

# Minutes of Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

**13 February 2025 at 6.00pm**  
**in the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Davies (Chair);  
Councillors Rahman (Vice-Chair), Jeffcoat, Johnston,  
Kaur and A Singh

**Officers:** Barry Ridgway (Group Manager Assets and  
Maintenance), Andy Miller (Strategic Planning and  
Transportation Manager), and Anthony Lloyd  
(Democratic Services Officer).

**In attendance:** Pete Bond (West Midlands Combined Authority), Matt  
Lewis (West Midlands Combined Authority) and James  
Hughes (West Midlands Combined Authority).

1/25      **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors  
Hackett and Hemingway.

2/25      **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

3/25      **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 5  
November 2024 are confirmed as a correct record.

4/25

## **Additional Item of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

5/25

## **Bus Reform - Update by Transport for West Midlands**

Transport for West Midlands (TfWM), as the transport arm of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), completed a Bus Franchising Business Case in July 2024; this was subject to external Audit (as required by legislation) during the Autumn of 2024.

The audit report was presented to WMCA Board on 13 December 2024. As a result, WMCA resolved to move to consultation which opened on 6 January 2025.

WMCA had worked to engage with local Councils across the West Midlands and on-going briefings were regularly held to keep each Local Authority informed.

Ensuring that buses were safe, reliable, affordable and accessible was the key objective of the Combined Authority. It was highlighted that 240 million bus journeys occurred in the West Midlands on an annual basis and that these journeys were crucial for connecting people to work, education, shops and leisure. Encouraging people to utilise the bus transport system as an alternative to using a car supported the WMCA's objectives to reduce congestion, emissions and to ensure transport affordability.

Under a Franchising system, WMCA could specify the bus network it wants, service standards and fares before awarding a contract to a private operator who would provide the service. It was stated that a variety of operators, both large and small, were keen to bid for a contract. This would drive down costs but also allow small operators to have their space within the franchise. Of the options considered by WMCA, the Franchising option was deemed the best value for money. It was also confirmed that WMCA would retain ownership of the bus fleet and depots and that the contract costs would be delivered within the existing budget without costing more than the current funding available.

It was noted that the total transitional costs would amount of £22.5m which would be spread out over a three-year period. It was assumed that this would be funded through borrowing and paid back by utilising future fare revenues and any other funding sources that could potentially become available.

Following questions from members, the following responses were provided:-

- Contracts with private operators could commence in 2027;
- Collaborative work with Manchester City Council had been carried out to obtain data and to promote shared learning;
- Route reviews would be considered on a three-four year basis but not until the transition period had been fully completed;
- A consultation process would be constructed which would include conversations with community groups, key trip attractors, key businesses, local councillors and other key stakeholders;
- Rather than being profit-based, consideration of fare prices would take a more social focus;
- Franchising was more attractive to contractors as the initial entry barriers such as up-front capital costs would no longer be of concern;
- The fleet available to WMCA would be utilised and individual vehicles, once 15 years old in age, would be replaced with an electrical vehicle instead;
- Tickets would be transferable across the whole network and no obvious differences would be identifiable between operators;
- No specific details in relation to the contents of the potential contracts with operators had yet been announced.

Members expressed their gratitude to Officers from the West Midlands Combined Authority and commended them on the extensive work that they had carried out.

## Flood Mitigation Strategies

The principal statutory duty imposed on the Council as Lead Local Flood Authority was set out in The Flood and Water Management Act 2010.

Local highway authorities also had wider statutory duties to maintain the highway at public expense as set out in Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980.

In April 2015, Sandwell MBC was made a statutory planning consultee on the management of surface water. When considering planning applications, Sandwell MBC provided advice to the Planning Department on the management of surface water.

The Black Country Authorities had worked in partnership with five other West Midlands Local Lead Local Flood Authority's (LLFA) to produce a SuDS Handbook. The SuDS Handbook presents design guidance alongside Local SuDS Standards that developers should meet when proposing SuDS systems on new developments.

Sandwell employed Staffordshire County Council to act on LLFA matters under a Service Level Agreement. Flood risk was co-ordinated at a Black Country level and was detailed within The Black Country Local Flood Strategy for Flood Risk Management (LFRMS).

The principal flood risk in Sandwell was from short duration, high intensity rainfall events (thunderstorms). When the Borough experienced heavy rain, the prevailing topography inevitably directed rainwater to low points. There was little in the way of open channel flows in Sandwell and most of the watercourse and drainage infrastructure was pipework or culverts. Therefore, there was little opportunity to work with natural processes.

It was noted that Sandwell had identified 41,947 unique highway gullies; each of which was subject to a period survey, inspection and subsequent cleaning when required. Gullies that were identified as being located in a "low" spot were cleaned more frequently.

Following a discussion with members, the following points were highlighted;-

The majority of funding was received from central government via flood and coastal erosion risk management funds;

- Canals were not a concern in relation to flooding;
- The Council's tree policy provided a flood-risk benefit as trees in full bloom would increase transpiration;
- Falling leaves could have blocked gullies during the autumn months but this usually corresponded with the increase in gully cleaning around the same time;
- Flood mapping exercises had modelled areas where surface water flooding could have occurred;
- A register of actual flooding events was maintained;
- Storm water sewers in Sandwell were managed by Severn Trent Water and were quite easily overwhelmed in heavy downpours;
- The Service Level Agreement with Staffordshire County Council was subject to an annual review as well as regular performance meetings;
- Officers believed that SERCO had offered good value for money from a gully-cleansing perspective.

Members were pleased with the current arrangements and stated that further consideration of the Council's Flood Mitigation Strategies at a future date would be beneficial,

## **7/25 Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

## **8/25 Cabinet Forward Plan and Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Work Programme**

The Board received the Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme. It was noted that an additional meeting had been scheduled for 1 May 2025 to consider the Highway Asset Management Plan.

Meeting ended at 7.55pm.

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