

West of England Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Member's Report
Written 10/02/2021 for the North Somerset Full Council Meeting 23 February 2021, 6.00pm

Since the last Full Council North Somerset Council's members of the West of England Overview and Scrutiny Committee has attended a formal overview and scrutiny meeting.

The following issues have also emerged:

- The West of England leaders have also met and decided that they remain of the view that the Bristol Airport planning appeal is a matter between North Somerset Council and the Planning Inspectorate and therefore will not be making any further statements.
- The West of England Combined Authority has submitted a bid to create a Great Western Freeport.
- Secretary of State, Luke Hall MP, has raised concerns that North Somerset joining WECA without an election could create a 'democratic deficit'. He has instead recommended that North Somerset joins as a non-constituent member of the Combined Authority. The extent to which becoming a non-constituent member of the authority is different to the current governance arrangements is unclear.

Overview and Scrutiny Members have written to the West of England Combined Authority to provide overview and scrutiny on these issues.

WECA Overview and Scrutiny Meeting (21/01/2021)

In this meeting, we discussed the proposed expansion of West of England Combined Authority into North Somerset, the Housing Delivery Strategy, Bus Network Recovery, Transport Decarbonisation and the Business Plan for the Year ahead.

A full report of this meeting can be found here: <https://westofengland-ca.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=143&MId=454>

Reports of the WECA Joint Committee can also be found here: <https://westofengland-ca.moderngov.co.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=192>

North Somerset and WECA

It was not possible to take forward the proposition of North Somerset joining WECA in advance of the next WECA Mayoral election scheduled for May. We have agreed that we will hold an additional meeting(s) specifically to discuss how North Somerset Council joining WECA could potentially be taken forward as soon as practically possible after the Mayoral election. This is something that Scrutiny in North Somerset Council might want to examine in the future.

We note that all authorities concerned would need to agree to take this forward. The specific questions and issues we wish to understand and explore, which we will hope will assist this process, are likely to include: - how we can seek clarification from / lobby the

government about the extent of additional resources and devolved powers that could be secured for the region through North Somerset joining WECA; and compare this with what each authority is seeking through further devolution. - how to take forward discussions with government about this happening outside of the WECA Mayoral electoral cycle. - in the meantime, how can we ensure the maximum degree of involvement of North Somerset in WECA arrangements.

West of England Housing Delivery Strategy

West of England UAs are developing a long-term Housing Delivery Strategy which sets out the ambition, the role and remit of WECA in housing delivery and how WECA intend to deliver on this.

North Somerset Council are part of the West of England's One Public Estate Partnership, however not WECA's Investment Fund. This means that North Somerset Council are only able to access One Public Estate Funding, however North Somerset Council may become able to access future funding depending on its specific criteria.

We recognised that the housing delivery strategy is essentially about how to accelerate the delivery of housing utilising the available tools, mechanisms and funding available to WECA and delivery partners.

We would like to emphasise though the critical importance of accelerating affordable housing across the region. This needs to be seen in the context that individual unitary authorities have more 'ambitious' affordable housing definitions than that defined through national planning policy. The local authorities need an agreed definition of affordable housing and this should be included as a definition in the housing delivery strategy to make it clear what is meant by these words – this might be something that North Somerset Council Scrutiny might want to examine in the future.

Our view was that implementing the strategy must help deliver these local ambitions by accelerating delivery and maximising new affordable housing.

We also noted that the strategy does not have formal, fixed targets but has been constructed to support existing Local Plans and the draft Spatial Development Strategy and updated/new Local Plans as they are developed

Bus Network Recovery Strategy and Transport Decarbonisation Study.

We would like to be kept informed of the position once a clearer view emerges from government about the National Bus Recovery Strategy and any proposed transitional arrangement e.g. a Bus Recovery Partnership with the Combined Authority.

We note that as part of the previous Bus Strategy work, officers developed a framework to evaluate the relative costs and societal benefits of bus services and that an evidence-based

tool has accordingly been developed that will help evaluate future tenders for bus services based on key principles included in the Bus Strategy.

In terms of the potential options that may be highlighted through the Transport decarbonisation study, and whilst recognising the significant scale of this challenge, we are particularly keen that as much as possible is done to help prepare for and enable zero-emission vehicle use into the future

It was noted that the study will generate a set of options, each with a proportionate contribution towards the overall 2030 net zero carbon commitment, so that packages of options and their combined impacts can be considered. This will provide the evidence base for decision making on which strategic interventions to progress and take forward to design, consultation and delivery.

The list of potential future strategic interventions for the study at appendix 1 was noted and generally welcomed. In terms of the reference in the first listed intervention to electric vehicles, it was suggested that it would be better to use the term “zero emissions” rather than “electric” as this, for example, will keep open the option of hydrogen solutions.

In terms of emissions, the study/report will provide factual evidence and data about emission sources. There will then be choices to be made about options to reduce emissions. This will also help provide clarity about the actions that the Combined Authority can achieve but also about those actions where other organisations will need to take a key role.

It was noted that the study will include the opportunities for delivering sooner on proposals for a West of England area electric vehicle charging network.

It is anticipated that while the private market will meet part of the infrastructure requirements, there is likely to be a significant role for public bodies in ensuring a sufficient network coverage to create confidence, ensure viability, and increase EV uptake.

This will include investing in those sites that might not be the most financially attractive at the moment (potentially with funding support) but that will play an important role in the network and have the potential to provide better financial returns in the future.

In relation to this, there may be an opportunity for the unitary authorities to consider anticipating future developments by installing EV points for private car charging on a commercial basis in car park sites that they own.

Business Plan 2021/22

We generally welcomed the plan and the clarity of the information set out. In terms of the four Business Growth objectives set out on page 12, whilst appreciating there is a lot of activity behind these objectives, we felt it would have been helpful to include specific objectives in terms of clean business growth.

In terms of the Corporate Risk Register at Appendix 2, we suggest that an additional risk should be added around the risk of extreme weather.

We also felt that it will be important to consider, in the context of WECA's business plan moving forwards (and the Climate Emergency Action Plan), the implications of 'The Sixth Carbon Budget' report (the UK's path to net zero) published in December by the Climate Change Committee.