

Wiltshire Council

Full Council

9 January 2025

Item 5 - Devolution Priority Programme

From David Redgewell

To Cllr Richard Clewer - Leader of the Council

Question (P25-01)

Preamble

South west Transport Network and Railfuture

Whilst we welcome the setting up of the Wessex mayoral combined Authority. We are concerned about the provision of the public Transport Network in the south west Region. Especially if Bournemouth Poole and Christchurch Borough Council and Swindon Borough Council do not join.

For the mayor to have effective control of the Region bus coach and Railway services. The Authority needs to abide to plan and control local Railway services Such as the Bristol Temple Meads station to Keynsham, Oldfield Park, Bath Spa, Freshford, Avoncliff, Bradford on Avon, Trowbridge, Westbury, Dilton Marsh, Warminster, Salisbury.

Local Metro west railway Network.

The Bristol Temple Meads station to Keynsham, Oldfield Park, Bath Spa, Corsham new Station, Chippenham, Royal Wotton Bassett, Swindon, Oxford.

Train services

Bristol Temple Meads, Bath Spa/ Swindon to Chippenham, Melksham, Trowbridge, Westbury, Frome, Bruton, Castle Cary, Yeovil pen mill station, Thornford, Yetminster, Chetnole, Maiden Newton, Dorchester west, Upwey, and Weymouth Line

The Exeter St Davids. Tiverton Wellington, Taunton, Castle Cary, Frome, Westbury, Pewsey, Bedwyn, Newbury, Reading railway route .

Local service along with bus and coach services across the Region. Such as the Swindon Pewsey Salisbury bus corridor. Or the Bath spa bus and coach station to Bradford on Avon, Trowbridge Westbury, Warminster, Salisbury.

Salisbury to Ringwood and Bournemouth. Or New Birmingham Digberth coach station, Cheltenham spa, Arles court interchange coach station/ or Royal Well bus

and coach station to Swindon bus and coach station to Southampton coach station to Ringwood and Bournemouth interchange. Which should operate via Salisbury.

- 1) So will Wiltshire Council with Somerset Council and Dorset Council support joining with Swindon Borough Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council and being in a Combined Transport Authority? And Gloucestershire County Council looking to join as a unity council either with Swindon Borough Council or the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority?
- 2) What discussions are taking place about taking over more control of the regional Public Transport Network with funding from the Secretary of State for Transport Heidi Alexander and planning powers from Angela Rayner, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Deputy Prime Minister.

It looks like the only way forward for Wiltshire Somerset and Dorset is Wessex.

Response

The Leaders of Dorset and Somerset councils and I have been clear that the door is always open to Swindon Borough Council and BCP council should they wish to join the Heart of Wessex proposal, as this would make good sense with reference to the geographic tests that the government have published (scale of 1.5m+, economic geography, historic identity, public service boundary alignment, no 'islands'). However, this is currently a matter for those councils.

Currently there are no specific discussions taking place on more control of the regional public transport network but this would be one of the core competences of the proposed strategic authority.

The English Devolution White Paper states:

- *The process for taking buses back into public control will be made faster and simpler.*
- *Mayors will be given a statutory role in governing, managing, planning and developing the rail network. In addition to partnerships with Great British Railways, Mayors of Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities will have a clear right to request greater devolution of services, infrastructure and station control where it would support a more integrated network.*
- *Mayors will take on powers to coordinate their road network, in partnership with constituent authorities and with less oversight from national government.*

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From Andrew Nicolson

To Cllr Richard Clewer - Leader of the Council

Question (P25-02)

Is the Council expecting any devolution arrangement to supersede the Western Gateway Subnational Transport Body?

Response

Currently, councils in the West of England, Gloucestershire, Dorset, BCP and Wiltshire are constituent members of the Western Gateway Sub National Transport Body. The White Paper states:

Our ambition to place the right powers in the right places will require working across regions where a larger geographic scale is needed to coordinate on strategic issues. This work has been undertaken to date by pan-regional partnerships, which have provided areas of strong leadership, focus and drive.

However, as an increasing part of England is represented through Mayors and Combined Authorities, it is right for those elected representatives to lead regional collaboration. Therefore, moving forward, the government intends to support Mayors in collaborating at pan-regional level and creating convening bodies whose purpose, priorities and membership are decided at a regional level, and working with existing regional organisations such as Sub-National Transport bodies.

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From Andrew Nicolson

To Cllr Richard Clewer - Leader of the Council

Question (P25-03)

Given that the Devolution White Paper indicates that all England will be under a Mayor, that combined authorities should be contiguous and preferably over 1.5 million population, that more of Bournemouth Christchurch & Poole ('BCP') Council's boundaries are with Dorset than with Hampshire:

(i) ... what communications have you had to and from BCP on the matter, and what is their gist?

and

(ii) ...what impact do you anticipate a grouping *without* BCP might have on coherent strategy development for a Heart of Wessex Mayoral authority in such fields as transport, housing, clean energy and climate change mitigation?"

Response

The Leader and Chief Executive of BCP council have participated in discussions with their counterparts from the Heart of Wessex as part of the process for evaluating their options ahead of submitting their own expression of interest. Their initial preference was for devolution to BCP as its own area but this has clearly been ruled out by government. The [BCP Overview and Scrutiny Board](#) meeting on 6 January had a paper on devolution from the chief executive which recommends that BCP council considers the invitation to join the Heart of Wessex devolution proposal. The Board has recommended an extraordinary full council meeting next week, which is after the deadline of 10 January. This will consider whether their preference is for joining the Heart of Wessex or Hampshire and Solent proposals. There is an open invitation from the Heart of Wessex councils to join but it is currently not clear if there is the required support from all the Hampshire and Solent councils for BCP to join that grouping. If Hampshire and Solent were to proceed as part of the Devolution Priority Programme, Hampshire will be developing proposals for local government reorganisation across the two-tier area and its neighbouring small unitaries.

From a Heart of Wessex perspective the inclusion of BCP, as with Swindon, would make good sense with reference to the government's geographic tests (scale of 1.5m+, economic geography, historic identity, public service boundary alignment, no 'islands'). As with Swindon, the largest part of their border is with the neighbouring unitary county and there are opportunities to support significant growth in housing and employment sites along the relevant transport corridors with the required infrastructure which can be reflected in the MSA's future spatial development strategy. Their presence round the table would ensure that this is given full consideration as well as other opportunities related to, for example, improving connections between the M4 and south coast ports. There would also be opportunities to align skills provision through further and higher education institutions with key employment sectors in the area. Additional scale would mean a proportionate increase in the Long-Term Investment Fund for the Heart of Wessex, which could help smooth the spending profile when managing capital programmes; and if BCP were to join the HoW area they would be a significant part of it (comprising over 20% of the 1.9m population). However, whilst the government have said they do not want islands left behind they have also indicated that areas not willing to progress soon should not hold back those that do; and there is a shared view amongst leaders that a three-council Heart of Wessex is a viable proposal in terms of scale and coherent geography. Leaders have been assured that 'huge opportunities' would be made available very quickly once areas had gone through the Priority Programme but that coming forward with proactive proposals is a matter for the councils involved. The government are legislating for a power of ministerial direction to create strategic authorities and ensure universal coverage where local leaders have, after due time has been allowed, not been able to make progress.