

West of England Scrutiny Committee Report - 11 Jan 2022

Due to a series of disputes between regional leaders over governance arrangements and funding, there have been a number of meetings Overview and Scrutiny Meetings.

Regrettably the October 19th Meeting West of England Joint Committee was cancelled, and so the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's views did not feed into that meeting.

Alongside Overview & Scrutiny Meetings, Huw James, Peter Crew, and Mike Bird have also attended a number of informal sub-group meetings on Skills and Transport. As chair of the Skills Sub-group, Huw James has attended the West of England Skills Board as an Observer.

A record of the meetings is as follows:

13 Dec 2021 10.30 am

Members in North Somerset, alongside many other members, were unable to attend the 13th December 2021 meeting due to its last minute in-person arrangements however made their thoughts known to the Chair of the Committee in advance of this meeting. The meeting was not quorate.

A summary of this meeting has been made by the chair:

1. Discussion with Metro Mayor:

We were pleased that the Metro Mayor again attended our meeting.

We had a wide-ranging discussion including the following points:

* We flagged the importance of progressing the collaborative work across the authorities to meet the envisaged timeline for delivering the Spatial Development Strategy (SDS). The next phase of release of documents that support the SDS including a new Memorandum of Understanding is January 2022. As we understand it, an essential decision that needs to be recorded in January is moving the formal decisions regarding the SDS process to April 2022, as this recording will be looked at by the government inspector.

* We discussed the issues faced right across the region in relation to bus services. We appreciate the financial constraints that the Combined Authority is operating within, and the very real challenges faced by bus operators - this though also highlights the importance of maximising opportunities through the Bus Service Improvement Plan and Enhanced Partnership. We also flagged that where services must change in the current situation and given the ongoing constraints, it is essential to provide prompt and timely information to service users.

* We discussed the award of £540m to the region through the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement and the need to focus on delivery in the next 5 years. We also flagged that our Transport Sub-group would like to see more information about the transport "hubs" and a clearer, user-centred definition of their features and benefits. In the longer term, we would like to see maintenance support the improvement programmes by integrating with them in terms of timing and, where possible, using maintenance to support improvements.

* We also flagged with the Metro Mayor a number of issues raised by the Transport sub-group in relation to rail - these included support for the approach of "sweating" existing assets as far as possible given the expense, long timescales and complexity of rail construction projects. There is also strong support for improving the accessibility of stations, including the new eastern entrance to Temple Meads.

* In relation to the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, members feel a key next step is the development of a network map, both a tube-style map and a more detailed alignment map. The walking network also needs to be linked in and aligned with the High Streets work and Liveable Neighbourhoods work, so that we encourage walking to the local high street as the norm.

2. Comments on the 17 December Joint Committee reports:

a. Agenda item 9 - West of England Joint Committee governance and voting arrangements

We noted the legal update, clarifying the voting arrangements as they apply to the Joint Committee

b. Agenda item 10 - Joint Committee governance review

We noted that this report was submitted by the four unitary authorities.

In terms of the governance review that is proposed, we would request that an appropriate officer or officers from the unitary authorities attend our next meeting on 24 January to provide an update on the review and to respond to any specific questions we may have.

We note that under the current governance arrangements, it has been advantageous to all authorities to follow a 'single pot' approach, allowing flexibility in supporting projects across funding programmes such as the Local Growth Fund, Economic Development Fund and Revolving Infrastructure Fund. We hope that the benefits of this approach are given full and due consideration as part of this review, as this will help to continue to assist cashflow across projects and address issues around what can be arbitrary deadlines for using funds.

c. Agenda item 11 – Local Enterprise Partnership & Invest Bristol and Bath budget outturn, April - October 2021

We noted this report, on the basis that it is essentially the same report as was prepared for the October meeting.

d. Agenda item 12 - Local Growth/Getting Building Funds, Economic Development Fund and Revolving Infrastructure Fund change requests

We support these proposals, again noting that they largely replicate the original October report.

e. Agenda item 13 - Metrowest phase 1B – Portishead line update

We noted this update and are appreciative of the urgent work taking place to resolve the issues around the Development Consent Order.

f. Agenda item 14 - West of England investment priorities

Again, we noted that this report has been produced by the unitary authorities.

It is clear that important discussions need to take place about investment prioritisation, recognising that it will not be possible to fund all unitary authority and Metro Mayor priorities.

It is essential that we demonstrate our willingness and ability to agree on and deliver the priorities, outcomes and optimised return on investment our residents need and deserve. We are supportive of the approach that these need to be based on as wide a set of criteria as possible

g. Agenda item 15 - Western Gateway update

We noted this update and we will be interested to see how the Western Gateway will develop, particularly in the context of the forthcoming White Paper on levelling-up.

15 October 2021 Meeting

Cllr Huw James summarised the meeting as following:

a. Metro Mayor's attendance at Scrutiny

We were pleased to again welcome Metro Mayor Dan Norris to our meeting and had a useful discussion around his key priorities. We look forward to continuing this constructive engagement.

We fully support the Mayor's stated ambition to attract significantly more government resources to our region, especially in relation to transport and delivering net zero by our ambitious 2030 target; we also need to ensure we are using current resources as effectively as possible, for example in tackling the significant pockets of deprivation across the geography of the Combined Authority area.

In terms of climate action, we stressed there must be a strong and sustained focus on retrofitting the region's properties.

b. General comment - amendments to reports at committee meetings

We appreciate that sometimes it may be necessary for amendments to committee report recommendations to be moved and discussed at Combined Authority and Joint Committee meetings. We feel strongly, however, that the starting point should be that this is kept to a minimum; in particular, amendments that are submitted at or only just before meetings pose potential difficulties as scrutiny members will not have received any opportunity to scrutinise or even see such amendments in advance.

c. Supporting the decarbonisation of aviation (item 9)

We noted this report and look forward to the more detailed report that will come back in January on developing a joint plan with industry.

We felt that the following factors should be taken into account in developing this work:

- * Some of the jobs of the 98,000 people currently employed in the aerospace sector may need to adjust / transition into supporting and driving wider carbon reduction initiatives.
- * Identifying new funding opportunities should be a key part of developing the joint plan with industry, including any match funding opportunities.
- * The planning / regulatory implications for authorities of new aviation innovations must be considered carefully, for example in relation to electric 'air taxis' or drones that may carry small numbers of passengers operating at relatively low heights.
- * Given the time it is likely to take realistically to decarbonise aviation, there is perhaps a case for lobbying the government to take incentivisation action through aviation fuel tax measures.
- * A stronger vision is needed for developing and then delivering hydrogen-based opportunities and solutions.
- * It will be imperative for the plan with industry to be backed up with key performance indicators so that progress can be tracked effectively.

d. Investment Fund (item 10)

- * We generally support the proposed update of the Local Growth Assurance Framework, noting that this takes account of the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement.
- * We note that it is now proposed to set up a Green Recovery Fund that will leverage £50m on priority projects to tackle the climate emergency. It will be important to robustly track and challenge delivery on this.
- * We noted that action is being taken to carefully assess the implications for investing in infrastructure linked to the current national issues around the economic supply chain and rising construction / materials / labour costs.
- * We feel there is merit in Scrutiny and Audit committee members jointly reviewing the outcomes from the recent Gateway Review of the Investment Fund.

e. City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (item 11)

We generally welcomed this report and look forward to the allocation to be confirmed through the government's spending review.

We flagged the following particular issues:

- * The ongoing importance of securing a north Bristol Park and Ride, noting the need to take every step we can to increase public transport use given the continued traffic problems in this part of Bristol, not helped by the 'ripple effect' of commuters parking in residential streets since the

introduction of residents parking zones in the more inner city areas of Bristol.

- * Securing a solution to the Brislington A4 transport corridor that does not involve building a new road on the Brislington railway path.

- * Recognising the A38 as a key transport corridor within Bristol.

- * Securing a more sustainable transport solution for the M32 and adjacent communities.

f. Bus Service Improvement Plan (item 12)

We welcomed the latest working draft of the plan.

We raised a number of issues, noting that they will be addressed through the plan and the enhanced partnership. These include:

- * The need to enhance and upgrade significantly the specific infrastructure around bus stops, including the quality of passenger shelters, waste bins, and real time information for passengers; and mobile phone charging points. There is a case for implementing this on a 'tackling the worst first' basis.

- * Routing of services – we should look to introduce orbital routes into the network of routes that connect communities to city centres; and also factor in the need to better connect important work locations to bus services, for example Avonmouth and Cribbs Causeway.

- * Delivering an enhanced bus passenger experience through cashless payments and through ticketing.

g. Supported bus services procurement (item 13)

We welcomed this report. Noting that the issue of procuring a Cribbs Patchway Metrobus Extension will be taken forward, it was suggested that the option of a Metrobus route serving the South Bristol Link should also be considered again.

h. Proposed future leadership structure (item 18)

We noted the Chief Executive's proposed leadership structure for the Combined Authority.

We note that inevitably it will take time to recruit the right people to take up the permanent senior leadership roles. Given this, we recognise some interim arrangements may be necessary, especially for the Environment Director role given we are in a climate emergency.

20 Sep 2021 Meeting

At the Combined Authority's Overview and Scrutiny Committee we discussed report for the West of England Combined Authority Meeting.

These were summarised by Councillor Huw James to the West of England Joint Committee, highlighting the following points:

a. Metro Mayor's attendance at Scrutiny: The Metro Mayor's attendance at the meeting was welcomed and scrutiny members looked forward to future positive and ongoing engagement with the Metro Mayor.

b. Principles for a refreshed climate emergency ambition (item 8): Scrutiny members noted and welcomed the fact that tackling the climate emergency was a key priority for the Metro Mayor and strongly supported the revised principles as set out in the report, recognising also the public appetite for fast, urgent action. The committee also supported the proposal to create an interim Environment Director to drive forward the refreshed ambition with a view to recruiting to this post on a permanent basis in the medium term. Members welcomed the broad representation proposed in terms of the membership of the Climate Board and the collaborative partnership approach to be taken. The committee also wished to strongly request that a scrutiny member was given observer status on this Board, in line with the arrangements being made for scrutiny member observers to attend the other Combined Authority Boards. Members particularly welcomed the clarity of the target that in order to meet the 2030 net zero carbon ambitions, a cut of 464kt of CO₂ needs to be achieved each year (10% of today's total) - this set the huge scale of the challenge ahead and demonstrates the region's ambition. It would be essential to continue collaborative work with the unitary authorities to establish clear, measurable targets within the Climate and Biodiversity strategy/action plan, which were agreed by all authorities and with robust progress checks and reporting in place; there must be clear lines of accountability for the delivery of each action. Noting that the new Climate and Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan will be delivered in Spring 2022, members requested that a progress update is specifically brought to Scrutiny in January 2022 to allow an opportunity to comment and input to this critically important plan. Members were particularly keen to see momentum build through urgently identifying and delivering tangible 'quick wins' in parallel with the Page 24 Page 26 5 development of the new strategy and action plan.

c. Green Recovery Fund (item 9): Scrutiny members broadly welcomed and supported this report and the recommendation to earmark (from the existing Combined Authority Investment Fund) headroom of £20m for a Green Recovery Fund. This amount should be seen as a start and any avenues of increasing the amount through match funding or otherwise should be explored. Scrutiny members would like to be kept fully informed

as the detailed plans for the drawdown of this fund to support specific actions are developed and were also concerned that the appraisal methods used to guide investment decisions should be fit for purpose and would welcome an independent expert viability assessment.

The Chair thanked Councillor James for presenting these comments

Further to this, at the end of the meeting, when leaders reached a deadlock, Councillor James added:

That if we can't get leaders to agree with each other with some immediacy we are never going to reach the 2030 Climate Goals. He added that Councillors from the outside would find it hard to understand why leaders couldn't come to a consensus to unlock funding, allowing the authority to move on from business as usual.

COMMENTS FROM CHAIR OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

COMMENTS TO BE SUBMITTED TO:
WEST OF ENGLAND JOINT COMMITTEE
17 DECEMBER 2021

I wish to present the following comments to the 17 December Joint Committee on behalf of scrutiny members:

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e. Agenda item 13 - Metrowest phase 1B – Portishead line update

We noted this update and are appreciative of the urgent work taking place to resolve the issues around the Development Consent Order. That said, scrutiny members are disappointed that the Portishead line will be an hourly service – whilst we understand the reasons for this, to be truly transformational, Portishead we feel needs a 30 minute service.

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