



Combined Authority Board

16 October 2024

Title: Public and Member Questions

Public Report: Yes

Question 1 – from Neil Mackay, local resident (asked on his behalf by William Bannell)

Question

I have here a copy of a letter from the Department of transport to the then Chief Executive of the Combined Authority Eileen Milner the letter is Dated 7th Jan 2022

The letter states that bus improvement funding to the tune of £4.29million would be provided in January 2022

The Letter states that ALL funding

-INCLUDING THIS FUNDING - will depend on your willingness to implement ambitious bus priority measures.

Later in the same paragraph it goes on to say 'In particular, the CPCA should commit to progress the reinstatement of the busgate on Mill Road, with access for Blue badge holders, as committed to by the Mayor in Late September.' (2021)

I went to Public questions at Cambridgeshire County Council recently and they informed me you had no power to make such a commitment

I am left thinking, the reason the legally quashed Mill Road Bridge TRO was so urgently relaunched and rushed through the County Council H&T committee, was because the bus funding grant money would need to be sent back to central government if the bridge failed to be closed.

I would like to know, why you made such a firm commitment to the Department of Transport? (ahead of any public consultation) Please could you explain?

RESPONSE:

I am able to confirm that no such commitment was made. There was press coverage of the meeting at the time on this, but no written communications have been identified. Mill Road was not discussed or minuted in any ZEBRA-related attended by Combined Authority officers with the DfT.

It is also important to reiterate that the Combined Authority does not hold authority over highway matters. As such, we appropriately refer such matters to the County Council (CCC), the Local Highways Authority responsible for such concerns.

The Combined Authority was the lead project sponsor for the project - i.e. the submission to central government was made via the Combined Authority through a partnership with other stakeholders. The Combined Authority and Greater Cambridge Partnership put forward a successful business case, submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) in August 2021, for a grant of £4.295m to help fund the 30 buses. The grant represents 26% of the overall bus replacement project of over £16.5 million, with the balance being funded from the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority's Transforming Cities Fund, Greater Cambridge Partnership's City Deal and Stagecoach.

A supplementary question was asked why the Mill Road Bus Gate was so specifically mentioned in the letter. The Mayor confirmed that many things were discussed at the meeting but that as Mayor there is no way he could have made a commitment to implement the closure of Mill Road.

Question 2 – from Dr Graham Turnbull, local resident

Question

Achieving a balance between economic growth in the CPCA region and protection of the environment, particularly our water resources, is an unresolved challenge.

Alignment of infrastructure development and creation of additional housing and non-household developments to a single unified, coherent and realistic timeline is essential.

In the September the successful Darwin Green appeal (APP/W0530/W/23/3328390) the Secretary of State agreed with the Inspector's judgement that while the weight of evidence before the Inquiry suggests that abstraction pressure is contributing to ecological deterioration, there is insufficient evidence to fully understand the potential impact of the appeal development. She also agreed with the Inspector's judgement that the proposal would add to pressure on existing waterbodies and cumulatively add to any existing pressure on the ecology of Surface Water Bodies.

The Environment Agency Water resources 2023-2024: analysis of the water industry's annual water resources performance published 7 October 2024 listed additional water supplies to our region as 2030-2035 for the Grand Union water, 2035-2040 for Fen Reservoir and 2040-2050 for the Lincolnshire Reservoir. Proposed water saving measures have yet to produced recorded sustained reduction in consumption at domestic water meters.

Currently the region is depleting the aquifer to supply the current population and relief is a decade ahead.

The Mayor is overseeing continued economic growth in the Authority and Government promises increased devolved powers to support that growth, including infrastructure.

Do the Mayor and the Authority have the powers needed to reliably align the annual completion and occupation of new housing and non-housing developments with a water supply that is sufficient to avoid further ecological deterioration and arrest the continuing over-abstraction from the chalk aquifer?

RESPONSE:

Ensuring that there is a sufficient supply of water to meet forecasts needs in the CPCA area is a matter for water companies, DEFRA and the water regulator. The primary means by which water companies demonstrate to DEFRA and the (Environment Agency) that they will meet their obligations is through the Water Resources Management Plans (WRMP) that they publish every 5 years.

The recent planning decision made by the Secretary of State for Darwin Green in Cambridge, and decisions made by the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service on whether to approve a specific development consider the matter of water supply and environmental risks. The CPCA is not the Local Planning Authority for its area. However, together with the leaders in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City, I have pressed Ministers at every opportunity to ensure that the necessary new water supplies for Greater Cambridge, that allow reductions in levels of water abstraction from the aquifer, are secured as soon as possible.

The government have established a water scarcity group with the task of ensuring the delivery of the new supply and demand management measures. This multi-agency group, including the regulator and Environment Agency, are working together with the water industry and the Local Planning Authority, to explore ways in which water demand and the environmental objectives to reduce abstraction can be planned for and delivered.

At a strategic level, the CPCA is a member of Water Resources East, the multi-agency body that is exploring long term water management across East Anglia. Given the number of water companies and supply options that will be needed across the Region to address local demands in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, in my view it is at this level that appropriate strategic water planning must take place.

Meanwhile, the draft Water Resources Management Plan for Greater Cambridge is currently working its way through the process towards publication and approval. As Mayor, I continue to keep a close watch on both infrastructure needs and the environmental concerns affecting our area as I push for continued economic growth in the area. I have already commissioned an Infrastructure Delivery Framework Plan for the CPCA area that highlights water stress as a continuing issue. In my conversations with Government, I have also impressed upon Ministers, the need for growth in the CPCA area to be underpinned by sound environmental principles. The CPCA continues to support the water resources planning process across the whole of the area.

I therefore remain confident that the process will be able to provide a solution that reconciles pressure of water resources with our ambitions for the continued growth of the area.

A supplementary question was asked that given the importance of this issue why is it not mentioned in the State of the Region report? The Mayor confirmed that the issue has come up on many occasions in discussions around the State of the Region and the Shared Ambition; he offered a full written response on the matter. Dr Turnbull highlighted the recent moratorium issued on non-housing customers by Essex and Suffolk Water, centred around the town of Eye, for no increase in water consumption until 2033.

Question 3 – from Councillor Anna Bailey

Question

On 15th April this year Stagecoach cut the number of buses on the Number 9 bus route from Littleport to Ely to Cambridge from three buses to one, citing problems with commercial viability. From the same day Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) commissioned A2B to provide one additional bus to service the route. The effect of these changes is that the route has been operating with only two buses since 15th April on a reduced timetable, with a notable gap in service at peak times. This situation hasn't been helped by the fact that the CPCA, which is the Transport Authority, has declined my request to place bus timetables at the bus stops along the route; I am grateful to Stagecoach for agreeing to my request to do this instead.

The reduced timetable is not operating services at the times people want and need to travel. This is evident in the passenger usage data:

- In the 10 weeks prior to the reduction in service there were 32,249 passenger journeys, equating to 3,225 passenger journeys per week.*
- In the 15 weeks after the reduction in service there were 18,190 passenger journeys, equating to 1,213 passenger journeys per week.*

This represents an approximate 62.5% drop off in the number of passenger journeys on the Number 9 bus service since the cuts, at a time when the people of Littleport, Ely, Little Thetford and Stretham are paying a 200% increase in the Mayoral precept on their Council Tax bills for bus services.

This is a hugely regrettable and predicted loss of passengers on this route which will be hard to win back. This situation could have been avoided with:

- public engagement with users of the Number 9 in the run up to the changes*
- better timetabling of the second A2B bus commissioned by CPCA, based on feedback from residents and users of the service*
- commissioning of the third bus to provide better frequency*

Will the Mayor therefore urgently convene the long requested public meeting for users and potential users of the Number 9 bus service to establish what times people want to travel and will the Mayor commit to commissioning the third bus and tell residents of East Cambridgeshire when they can expect reinstatement of a full timetable on their Number 9 bus service?

RESPONSE:

Earlier this year, Stagecoach did cut the 9-bus service, citing non-commercial viability due to congestion and section 106 funding that had not yet been triggered. For the journeys that Stagecoach retained when cutting the service, they did also change the times of the journeys which made a like for like timetable, particularly in the morning peak extremely challenging to schedule.

Whilst Stagecoach did offer to support the 'co-design' of the timetable, lawyers advised not to allow a commercial operator to design a timetable that would go out to tender.

It is extremely unusual for a commercial operator to cut a service to such a degree whilst maintaining the most commercial journeys. Once CPCA understood the nature of the timings and changes that Stagecoach made (with 70 days notice) an accelerated procurement was undertaken to boost the service for April 14th based around filling in as many of the journeys as possible with an additional bus.

Integrated timetables were made available digitally, with Stagecoach supplying some information at bus stops with QR codes directing passengers online for further information. Officers are continuing to engage with Stagecoach and A2B as the operators of the commercial and contracted parts of the service on timetable information. It is also our understanding that Stagecoach and A2B continue to discuss a form of 'operator partnership' where A2B will operate the commercial part of the service on behalf of Stagecoach. Officers are awaiting a firm decision on this arrangement to implement next steps in boosting the service, subject to further procurement advice.

I appreciate that as with the 22 commercial bus services that were deregistered in 2022, the viability of operating commercial services in the current model of delivering bus services is challenging and places the CPCA in a very reactive situation to quickly find solutions to maintain stability for passengers.

I am pleased that the Combined Authority has been able to work with another local bus operator, Dews as part of the precept funded improvements to further boost services that serve Ely. Those improvements launched this week and include a new Zipper 3 service connecting Sutton and local villages into Ely as well as creating a new onward connection at Chatteris for travel through to Huntingdon. The Zipper 2 has also been extended to March, creating stronger links between March and Ely. Dews have worked with the Combined Authority to produce a new network map for those services which is available online.

In a supplementary question, Councillor Bailey reiterated the issue that the Stagecoach bus runs at 6.30am and then not again until 9.30 so there is no reasonably viable option for people starting work at 8.30 or 9. She repeated her question asking for the Mayor to convene the public meeting for users and potential users of the Number 9 bus service to establish a desired timetable, to commit to commissioning the third bus confirm when residents of East Cambridgeshire can expect reinstatement of a full timetable for the service? The Mayor confirmed that rural isolation and consequential inequalities are at the heart of Mayoral ambition. He reiterated there are ongoing discussions with officers and operators around an operator partnership. A full written response will be provided by officers.

Question 4 – from Councillor Anna Bailey

Question

It is incredibly disappointing to hear that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) has been delayed...again.

CPCA is the responsible body for preparing the LNRS for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and has been given some £300,000 by the previous Government to deliver this important piece of work. CPCA has commissioned Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) to oversee its production.

Informally, work commenced at CCC in early 2022 with the appointment of a full time LNRS officer in November 2022, with an expectation that a draft strategy would take around 5 months to produce. This work has been beset by delays as well as management and governance issues.

Two years on and still we have no draft LNRS. At a recent meeting of the Steering Group all parties were agreed that the draft document is of such poor quality that it simply cannot be taken forward.

Two years on we have no draft document and there appears to be no plan to salvage the situation.

The failure to produce the strategy in a timely manner is having detrimental impacts. It is impeding East Cambs District Council's and other constituent Councils' ability to successfully implement biodiversity net gain efficiently, it is harming confidence in the farming community which desperately needs certainty, and simply, it is impeding the work needed to get on with delivering habitat and nature recovery in our county. This is a hugely regrettable and disappointing state of affairs.

Surely it is time, urgently, to find a competent body to carry out the work instead and to provide confidence to this Board and other interested parties that any newly agreed timeframe will actually be adhered to.

Will the Mayor and the CPCA be seeking a refund from Cambridgeshire County Council and, more importantly what is being doing to get this work back on track, when can the constituent councils expect to receive the completed and adopted LNRS and how can we be assured that it will actually happen?

RESPONSE:

The last Government commenced the process of seeking a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) through the 2021 Environment Act but the regulations and guidance to support the development of LNRS were only published in March 2023. The CPCA was subsequently formally appointed as the Responsible Authority on 30 June 2023, 16 months ago. Further guidance was still being published earlier this year by the previous Government in February 2024, 8 months ago.

A paper was provided to the Environment and Sustainable Communities Committee in June 2023 with a project plan that set out the intention to publish a strategy by March 2025. Ensuring continuing oversight, a further update was provided in November 2023 and in June 2024.

Initial conversations commenced in 2022 recognising the importance of LNRS by the CPCA, the Local Nature Partnership, Natural England and Cambridgeshire County Council. Informal conversations took place from summer 2022 and an LNRS Officer was appointed by CCC in December 2022. This period was used to discuss governance with relevant organisations including East Cambridgeshire District Council (Initially East Cambridgeshire DC did not join this Steering Group).

A draft strategy for consultation was never promised to be produced in 5 months. Indeed, it was advised by Defra/Natural England at the time (published on the LGA [website](#)) that 'LNRSs are expected to take 12-18 months to be prepared and published'.

It is noted that unfortunately, as was reported, there was some sickness within the team at CCC but is not considered that the LNRS wasnt delayed considerably compared to initial estimates.

Draft chapters of the LNRS have been shared throughout the process with the first one being shared in February 2024. As such, a draft LNRS does exist, and the supporting mapping is in the latter stages having been shared with the Ecologist Group on Friday 11 October and was shared again with the steering group on 15th October

The complexity of the issues and the interdependencies with land ownership, planning and implementation do need more work and so the Steering Group on 15th has focussed on agreeing actions that need to be achieved to review and revise the critical path for the consultation and approval of the LNRS in 2025. This includes ensuring alignment and that it is fit for purpose given the forecast growth from Government.

The LNRS was always intended to be published in 2025. It is unclear how this is impeding ECDC's ability to successfully implement biodiversity net gain. All local planning authorities nationally are in the same position as no responsible authority has yet published a LNRS.

As already highlighted, the responsible authority and supporting authorities are working collaboratively to ensure the LNRS is completed in 2025. A workshop with the steering group took place yesterday to take stock of progress to date, present the initial mapping outputs and to collectively agree the next steps that are required. We all recognise the importance of getting the document right (noting that once published the document won't be updated again for between three and ten years as directed by the Secretary of State).

We will not be asking for a refund as we are focussed on working together to get this project done. The representative of the Environment Agency said yesterday at the Steering Group that every LNRS process has experienced some tricky periods as it is about 'breaking new ground' but that they were supportive and welcomed the collaborative approach being taken in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. To ensure oversight the Executive Director is now attending the Steering Group and each Environment and Sustainable Communities Committee will receive an update or decision making report into 2025.

In a supplementary question Councillor Bailey asked for an expected delivery date, noting that some of the documents are very underdeveloped. A lot of money has been spent; she enquired whether the County Council would need more funding to complete the work. The Mayor confirmed that the goal is to complete the work professionally by the end of 2025. A full written response will be provided by officers.

UPDATE: At the meeting of the Combined Authority Board on 13 November 2024, a point of clarity was made by the Mayor that, in June 2023, the target date of the LNRS approval was November 2024, not March 2025 as stated. For clarity therefore, 2025 was not always the target date for completion.