

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Growth and Regeneration Scrutiny Commission



6 January 2021 at 3.00 pm

Members Present:-

Councillors: Paula O'Rourke (Chair), Mark Bradshaw, Tom Brook, Martin Fodor, Carole Johnson, Tim Rippington, Donald Alexander, Lesley Alexander and Gary Hopkins

Also in Attendance:-

Mayor Marvin Rees, Mike Jackson (Chief Executive) and Tim O'Gara (Director, Legal and Democratic Services)

1. Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed the attendees to the Extraordinary meeting. The meeting was conducted via video conference.

The Extraordinary meeting was arranged to consider three elements; to assess the proposals for North Somerset to join the West of England Combined Authority; to consider the Mayor's view on the proposals and to understand the criteria required for this to be accepted; and to consider possible next steps.

2. Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies were received from:

- Councillor Mark Weston
- Councillor Fabian Breckels with Councillor Don Alexander as substitute
- Councillor Kevin Quartley with Councillor Lesley Alexander as substitute
- Councillor Mark Wright with Councillor Gary Hopkins as substitute

3. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.



4. Public Forum

Public Forum questions and statements were published prior to the meeting and can be viewed [here](#)

David Redgewell asked two Public Forum questions and received written responses. As a supplementary question he asked whether the Chief Executive was aware of the issues around the Greater Somerset devolution deal, and if a response to the proposals had been sent to the Secretary of State. The Chief Executive responded that they were aware of the review, but that Bristol City Council had not been approached to express views.

David Redgewell spoke to a submitted Public Forum statement, emphasising the need to work with the Secretary of State.

Councillor Huw James asked a Public Forum question on ensuring the prosperity of the region and received a written response.

Councillor Clive Stevens asked two Public Forum questions and received written responses. As a supplementary question he asked to clarify the responsibility for the referenced governance review required by government. The Mayor referred to a letter sent by Simon Clarke in August 2020 outlining this requirement; the responsibility remained with WECA.

As an additional supplementary question Councillor Stevens asked to clarify the process for a governance review. This was not established within the discussions held and was not known.

Councillor Paula O'Rourke asked three Public Forum questions and received written responses. As a supplementary question she asked if alternative regional development projects and processes had contributed to the current status. The Mayor suggested that this was likely to have had minimal impact beyond raising questions over the nature of what would be available.

Laura Wells presented a public forum statement on behalf of the Bristol Disabled Equalities Forum. This was noted by the Commission.

Christina Biggs presented a public forum statement on behalf of the Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways. This was noted by the Commission. It was clarified that there are two separate projects referred to as 'Western Gateway'. The statement posed a number of questions that were agreed to be addressed in the meeting.

Additional public forum statements were noted.

RESOLVED; That the Public Forum be noted.



5. West of England Combined Authority (WECA) Expansion

The Director for Legal and Democratic Services presented a legal briefing published prior to the meeting providing an overview of the relevant legal framework. The decision to expand WECA would require the approval of a new governance scheme and amendment of the Constitution, which would in turn be subject to public consultation.

The provision for potential amendments was contained within Section 106 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, and would require consent from WECA members. The legislation did not require the process to coincide with WECA elections, although there would be practical reasons for this to be the case. There had been no discussions of delaying elections for this purpose, and an application for amendments could be made at another time.

It was clarified that WECA elections fall on a four-year cycle; due to the delay to local elections these would coincide in 2021.

The Chair asked the Mayor to present his considerations of why the devolution deal failed to progress. The Mayor explained that the terms of the funding available were very clear when the initial deal was first presented, but that Bristol City Council had raised issues around governance and delivery for some time. Ideally discussions around the devolution deal would have taken place from 2018 onwards, but did not appear as agenda items for discussion. The Mayor had raised concerns over both the future funding split and the mechanisms for safeguarding Bristol interests at an early juncture with WECA members and explained the agreements that would be necessary to continue, but discussions on these points failed to progress.

All relevant correspondence was published. Members noted that a review took place in July 2019, and asked why agreement was not reached at that point, also noting that there appeared to be difficulty in progression as the Minister required a governance scheme outline while the Chair of WECA maintained this could not be provided without a funding agreement. The Mayor agreed that a governance scheme outline should have been prioritised at this earlier point. The review at the time was specifically around project delivery.

Members asked for clarification over why Bristol City Council was not more proactive in leading expansion discussion. The Mayor's view was that WECA membership, and any subsequent expansion, was not a goal in and of itself but a benefit due to the access it could provide to economic development opportunities. Therefore expansion was less of a priority than the delivery of the individual projects in which Bristol was involved.

A member expressed concern about the nature and format of the extraordinary meeting, and suggested that input from the other local authorities would have been more beneficial. The Chair stated that other local authorities were provided opportunities to comment, and that this meeting was arranged to consider the role of Bristol City Council only. The Mayor added that he had also had conversations with neighbouring authorities about the disclosure of correspondence to support transparency.



The Chief Executive provided some additional background that the Devolution White Paper and the Government's Spending Review were both initially anticipated in 2020 but were delayed. This was a significant factor in the development of discussions.

Members asked for an outline of the benefits that WECA had provided in the last three years. The Mayor stated that the greatest benefit was access to the accompanying funding pot. The structure introduced was intended to develop cross working behaviours, but the structure was not necessarily the most efficient for this purpose within the South West.

Members noted that funding could be allocated in a number of different ways beyond a proportional split. The Chief Executive agreed that this was an element of the discussions required.

It was noted that WECA initially started a review, but stopped when leaders could not reach agreement. The Mayor was only able to comment from the Bristol perspective but stated that agreement was not reached as the proposed review did not consider the full range of issues and so would have been insufficient. The Chief Executive clarified the difference between the narrow definition of 'governance review' set by legislation and the wider discussions around governance.

Members asked why Bristol representatives on WECA Scrutiny were not involved at an earlier stage. The Mayor's position was that it was outside of his role to set the agenda for Scrutiny. There was some discussion around availability of sufficient information for Scrutiny to be conducted; this discussion was suggested as more appropriate for a different forum.

Members asked the Mayor to set out what criteria would need to be seen before an agreement could be reached. This would include;

- Clarity over the deal available so that any public consultation would be meaningful
- Establish the level of government interest, and what this would look like in terms of funding
- Ensuring that a smaller proportion of funding would be balanced against tangible benefits (ie. a larger pot, or equivalent benefit)
- Clarity over investment decisions and distribution of project funds
- Assurances that Bristol projects would not be held up and that interests be safeguarded for the future.

Members raised a concern over the lack of debate or alternative proposals previously seen at WECA. The Chief Executive agreed that a process for appropriate WECA Scrutiny would be welcomed as part of the governance review.

The questions raised as part of a Public Forum statement were revisited. Members asked the Mayor his current thinking around how to proceed. The Mayor reiterated that more detail would be needed before a decision on the deal could be made. He agreed that there had been some frustrations through this process, including the lack of a joint vision for Bristol. All things being equal the expansion of WECA by inclusion of North Somerset would be beneficial, but not at the expense of Bristol economic success.



The Mayor believed that it would be possible and beneficial to move forward once the required details were outlined and a working relationship was established.

The Chair summarised that:

- There was no legislative reason why the devolution discussion was required to align with elections
- The delay to the Devolution White Paper and Government Spending Review provided an explanation of changing levels of urgency
- There had been some clarification of why discussions with central government had not progressed

The Chair asked the Mayor and Chief Executive to outline their consideration of the next steps.

The Chief Executive noted that Bristol cannot be the only leader in discussion. His view was that it was unlikely to see a deal from central government before the anticipated Devolution White Paper was released, but that the issues around WECA governance and allocation of resources could be progressed before this. The request from Bristol to engage in these discussions remained open. It was clarified that the 'scheme' refers to the narrow definition of WECA; effectively any changes to the constitution and model of governance. It would be a technical piece of work with a rationale and financial model prepared before consultation.

The Mayor suggested that a WECA Scrutiny discussion to address the questions raised would be an appropriate forum to move this forward.

The Chair thanked the Mayor and Chief Executive for the meeting and discussion, and suggested that the discussion could be revisited in 3-6 months time. The invitation was accepted.

RESOLVED; That an additional Extraordinary Growth and Regeneration Scrutiny meeting be arranged in the 21/22 year to consider progress.

Meeting ended at 5.00 pm

CHAIR _____

