

**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3)**  
**held at 2.00 pm on Wednesday, 19 February 2025**

Present:

Members: Councillor R Singh (Chair)  
Councillor P Akhtar  
Councillor J Blundell  
Councillor T Jandhu  
Councillor S Jobbar  
Councillor A Kaur  
Councillor C E Thomas (Substitute for Councillor T Khan)

Other Member Present: Councillor J O'Boyle (Cabinet Member for Jobs, Regeneration and Climate Change)

Others Present: Pete Bond, Director of Integrated Transport Services, TfWM  
Steve Hayes, Head of Network Transformation, TfWM  
James Hughes, Member Relationship Manager, TfWM  
Umutcan Erdogan, Contractor  
Clive Lewis, Technology Manager from Midland Airspace  
Elliot Parnham, CEO, Skyfarer

Employees  
(by Service Area):

Law and Governance E Jones, M Salmon

City Services and Commercial S Budhdeo, D Pipe, J Seddon

Apologies: Councillor T Khan (Substitute Councillor C E Thomas)

## **Public Business**

### **18. Declarations of Interest**

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

### **19. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2025 were agreed and signed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

### **20. Consultation on Bus Franchising Options**

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a briefing note and presentation of the Director of City Services and Commercial that provided background information on Transport for West Midlands' (TfWM) proposal to

introduce a Franchising system for bus services across the region. It followed a briefing session held on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2025 for all Members of the Council with TfWM. Appendices to the briefing note detailed General Franchising FAQ's and Stakeholder FAQ's. The Director of Integrated Transport Services, the Head of Network Transformation and Member Relationship Manager, from TfWM attended the meeting for this item.

TfWM was the Local Transport Authority for the West Midlands, with overall responsibility for the bus network across the region. However, the services themselves were run by commercial operators from the private sector, with National Express being by far the largest operator in the region. At present, the West Midlands had a 'deregulated' bus network. This meant that where services were run on a commercial basis, it was the operators themselves (rather than TfWM) who were responsible for determining routes, timetables and quality standards.

TfWM was currently carrying out a public consultation on proposals to introduce Bus Franchising across the region. Under a Franchising system, it would be TfWM who planned the network and then awarded contracts to bus operators, paying them to run services. The public consultation opened on 6 January 2025 and runs until 30 March 2025. Coventry City Council was a statutory consultee and Council officers would be preparing a corporate response to the consultation. TfWM were also seeking responses from residents. The Councils' Communications Team was engaged and was sharing the consultation materials with residents. Details of the consultation were available via TfWM's website at <https://www.tfwm.org.uk/consultations/bus-reform/>. The consultation materials included more detailed explanations of what franchising would entail, how much it would cost, what TfWM expected the benefits to be, and how and when it would be implemented, as well as how to respond to the consultation. A seminar for all Members was held on these elements of the consultation on 3 February 2025.

The West Midlands Combined Authority expected to make a final decision on whether or not to implement Franchising in May 2025, following completion of the consultation. If approved, bus services in Coventry would be franchised in 2027.

TfWM had carried out a Health and Equity Assessment of the proposal to proceed with Franchising. The assessment had been published as part of the consultation materials and was available at: <https://www.tfwm.org.uk/media/sajdpzou/health-and-equity-impact-assessment-west-midlands-bus-franchising-assessment.pdf>

In considering the briefing note and a presentation by officers, the Board asked questions and received responses on matters in the following areas:

- Funding – TfWM received Levi funding that supported regional transport, along with Government funding to support revenue, and Bus Service Improvement Plan funding via some repurposed funding
- Check and balances on contract delivery – financial diligence tried and tested processes in place, and appropriate mitigations would be put in place for risk issues
- Standards would be applied (national agency standards) to meet local requirements

- One point of contact to report issues – appropriate standards will be put in place to support members of the public
- Consultation responses - compared/benchmarked against other Local Authorities for percentage of participants expected
- Single point of payment and a single suite of tickets across all bus operators/transport modes was proposed – it was hoped that these would be operable between buses, trains, and trams in the long-term
- Cheap, clean reliable services would encourage bus use
- Further consultation required at the relevant time, for passenger requirements on frequency or service, fares, security, especially for evening and early morning buses/bus shelters, provision for schools, provision for places of public interest, provision for rural areas, cleanliness, ticketing options, and options for disability.
- Bus pass validity of passengers who used mobility scooters, for use outside of the West Midlands Region – discretionary passes should be recognised nationally
- Consultation would be undertaken for the designs for new buses
- Case for change – part of the strategic case - franchising would afford the opportunity to look at what modes of transport was best for each circumstance/what core bus service were to be maintained
- Franchising was a very regulated system/process – the network assessment and review would be undertaken separately
- Options for communicating the consultation – Included peer to peer communication, a 9 Question online survey, a 43 Question online survey, Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, Local Radio and TV. There has also been engagement with schools
- Contract lengths were 5-7 years and could be developed, changed, and services altered during contracts
- Appropriate performance standards would be applied for operation – would engage with the market to ensure appropriate recognition and rewards
- On-demand services – consider expanding services to more rural locations
- Consider raising awareness of bus options through a stand at the Godiva Festival
- Other modes of transport should be assessed, through the Bus Reform Panel, that could help improve the whole transport system for users, these were, but not limited to, TukTuk, small electrical vehicles for up to six people, and small road-based trains
- There would be no shortage of operators interested in the bus operation contracts
- Depots and buses need to be migrated into ownership of the Authority. Electric buses were leased but would be transferred across to the Authority if the move to a franchise model was implemented
- Costs associated with asset value completed although not part of franchising - £22.5m was new costs associated to moving to a franchising model

The Board sought and received assurance from TfWM officers on the following matters and asked that these be included in the feedback on the proposals, to be considered as part of the consultation process:

- 1) The best value and best service design be sought with an assessment of other methods of transport and citizens' requirements, before the designing and signing of the Franchise Contract.
- 2) Further consultation be launched at the appropriate time on citizen requirements such as frequency, cost, security, provision of security late at night and very early morning (buses and bus shelters), coverage of schools and other places of public interest, coverage of rural areas, cleanliness, and ticketing options, and options for disability.
- 3) An assessment of other modes of transport that could help improve the whole transport system for users be undertaken before the franchise contract's final design and signing. These were, but not limited to, TukTuk, small electrical vehicles for up to six people, small road-based trains as used in Eastbourne called Dotto, and much more.
- 4) Further consultation be undertaken with the Local Authority on the operational assessment of the Network, subject to the WMCA Mayor's consideration of the franchising of the buses.
- 5) Investigations be undertaken into the bus pass validity of passengers who use mobility scooters, for use outside of the West Midlands Region
- 6) Consideration be given to raising awareness of bus options through a) a stand at the Godiva Festival, and b) local radio and tv stations

Members felt that it was important to acknowledge that public finance would be tight for the foreseeable future. In order to obtain the best value and a more sustainable transport system for the future, it was important all these matters were assessed to deliver a meaningful and worthy change for West Midlands citizens.

**RESOLVED that the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3):**

- 1) Supports the proposals to introduce Franchising for bus services in the West Midlands.**
- 2) Requests that the feedback outlined be submitted to TfWM officers on the franchising for bus services proposals, to be considered as part of the consultation process.**

**21. Drone Technology**

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a briefing note and presentation of the Director of City Services and Commercial on the projects that the City Council was currently involved with that related to the use of drone technology. A representative of the Contractor, the Technology Manager from Midland Airspace, and the CEO from Skyfarer, attended the meeting for this item.

Drones were unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) that were increasingly being used for a range of activities within both military and civilian environments, with use regulated by Government through the Civil Aviation Authority.

Coventry City Council had been a partner in a range of projects relating to the use of drone technology, including the first-of-a-kind demonstration of the Urban Air Port (UAP) on the Westminster Road Car Park in Coventry City Centre in May 2022. This showcased the construction and operation of a facility from which passenger and freight carrying drones could potentially operate and attracted international attention to Coventry. The UAP demonstration highlighted some of the current limitations on drone use, as traffic management measures were required during drone operations to ensure that drones were not operating over live traffic. This, combined with the restrictions over operating drones beyond the visual line of sight, restricted the capability for using drones for more mainstream activities such as undertaking parcel deliveries, moving light freight around cities, and moving essential items such as medical supplies.

Since the UAP demonstration, the Council had been a partner in other projects relating to drone technology:

- Project Skyway - to examine the regulatory framework that controls the operation of drones in the UK to identify how this needs to be adapted to support the safe operation of drones for mainstream activities.
- The Drone Ready City project - led by Midlands Air Alliance with grant funding of £285,000 from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, it focussed upon leading the development of processes aimed at supporting local authorities in the integration of drones into their everyday activities.

Examples of the uses that the City Council was making of drone technology, in partnership with Skyfarer (a spin off company from Coventry University), included:

- Traffic surveys
- Bridge and Building inspections
- Building surveys
- A project for the transportation of medical supplies between the Hospital sites at Rugby and Walsgrave, Coventry.

Other potential uses included the ability to send a drone to investigate causes of congestion, delivering goods between Council buildings, supporting security patrols by covering larger areas more quickly than a ground patrol, and undertaking surveys of highway condition.

The outputs from the Drone Ready City project had been shared with other local authorities through a series of demonstrations and events, including attendance at the Local Government Association annual meeting. Involvement with the project had further enhanced Coventry's reputation as a City Council that was at the cutting edge of transport technology, embracing projects such as Coventry Very Light Rail as well as the testing of autonomous vehicles on the Council's highway network.

The involvement of the City Council in these projects had also demonstrated the potential value that drone technology could have in reducing costs, reducing emissions, and increasing efficiency associated with a range of Council activities, and as these initial projects drew to a close, there would be a review on how these technologies could be integrated with the Council's "business as usual" to maximise these benefits.

There were potential direct and indirect health benefits from the integration of drone technology into the transport system, including the improved efficiency of delivery systems for general goods, medical supplies and Council services, reduced emissions through reduced reliance on road transport, and by reducing the exposure of Council staff to risks associated with activities such as bridge and building inspections where working at height or within confined spaces might otherwise be required.

In considering the briefing note and a presentation by officers, the Board asked questions and received responses on matters in the following areas:

- Security and privacy – mechanisms in place to ensure flight height, tracking drones, blanking out facial recognition, and ensuring the use did not impede data protection rules
- Two flight operating uses - 'beyond the line-of-sight operation' and 'flying closer to infrastructure' - Maximum flight height 400ft
- The deployment of drones to assist in delivering and/or improving City Council services
- Provision for the disabled in the way things were delivered/accessed - would always start at addressing vulnerable people, then move forward from there.
- The security of delivering medical supplies and medication
- Drone in a box – secure boxes currently being developed
- Provision for the Police to bring down drones in an emergency situation
- Hacking into drone tech - standard security measures applied
- Airports – rules for flying drones in segregated air space
- Power outages – mitigation measures in place. Plans in place that would allow time to take appropriate action, to ensure continuation of Drone use without interruption
- Through risk assessments undertaken - part of submission requesting use of drones was that assurance was provided that risk had been assessed, before a flight was approved
- Future use of drones could be considered for fly tipping, monitoring driverless vehicles, areas identified as having anti-social behaviour issues, and modelling for construction projects
- Fly Tipping Drone Project in Burnley – an update be sent to Members of the Board in due course
- Current use of drones for traffic and highways issues
- Future proofing was essential during development of drone use
- Drone funding still to be quantified. Current funding exhausted. New funding streams being investigated
- Footage – anything from 15 minutes up to 3 hours footage could be captured on varying drones depending on the technology being applied
- Web links to drone open data – to be shared with Members of the Board
- Partnership development – being considered, further work with Legal Services required
- Data reliability – piece of equipment would need to be acquired to enable reliable thermal imaging

Members requested that Web links to drone open data be circulated to them and that they be provided with an update on the Fly Tipping Drone Project being undertaken in Burnley, in due course.

**RESOLVED that the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) notes and supports the use of drone technology for Local Authority projects for the delivery of Council services.**

**22. Work Programme 2024/25**

The Business, Economy, and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a report of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator that detailed issues on the Board's Work Programme for meetings of the Board for 2024/25.

**RESOLVED that the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3):**

- 1) Notes the issues on the Board's Work Programme for 2024/25 and that an item headed 'Hotline Update' had been added to the Work Programme, for consideration in 12 months' time.**
- 2) Agrees that in respect of the Local Cycling and Walking Innovation Plan, a Task and Finish Group be established.**

**23. Any other items of public business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of the special circumstances involved**

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 5.50 pm)