

Extraordinary Full Council

Supplementary Information

Answers to Public Forum Questions



Date: Wednesday, 25 November 2020

Time: 6.00 pm



Extraordinary Full Council -25th November 2020 Agenda item 4b



Public Questions & Councillor Questions

Procedural note:

Questions submitted by members of the public:

- Questions can be about any matter the Council is responsible for or which directly affect the city.
- Members of the public are entitled to submit up to 2 written questions, and to ask up to 2 supplementary questions. A supplementary question must arise directly out of the original question or the reply.
- Replies to questions will be given verbally by the Mayor (or a Cabinet member where relevant). If a reply cannot be given at the meeting (e.g. due to lack of time) or if written confirmation of the verbal reply is requested by the questioner, a written reply will be provided within 10 working days of the meeting.



QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC		
Ref No	Name	Intentions
PQ01 & PQ02	Suzanne Audrey	Registered to speak

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS	
Ref No	Name
CQ01 & CQ02	Councillor Paula O'Rourke
CQ03	Councillor Clive Stevens
CQ04 & CQ05	Councillor Martin Fodor
CQ06	Councillor Margaret Hickman



QUESTION PQ 01 & PQ02

Questions submitted by: **Suzanne Audrey**

Background

I read with interest two different versions of the order in which this issue should be resolved.

- Regional growth and local government minister Luke Hall had urged council leaders to launch a public consultation and send the responses to the secretary of state by November 27. Cllr Tim Kent: "The Government would then initiate the next stage, the detailed financial negotiations with Westminster."
- Mayor Marvin Rees: "All the relevant leaders signed a letter to government expressing a clear view that we could not progress to a consultation without a clear financial agreement to cover the costs and add the ambitions and needs of North Somerset. The Government has resolutely refused to offer any idea of a settlement."

Question 1: Is it possible for WECA to undertake the public consultation followed by discussions of a financial settlement and then make the final decision about whether North Somerset should join WECA?

Question 2: Can the public see the letter to the government signed by all relevant leaders, together with minutes or notes of discussions about North Somerset joining WECA?

Reply:

1. It is not possible to have a meaningful consultation with people of Bristol and the city region if we don't know what we're asking people.

In 2017 we had a clear offer – give up some sovereignty and you get £30m a year for 30 years. Now there is no clear offer.

2. I am happy to share the documents you have listed. I will raise this with fellow WECA leaders and share something on my blog in the coming weeks. I will also follow up with you directly when this is done so you are aware.



QUESTION CQ 01 & 02**Question submitted by: Councillor Paula O'Rourke**

Question 1

The reasons you have given for not agreeing to the 'deal' for allowing North Somerset to join are funding and governance. This is an opportunity for you to describe, in real terms, the difference between the offer on the table now and the objectives you have for Bristol within the new authority.

Can you outline the benefits for Bristol, both financial and governance, that you are asking for but have been denied so far?

Question 2

During these negotiations, did you consider taking the topic to WECA Scrutiny? It seems that this could have leveraged your position or, at the very least, opened up the democratic process.

Reply:

1. There is no deal on the table to consider or agree. There have been no talks or negotiations with government. In fact, the government cancelled two scheduled meetings to discuss the potential of a deal, demonstrating the lack of interest. Meanwhile they've written to BANES and North Somerset to engage in an expanded Somerset. This is clearly the government's preference.

In terms of financial asks, we've highlighted billions of pounds of infrastructure investment that would support the region:

- Temple meads
- Hengrove Park & Bottle yard
- Mass transit
- Flood defences
- Western Harbour
- Strategic ring of park and rides

When it comes to governance, we must carefully consider how we would protect Bristol's interests if we are to progress with an expanded WECA. We must think about the following:

- a. We would be one voice among 4, rather than one among three
- b. We would be the only city voice in the face of three rural authorities, which would have the potential to dominate WECA meetings and priorities
- c. We would have a WECA mayor elected by rural voters with a rural mandate

We are therefore looking for a safeguard for the city's interests. At a recent meeting, I faced opposition from other regional leaders to our flagship schemes: Hengrove and mass transit. This opposition was supported by North Somerset.



What we need to progress the conversation is not only the financial package, but a governance review.

There is a drive for any money to be split three ways irrespective of the population, inequality and the size of the ambition. We've raised this multiple times, yet it's never been addressed.

We've listed ten times as much ambition, but we are restricted by the approach of splitting equally three ways.

I've used the example of the Love our High Streets Fund. The total pot was £10m, with £9m being available for the Local Authorities.

Whilst a formal funding split was not agreed by WECA, it has been presumed by BANES and S Glos that the £9m is being split evenly, and they have been working on this assumption. This is despite Bristol having 47 highstreets; South Glos having 11 and BANES having 35.

We have constantly challenged this and want to share the money against economic uplift of plans. But we are out voted on it.

We will be selling the city cheap if we enter into an arrangement without the promise of a bigger pie and much-needed changes to governance that will protect us.

It would be a huge risk for the city, the plans we need and ambitions we have, without those being secured.

2. It's a fair point, and I understand why you suggest it.

It is true that maybe we've missed an opportunity to invite scrutiny to look at the methodology and governance arrangements.

However, in terms of the negotiations, there have not been any, and therefore there's nothing to scrutinise.

WECA scrutiny could of course still look at it if they decide to.

Since this meeting, I understand that Growth and Regen scrutiny will be looking at this in the new year.



QUESTION CQ 03**Question submitted by: Councillor Clive Stevens**

Marvin - I have no doubt there is some political calculation going on but I listened to your points on the radio. But there are clearly some political calculations by the Conservatives too who see a more likely win with 4 LAs to offset their lacklustre Mayor. Hopefully they are fielding another candidate. I suspect the Lib Dems are on the same bandwagon.

The core problems of Bristol are lack of affordable homes and inadequate transport (and the effects are homelessness, traffic congestion, air pollution and carbon dioxide). To solve them we need the support of all four LAs. And money.

I appreciate you are trying to hold out for a better deal (or an offer even) but one of the things I hate about WECA is the lack of democracy. I feel I was railroaded into the vote in May 2016 as a fresh faced Councillor. This needs to be managed differently. Much more openly. If the people of Bristol are going to be ruled by a Tory Metro Mayor forever more then they should know the facts.

On the radio you likened it to buying a house without knowing the price. That's not quite right. You don't know the price, nor how many bedrooms it has nor even where it is.

But you must know something and you should share that with us and ideally all of Bristol. This is so important to the future lives and opportunities of Bristolians, whichever way it goes. We need to know.

Q) Can you share with Councillors or even better the people of Bristol what exactly is on offer at the moment? We deserve to have a say. Smoke filled rooms even ones with our Mayor in are profoundly undemocratic.

Reply:

I don't think there is anything undemocratic about a directly elected Mayor negotiating and taking decisions in the interests of the organisation and city they are elected to run.

As I have highlighted – there are no meetings, there is nothing on offer. We've had two cancelled meetings and the only offer has been for Luke Hall MP to have a conversation with treasury.

We are being asked to take a bet on a brand new minister of local government, not even a secretary of state, getting money out of the treasury – not for a specific scheme government will be able to point to, but for a layer of regional government.

And at a time when they are freezing public sector pay and reducing spending in a shrinking economy. They are even reducing our foreign aid budget against the objections of the president-elect of the United States on whom we are depending for a trade deal. The chances of getting more money are slim.

A Conservative metro mayor cannot get into a smoke filled room with a Conservative minister from his own council region. That's how interested the government are.



They've had two years since North Somerset first expressed their interest in joining to do this. Instead they came to us a minute before midnight.



QUESTION CQ04 & CQ05

Question submitted by: Councillor Martin Fodor

When the Combined Authority was mooted a funding deal was offered by the government. This was promised to the four authorities and was a major factor cited in favour of joining in the city council debate when we joined. Another issue was the experience elsewhere of additional powers and functions and additional devolution of funding being added in years after the authorities were created.

1. What is the Mayor's view of the full sum being made available despite only three authorities voting to form WECA?
2. What is the Mayor's view of the implications for additional functions, powers and funds being offered if Bristol's elected Mayor blocks the expansion of WECA at this time?

Reply:

1. I suppose in a way we were happy to have the money spilt 3 ways instead of 4, but of course that came at the price of not having closer working with North Somerset.

As you have highlighted, there was a clear deal to point at last time, which served to underpin the conversations that were had.

It was a positive deal for us four years ago, which is why I supported it, and many feel North Somerset should have joined at the time too.

But things have moved on since, and we're now talking about a combined authority with a track record of, or maybe rather a lack of, delivery – so the question many residents will ask themselves is "what do we get out of it?"

Simply, do we want the money to now be divided between four instead of three? I don't think that's a good deal if WECA cannot show that it is also securing more investment to make the pot bigger.

2. There is no offer. Can you be specific about funds and powers you think we're not now going to get?

Manchester signed their first deal in 2014 and have had 5 more since. Liverpool have had 3.

We are continuing to drive regional work through Western Gateway and Core Cities.



QUESTION PQ06

Question submitted by: Councillor Margaret Hickman

Will the Mayor reiterate that he is open to the idea of North Somerset joining WECA in principle, but a financial settlement needs to be agreed first?

Reply:

Absolutely – North Somerset are a key part of our region and I would support them joining where it would benefit Bristol residents. There are clear benefits for North Somerset for joining so I understand why they are disappointed.

We work closely with North Somerset. For example, we have maintained a Joint Committee to work on planning and transport.

As I've outlined, to proceed with an expansion, we need something on the table – at the moment we only have vague assurances and no commitments of funding.

It is not simply about money either, although that is important. We need assurances about governance to ensure Bristol's interests are not simply diluted, but rather strengthened through joining together.

Finally, this is not just about my view. How are we able to go to the people of Bristol to consult them on something when we only know half the bargain?

