RE: WECA and North Somerset: letter from WECA Scrutiny

2nd December 2020

Dear Councillor Clarke and members of the WECA Overview and Scrutiny committee,

North Somerset and WECA

Thank you for your letter regarding the expansion of the West of England Combined Authority to include North Somerset, and apologies for the delay in my reply.

This reply is from me personally as the mayor, rather than as chair of the WECA committee because, as you will be aware, there is not political consensus on the committee as to the way forward.

As you will have seen from the statements I have made on this issue, I am fully supportive of North Somerset joining the Combined Authority as I too believe it makes complete business, geographical and environmental sense. I believe there is a great deal of potential benefit to the whole region of enlarging the size of the Combined Authority, allowing us to operate at scale and tackle some of the intractable issues the region faces, such as strengthening inclusion, driving up productivity and cutting our carbon emissions and improving air quality.

Our analysis suggests that if the Investment Fund performance were to be extended to North Somerset then we would see at least £485m of GVA, 2,500 new jobs, 7,400 learners gaining new qualifications or skills, and an additional 285,000 bus and 835,000 rail journeys annually. It would also help us more effectively deliver on our shared ambitions for the region including our Local Industrial Strategy and Regional Recovery Plan.

The Government has been very clear that they are fully supportive of helping to progress the expansion ahead of the planned 2021 election, but the timeline to do that was tight. They asked that the region's leaders open the consultation on governance arrangements to demonstrate our political will to expansion, but that window has now closed as political consensus could not be reached although I would have been happy to see the consultation open as the Government have said all along that discussions about a financial settlement needed to progress in parallel.

I hope this provides you and other committee members with a clear understanding of my position.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Bowles

Mayor of the West of England