

Devolution's potential for reaching net zero

Non-Verbatim Minutes



The Devolution
All-Party Parliamentary Group

Date	Wednesday 23 February 2022
Time	13:40 – 14:30
Venue	Virtual meeting conducted via Zoom.
Chair	Andrew Lewer MBE MP Member of Parliament for Northampton South, Chair of the Devolution APPG.
Speakers	Baroness Vere of Norbiton Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Transport. Stephen Joseph Visiting professor at University of Hertfordshire, Transport Policy Consultant and Trustee of the Foundation for Integrated Transport.

MINUTES

Chair of the APPG for Devolution, **Andrew Lewer MP** convened the meeting, and noted that sustainable transport is vital to the Government's agenda and that, following Peter Hendy's report, there is a need to look at private and active travel and how transport can adapt to help us meet our net zero goal.

Andrew introduced **Baroness Vere of Norbiton**, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton began by stating how lucky she felt to be overseeing this work, and how the key themes of the meeting are at the heart of everything she does. The Baroness explained the need to look at all levels of devolutions with regards to transport.

She explained the importance of Peter Hendy's Union Connectivity review, noting that it was key for future developments. She stated that the review has enabled us to think about transport in the different parts of the UK. Hendy notes in the review that transport devolution has worked well within different parts of the union, but has been very inward looking and therefore doesn't look at longer routes for people or freight. She therefore highlighted the need to focus on travel on a wider scale.

Baroness Vere noted that the Government warmly welcomed the recommendations in the report, especially where Hendy wrote of the importance of the Key Transport Network Corridors that will enable us to get goods to and from all areas of the UK including Northern Ireland to Northern England.

She stated that the Government has been speaking to business stakeholders around the need for a holistic approach to ensure local authorities and businesses are part of the conversations around transport routes. On the back of this, she noted that there is funding available that can be used for devolution type studies.

On the topic of Combined Authorities (CAs), the Baroness explained that the Government has good relationships with local mayors including Andy Burnham, noting that these relationships have become stronger during the pandemic. She explained that the Transforming Cities Fund went to CAs and other major cities, in order to help with infrastructure. There has also been Government work with CAs around integrated transport systems and their carbon impact. The Baroness stated that local authorities already have transport powers and thus the Government are working with them around the Levelling Up Fund, bus and rail powers. She noted from the Levelling Up Funds, 27 projects received funding and there is soon to be a second round.

Finally, Baroness Vere acknowledged the need to not just focus on carbon when we talk about the environment, but that we should also be discussing biodiversity, air quality impact, noise impact and many other environmental factors.

Baroness Vere then opened the floor to questions.

Baroness Blake of Leeds raised the issue of buses and the changing nature of their use. She asked how the Government can focus on the need for bus services to meet the needs of local people.

Baroness Vere personally noted the importance of buses as a mode of transport. She explained that the Government is clear on where they stand regarding bus provisions and the necessary relationship between local transport authorities and bus companies to ensure local demand is met. She explained that work by Steve Rotherham suggested that bus ridership in certain areas is back up to 80%, however this is not the same across the country, for reasons such as more people working from home still. She noted that there needs to be an awareness that people will use buses differently as time goes on, and we must keep up with the ever-changing needs of local people.

She explained the how the Government is working with bus operators to better understand ridership levels. She noted that the Government need to see local authorities playing their roles in this, as they will need to be able to support local demand.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock noted that he had attended a call similar to this, and was made aware that local authorities in England have to apply for a lot of these funds that Baroness Vere had mentioned. Lord Foulkes questioned whether the Baroness thought this is true devolution, and questioned why we aren't moving towards local areas having more autonomy.

Baroness Vere replied saying that the Government is trying to move in that direction but there is also a need for appropriate governance to help the taxpayer get their money's worth when meeting local needs. The Government are keen to give local authorities more control, where local areas have the capabilities to deal with the funding and action their plans. She said that some smaller local authorities seem to be missing the capabilities to cope with the funding, and thus the Government are therefore working to help them progress forward. She noted that a directly elected mayor can be a sign of well organised local administration.

Lord Sentamu noted that, when bidding for funding, local authorities who are quicker to submit bids often do better than those who are slower. He asked how, in the context of levelling up, the Government are ensuring that local authorities do not get left behind.

Baroness Vere explained that is very important to the Government that local areas have the skills and capacities to be able to level up. She explained that the Government is passionate about regional centres of excellence, which would allow local authorities to share best practice and help those who fall behind. She stated that the Government needs to identify those who are not bidding correctly and help encourage best practice.

She also explained that local authorities are elected by and accountable to local people and therefore she feels the Government have limited scope to dictate how they should function. She noted that local authorities are accountable to their electorates for the outcomes of their organisational choices.

Giles Watling MP asked if the UK Government has dropped the Trans-European Transport Network. The Baroness noted that we have dropped it but instead we have UK Net, which is more specific. In this there is a need for the four nations to work together and there is also a need to think about the movement of people but also of freight and how this can be done in a sustainable way.

Andrew concluded the discussion with Baroness Vere and noted that through the discussion it seems that there is clear need for devolution to allow local areas to address the needs of their populations. Alongside this, there is also a need for the correct level of governance to ensure services are kept to a high standard. Therefore, there is a need for a hybrid model of devolution.

Andrew then introduced **Stephen Joseph**. Stephen is an advisor to the Rail Devolution Network, a Transport Policy Consultant and a Visiting Professor at the University of Hertfordshire.

Stephen began his talk noting that the University of Hertfordshire chose to set up its own bus operator, due to there not being adequate transport provisions for the university students.

On the topic of net zero, Stephen noted that transport emissions have not reduced, especially those involving carbon, which are the largest contributors to emissions. He expressed that there is a general feeling in the UK that electric vehicles can only get us so far. Alongside net zero there is a need to talk about Levelling Up, in that when we talk about active travel, this needs to involve walking and cycling, noting that before the pandemic, walking accounted 26% of trips.

Stephen explained that there is a need for local transport plans to have decarbonisation at the heart of their infrastructural plans, with the guidance on how this is to be done being key. He noted that while the Government talks of expanding transport provisions, there is currently a reduction in services, suggesting the UK Government's position on expansion is unclear. He also noted that with bus serfunding for local authorities, there was a shortfall between bids received and the funding available, which leaves big questions around what we do about buses and how they are funded.

On devolution, Stephen explained that the devolution of local rail services has been shown to work; Merseyrail and London Overground are good examples. Merseyrail has ordered new trains with battery technology. He noted that it isn't clear where devolved rail services will sit within the new Great British Railways structure.

With regard to ticketing he noted that currently, it is only rail services which offer smart ticketing packages. He stated that buses need to be involved in a multi-operation smart ticketing package. People need these multimodal ticketing packages, which is important for levelling up and for net zero targets. An issue for those less wealthy can be getting from one side of the city to another, for example for work, which can be extremely complicated and costly. He said the Government could go faster on this.

Stephen explained that transport outside of cities is not discussed enough. He explained that devolution can be useful in helping with this issue, explaining that Cornwall's local council sit in a non-city region with devolved powers and have strong transport links.

Regarding planning developments, he stated that there is a need to look at transport for new homes, as there is a lack of integration between planning and transport. There is also a need for reform of road systems, including a net zero compliant roads programme, and this programme needs to encourage shared, sustainable and active travel.

On the topic of funding Stephen explained how other countries have local authorities with better local funding options, for example France. He suggested looking at workplace parking levies, which has been implemented by Nottingham City Council and with Leicester now consulting on following this, where the funding raised must be spent on transport.

Stephen's closing remarks formed around the idea that local authorities need powers and funding, to which we can look to certain areas of the UK and abroad for exemplars. Stephen finally noted that he is worried that the UK Government does not have their ducks in a row around these issues.

Andrew then opened the floor for questions for Stephen.

Baroness Blake of Leeds talked about smart ticketing and the difficulties surrounding it, and asked Stephen to expand on his thoughts on this matter. Stephen explained that the Government pulled the plug on the Transport for the North scheme and is only funding smart ticketing for some rail services. He noted that the difficulty with this is that it doesn't seem to have space for buses or trams to be integrated into it.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock said to Stephen that he is interested in the workplace parking levies, and if Stephen had any further information around them, then he would appreciate it being sent to him.

Gavin Newlands MP explained that politics often gets in the way with regards to the workplace parking levy. The legislation in Scotland around the workplace levy is exactly the same that Labour introduced many years ago, the only difference being exemptions in Scotland, for example for NHS staff and people with disabilities. Gavin explained that in Scotland they are trying to reach the target spend of 10% on

active travel, but they want to know how they may be able to achieve this. He queried whether working in partnership with local authorities and Transport Scotland would work.

Stephen noted with regards to the workplace parking levy, the UK Government did legislate this, but Nottingham's local authority had to help Government to get it through secondary legislation. However, this now means there is a template there in place that could be used by other local authorities. In Nottingham the money raised has been spent on lines 2 and 3 of their tram network, some new bus services and the redevelopment of the main railway station. Stephen also noted that the levy allows conversations with businesses around where the money should be spent.

On active travel in Scotland, Stephen suggested looking at what the Danish Government has done with E-bikes and creating high quality cycle routes alongside main roads.

Questions for Stephen then came to an end. Stephen finished his section of the meeting noting that the broader issue that the Government needs to address is around places in between cities and the possible devolution deals for them. He stated that there also needs to be more strategic join up between planning and transport.

Andrew then thanked attendees and speakers for their insightful views and questions. He noted that the next meeting (and AGM) would be in March, and that details of the Group's inquiry into the Levelling Up White Paper will be released shortly.

The meeting closed at 14:30.