



West of England Metro Mayor

Three Policy Priorities for 2021

In May, West of England voters will elect a metro mayor for the second time. The winner will lead a mayoral combined authority with powers over transport, skills and planning. In recent polling conducted by Savanta ComRes for Centre for Cities, 66 per cent of local residents were aware there was a mayor. But only 7 per cent of residents could name Tim Bowles, the incumbent mayor who is not standing for re-election.

Figure 1: West of England Combined Authority



Figure 1 shows that the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) area contains the city of Bristol and South Gloucestershire local authority, which overlap across Bristol's urban area, as well as the local authority of Bath and North East Somerset. The neighbouring local authority of North Somerset is currently outside the combined authority, but debates continue as to whether it should join. More information on the West of England economy and how it ranks compared to other metro mayor areas can be found in the [factsheet](#) and for Bristol in the [City Monitor](#), [High Street Tracker](#), and the [UK unemployment tracker](#).

Beyond the immediate challenge of recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, which has seen unemployment-related benefit claims rise locally by 18,000 from March 2020 to February 2021, this briefing sets out three policy priorities the mayor should focus on to support the economy. These are **tackling housing affordability problems by building more homes; cutting congestion, cleaning up the air, and improving public transport; and giving young people the necessary skills to prosper in the existing economy.**

Policy priority 1: Build more homes to improve local affordability

- **Double the target housing growth rate.** WECA's spatial development strategy (SDS) should set a clear annual target for social and non-social housing construction.
- **Call for a strategic review of green belt land.** In particular, land around railway stations should be released for over 50,000 climate-friendly new homes with excellent access to existing transport infrastructure.
- **Recognise the importance of commercial space in Bristol's city centre.** Promote housing development in suburban areas in order to avoid competition between housing and office space in the city centre.

The WECA area is a successful economy, driven by Bristol's city centre, which attracts high-skilled businesses that pay comparatively high wages.¹ But this strong economic performance comes with costs, which are mostly reflected in house prices, as the area has become one of the least affordable in Britain. The next mayor must tackle housing affordability by ensuring more homes are built, while keeping the city centre thriving for business. This will require some tough decisions from the mayor, such as promoting construction in suburban areas and calling for a strategic review of green belt land. The benefits will be improved affordability for residents and reduced local inequality.

In the next Spatial Development Strategy, the mayor should set a target of increasing the area's housing stock by 2 per cent a year. This target would be in line with Cambridge, which has been able to stabilise housing affordability in recent years, by allowing housing supply to respond to housing needs. Between 2016 and 2020, house prices increased by 17 per cent in Bristol and the adjacent South Gloucestershire local authority, significantly above the national average, causing housing affordability to deteriorate. Unless housing supply is able to meet demand, prices will continue to rise. As part of such a policy, the mayor should publish and promote targets that prioritise new supply, for both social and non-social housing – as Bristol City Council already does.² A transparent strategy like this will increase political accountability on this important issue.

The mayor should call for a strategic review of green belt land. In Bristol itself, brownfield land is fairly limited, so it cannot be seen as a major source of land to meet ambitious housing targets.³ While one approach would be to release land piece by piece from the green belt in an uncoordinated way, a strategic review across all the local authorities would ensure that the most appropriate land with the best infrastructure would be developed and the rest protected.

1 Breach, A and McDonald, R (2018), *Building Blocks*, London: Centre for Cities

2 Bristol City Council (2020), *Bristol Housing Delivery Test Action Plan*, Bristol: Bristol City Council

3 Clarke, E Nohrová, N and Thomas, E (2014), *Delivering change: Building homes where we need them*, London: Centre for Cities

Research by the Centre for Cities shows that it is possible to build 55,200 homes in existing green belt and agricultural areas next to train stations at suburban densities, which will allow for climate-friendly commuting into Bristol city centre.⁴ This approach would continue to protect National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and public recreational areas.

The expansion of housing in Bristol city centre should be carefully monitored so that it does not squeeze out commercial space. Bristol has a strong city centre, which is home to a large number of high-skilled jobs that support prosperity for the wide WECA area.⁵ But the economy could be weakened in the long-term if commercial property is squeezed out by residential development.

Increasing the supply of suburban housing would ease this city centre squeeze, and protect the prosperity of the local economy for all residents. If the metro mayor successfully accomplishes this but a city centre squeeze on commercial property continues, it may become appropriate to work with the Mayor of Bristol to ask the Government for an Article 4 direction in order to reduce the loss of commercial property due to permitted development rights within Bristol city centre.⁶

Policy priority 2: Cut congestion, clean up the air, and improve public transport

- **Build institutional capacity to promote a strong transport network.** The mayor should build a stronger institutional base for transport policy in the city region by franchising the buses, building analytical capacity to promote efficient investment, and championing the inclusion of North Somerset in WECA.
- **Tackle congestion, in coordination with the local authorities, by implementing congestion charges, and workplace parking levies.** These policies will improve the city centre's air quality and reduce traffic.
- **Use transport-related revenues to fund WECA's local transport operation.** Those revenues would help run and expand the existing public transport network.

Poor air quality in WECA is closely linked to car congestion and low levels of both public transport use and accessibility. According to the 2011 census, Bristol local authority punched below its weight in terms of public transport usage: only 11 per cent of commuting within was done by public transport – defined by bus, train or metro – significantly below Leeds, Newcastle and Liverpool. The low levels of public transport use are likely to lie behind Bristol's congestion problems. The joint local transport plan for the area states that two-thirds of commutes are done by car, with a high prevalence of short commutes (less than 2km).⁷ This impacts air quality. Transport is a key contributor to the high levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and fine particulate matter 2.5 (PM_{2.5}).

As a priority, the mayor should build an institutional framework inspired by Transport for London, to enable the city region to introduce a congestion charging system, while expanding public transport provision.

4 Cheshire, P and Buyuklieva, B (2019), Homes on the right tracks, London: Centre for Cities

5 Breach, A and McDonald, R (2018), Building Blocks, London: Centre for Cities

6 Article 4 directions a local planning authority to remove specified permitted development rights in a defined area. More information available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/when-is-permission-required>

7 West of England Combined Authority (2020), Joint Local Transport Plan 4, Bristol: West of England Combined Authority

This will require a mix of interventions, and the mayor should:

- Follow Greater Manchester and franchise buses, using the new powers in the Bus Services Act 2017. This would comply with the Government’s National Bus Strategy, which in turn unlocks national funding to support improvements to bus services.
- Set as a long-term target to secure control over the MetroWest rail services.
- Establish local analytical capacity to evaluate investment projects, similar to the Manchester Independent Economic Review.⁸
- Champion the inclusion of North Somerset in the combined authority. A larger share of people commute from North Somerset to Bristol than from Bath and North East Somerset, and North Somerset is already included in the joint transport plan.⁹

To reduce air pollution and improve air quality, the mayor must work with the councils to set policies that discourage the unnecessary use of private vehicles, such as congestion charges, clean air zones, and a workplace parking levy. Bristol council recently set out its plan for a clean air zone, which would charge older and polluting vehicles. However, this is expected to exempt 71 per cent of vehicles, which will leave the challenge of congestion largely unaffected.¹⁰ A similar strategy was implemented by Bath and North East Somerset Council in the centre of Bath.¹¹ These will do little to reduce PM2.5 concentration, generated from all road vehicles from brake pads being applied to tyres and from some more than others by the burning of fuel.¹²

A better strategy would be to charge all vehicles to enter the centres of Bristol and Bath, with the most polluting vehicles, whether by engine or weight, paying more. This would reduce pollution and congestion. Research shows congestion charges reduced traffic in London by 21 per cent and the Ultra Low Emission Zone is estimated to have reduced NO₂ concentration by 29 per cent in central London.¹³ Meanwhile, the implementation of a workplace parking levy in Nottingham has proved successful in increasing the use of buses.¹⁴

The revenue raised by these transport charges should be used to improve existing services. Evidence shows that the introduction of transport-related charges have been effective in raising revenue for public transportation. For instance, Nottingham’s levy has raised around £9 million a year since 2012 to fund public transport.¹⁵ London’s congestion charge, introduced in 2003, boosted Transport for London’s revenues and improved bus services through the reduction of congestion-related delays.¹⁶ If the mayor introduced such charges, the revenues raised would be under the mayor’s control and would provide additional local funding for public transport, which could be used to increase bus frequencies and expand provision under a franchised bus system.

8 Breach A, Jeffrey S (2020), Re-writing the Green Book for levelling up, London: Centre for Cities

9 According to the 2011 Census, 22 per cent of working age residents commuted from North Somerset, compared to 10 percent from Bath and North East Somerset.

10 More information available at: <https://www.cleanairforbristol.org/>

11 More information available at: <https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/bath-clean-air-zone>

12 PM2.5, also known as fine particulate matter, refers to particles that have a diameter less than 2.5 micrometres.

13 Centre for Cities (2020) Cities Outlook 2020, London: Centre for Cities

14 Clayton N, Breach A & Jeffrey S (2017), Funding and finance for inclusive growth, London: Centre for Cities

15 Clayton N, Breach A & Jeffrey S (2017), Funding and finance for inclusive growth, London: Centre for Cities

16 Asian Development Bank and Deutsche GIZ (2015), Introduction to Congestion Charging – A Guide for Practitioners in Developing Cities

Policy priority 3: Ensure that young people have the necessary skills to benefit from the existing economy, in which Bristol city centre plays a pivotal role.

- **Promote extracurricular activities for young people.** The mayor should champion the expansion of initiatives like the Children’s University, which has proved effective.
- **Target and support young people at risk of not participating in education and training post-16.** New interventions should be based on the outcomes of the existing *Realising Talent* pilot programme.
- **Help maximise the take-up of existing active labour market policies with a ‘skills compact’.** Policies like the Kickstart scheme should be rolled out with local stakeholders.

WECA’s existing high-productivity economy requires a skilled labour force, but Bristol’s school pupils are currently underperforming their peers nationally, and so stand to miss out on the prosperity of the local economy. While the mayor has few formal powers in this area, they do have influence and can use their role to champion learning and to help ensure that young people benefit from the city region’s prosperity through accessing well-paid employment opportunities.

The next mayor should build a network of extracurricular activities for young people, by promoting the expansion of the existing Children’s University project.¹⁷ In 2019, 59.9 per cent students got good GCSEs in Bristol local authority, compared with 64.9 per cent nationally. While the mayor will not have powers over schools, they will be able to support extracurricular activities to help children succeed.

In the same year, 200 pupils graduated from Children’s University in Bristol and South Gloucestershire – a programme that targets five-to-14-year-olds and promotes extracurricular activities like playing board games and physical activities. The mayor must make efforts to expand the number of children participating in the scheme. Empirical evidence from this programme shows a link between participation and academic performance, especially for pupils from deprived backgrounds.¹⁸ The mayor should adopt Sheffield City Region’s commitment to expand the Children’s University to the whole combined authority area.

In the next five years, the existing support to students at risk of not participating in education and training post-16 must be expanded. Despite education being compulsory up until the age of 18, some young people still unfortunately drop out of education and training after turning 16. The existing WECA-funded *Realising Talent* pilot project aims to provide free support to targeted 14- to 16-year-old students to encourage them to continue their studies post-GCSE.¹⁹ The two-year programme includes mentoring sessions and it may provide placements opportunities. If the results from the pilot are positive, this scheme should be made permanent.

¹⁷ Bristol and South Gloucestershire Children’s University. More information at: <https://www.uwe.ac.uk/business/schools-and-colleges/childrens-university>

¹⁸ Hamshaw K (2018), Sheffield Children’s University, Sheffield: Sheffield Children’s University & Sheffield City Council

¹⁹ More information at: <https://www.westofengland-ca.gov.uk/skills/realising-talent/>

The mayor should create a ‘skills compact’ to co-ordinate skills provision and need across local providers and employees and launch a skills audit. The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth has shown that active labour market policies, like training and subsidised employment, tend to have positive long-term effects in employability, especially during recessions. They also found that providing information and assistance regarding education programmes increases their take-up levels.²⁰ Establishing a skills compact with local firms and education providers to coordinate local activities and to integrate central government strategies focused on understanding local skills need and provision, should be the next step for the mayor, to create a strong culture of adult learning.²¹

20 COVID-19: Local responses to youth unemployment and scarring (2020), London: What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth

21 Magrini, E (2018) Can Cities Outsmart the Robots?, Centre for Cities

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