



**TUC**

Changing the world  
of work for good

# West of England Strategy

Response from the South West TUC



Church House, Church Road, Filton, Bristol BS34 7BD

0117 947 0521

[southwest@tuc.org.uk](mailto:southwest@tuc.org.uk)

[www.tuc.org.uk/southwest](http://www.tuc.org.uk/southwest)

September 2017

# **West of England Strategy**

## **South West TUC Response to the Discussion Paper**

### **Introduction**

The South West TUC welcomes the vision for the West of England to be a beacon of growth and innovation; a place where everyone has the opportunity to reach their potential and where prosperity delivers for everybody. Trade unions stand ready to work with the new mayor and Combined Authority to help make the West of England a success. The Discussion Paper sets out the positive aspects and some bold intentions. In so doing it could be seen as complacent and the plans lack clarity and tangible actions.

### **Voice of Working People**

There are around 100,000 trade union members in the West of England area although many thousands more workers are covered by the agreements unions and employers make and the wider services unions provide.

The South West Trades Union Congress (TUC) is the federation of unions. It is not affiliated to any political party. As the voice of working people the TUC has a responsibility to encourage debate and to express views based on the values of trade unionism.

### **Strong region but deep-rooted divisions**

The West of England can be a great place to live and work as the Discussion Paper explains, but life for many is still tough with insecure employment, long hours, incomes squeezed, affordable housing hard to access, public services cut and welfare support slashed.

Trade unions believe there is an alternative to austerity and argue for a more equal distribution of resources and taxes. We want the West of England's economy to work well with job opportunities for all at decent wages and skills development. We want to unleash the creative talents of local people and to celebrate the cultural diversity that makes the West of England such a vibrant place.

This is a lot to ask of a new metro mayor with limited powers. It is a task made harder by the political tensions built into a fragmented system of local government across the West of England. Devolution is work in progress and we support the aim to give power to local people. The current situation however, is a mess with confusion on the geographic coverage and conflicting powers between mayors, leaders and councils.

As a regional body, the South West TUC is conscious that parts of the region lag well behind when it comes to economic performance. The West of England has a responsibility to play its part in the wider regional development for the benefit of all.

The unemployment rate has been falling but job growth in the West of England has slowed compared to the rest of the country. The area is particularly vulnerable to any negative impact

from Brexit. The picture looks worse when broken down into local wards and for particular groups. Women, young people, and especially young black men, remain disadvantaged.

The great potential of the West of England economy must be harnessed to produce employment and quality career options for all its citizens.

Trade unions are working in partnership with specialist campaign groups, community bodies and business groups to press for common interests.

## **Productivity and investment**

The Discussion Paper highlights the fact that productivity – already falling behind international competitors – is falling. Following the EU referendum result, the collapse in the value of Sterling has pushed up inflation. Pay is not coming up, average personal debt is now higher than before pre-crisis levels and consumer confidence is declining.

Fears over Brexit has already hit business confidence and investment. A recent Business West survey puts business confidence at its lowest level since 2009. Foreign investment is critical to future growth and productivity performance. We are critical of the fragmented system to promote and support international investment. It requires a much larger geography and critical mass to sustain effective provision. This is made more important by the work to promote international investment by the Welsh Assembly.

## **Skills for the future**

The area has some great educational institutions. They should be encouraged to collaborate and unions will speak out against the drive to competition between colleges, schools and universities. We will lobby to maintain the vital programmes for research and collaboration across Europe.

The area's employers are not investing sufficiently in training. This is a long-term fundamental problem in the British labour market and skills system. We welcome the ambitious aims in the document but there are no clear pathways and action plans to secure them. To align skills supply with future employer demand is a shared objective but it misses the truth that employers chose not offer training opportunities beyond the limited scope of the job role. Transferable skills are seen but some employers as a passport to leave and in a tight labour market they will choose to poach rather than train staff.

The TUC welcomes the Apprenticeship Levy to help address this problem but this only goes a small way to addressing the deep-rooted skills failure. The Discussion Paper repeats 30-year-old policy that employers know best and the challenge is to ensure the supply-side is responsive to their needs. At the same time the further education sector is in crisis and the adult skills budget cut.

Local colleges have become almost adult-free zones and narrow performance targets have forced providers to offer fewer routes to capture the enthusiasm of potential learners. The wider value of adult education has been sacrificed in the drive for cost savings.

The role of the learner in the workplace, is invisible in the document as if they lack any discretion or voice. We welcome the objective to provide information, advice and guidance to unlock the career potential of local people but the system has been broken for many years with no significant attempt to provide a comprehensive and independent offer.

Union learning reps and union-based projects have a successful record of driving the learning agenda. Many people at work in West of England today will need to retrain and develop their skills and knowledge as the advance of technology and work continue to change. The West of England needs a culture of lifelong learning where no-one is denied another chance and where learning providers reach out to all.

Trade unions have a network of Union Learning Reps who provide front-line assistance and advice to workers. The Discussion Paper is poorer for the absence of any recognition of this work. There is no acknowledgement that to thrive, the existing workforce in the West of England needs more support and unions offer a valuable route to provide it.

No young person should be left outside employment, education or training (NEET) and this should be a firm promise by the Combined Authority.

The Authority should support the promotion of apprenticeships by building clear targets into its procurement processes. Special efforts should be taken to promote such training to non-traditional entrants so we can break down barriers along gender lines.

## **Better jobs**

To provide decent employment the West of England needs inclusive economic growth. Work is a key part of the answer to poverty but the shocking levels of hardship faced by those on poor pay shows that we need good quality employment offering family-sustaining wages.

We need better jobs by promoting sectors that provide them and by improving current employment practices. The employment relationship is not something to be ignored by public policy as if it was a private matter not to be openly discussed. Too many local jobs are insecure and of poor quality. Bad employers need to be challenged.

The solution lies in empowering workers to improve conditions through skill development, career advice and collective bargaining. It is our view that mayors and local authorities have more powers than they choose to use to tackle bad employment practice.

The project to utilise social housing providers to access workers in poor jobs in order to offer support to access training is an interesting initiative. Unions understand the pressures workers are facing and the difficulties of developing skills. Funding by the DWP this project would appear to be driven by an object to reduce in-work benefits and we have concerns how tenants will view it.

The Combined Authority can influence employment standards through any procurement policies, advocacy of the Living Wage, apprenticeships and training policies. It can encourage a partnership approach to exposing employment abuse and exploitation and encourage joint working with enforcement agencies.

## **Sustainable development**

The free market alone will not deliver a growing, prosperous and sustainable West of England. In the 1980s, this approach saw damaging conflict between the private sector and elected councillors. The metro mayor will need to champion a vision for the West of England that will win private investment as well as national government support for infrastructure.

We welcome investment from the Regional Growth Fund, Growing Places and the resources to establish Enterprise Zones. But these are piecemeal, fragmented programmes that the West of England has won through competitive bidding. We would rather see a strategic approach to pursue a shared vision developed with the engagement of the whole community.

Projects championed as success stories in the region, such as the Bristol Bath Science Park or the National Composites Centre are the products of a former structure of economic development planning and it is hard to see such bold initiatives being repeated under the current regime.

## **Green jobs**

A coherent approach must also be grounded within a commitment to sustainable development and care for the environment. The West of England has a good record of promoting the green agenda. We would welcome a drive to offer more affordable public transport to reduce reliance on cars. Spatial planning needs to link housing, transport and employment opportunities. People in the poorer districts of the West of England find it hard to reach better jobs.

We welcome policies to encourage renewable energy schemes and regret the lack of a comprehensive publicly-owned scheme of energy conservation in our domestic and industrial buildings.

Unions promote green reps and green workplaces, develop ideas around a balanced time approach to work that will reduce congestion alongside promoting schemes to encourage walking, cycling, car sharing and public transport.

## **Transport**

Squabbles between councils haven't helped resolve the region's transport needs. We welcome the development of the Combined Authority to oversee the provision across its area. Public transport continues to be blighted by fragmentation and privatisation. The public sector needs to be able to control and coordinate the transport system to provide an efficient, affordable and integrated offer.

Electrification of the Great Western main line will improve journey times and capacity on the main routes to London but we need a mayor to campaign to ensure its completion in full.

The South West TUC works with local transport campaign groups who are promoting a range of solutions and innovative ideas to the region's infrastructure.

The South West TUC has helped promote cycling and walking to work schemes. Unions are actively promoting these in workplaces.



## **Housing**

West of England faces a housing crisis. Few young people can afford to buy a house. The ratio of median house prices to median earnings is now over seven, confirming the impact of the housing shortage for those who seek to buy a home.

The Discussion Document fails to acknowledge the depth of the housing crisis, especially for affordable homes to rent and buy. We believe the solution has to be a renaissance in council housing and local authority-led developments.

## **Equality**

The scale and speed of cuts is having a major impact on the West of England's council's ability to provide essential services to the most vulnerable families and communities. Austerity is causing hardship to those in most need of support, increasing unemployment and pushing more families into poverty.

A recent Bristol Fawcett Society report concluded that the cuts are having a disproportionate impact on women and lead to greater inequality in the city.

The scale and timing of cuts will increase demand for council services at the very time they face severe cuts. Women are expected to fill gaps left by the withdrawal of services, they tend to be the ones most affected. For example, the mayor should support projects to eliminate rape and violence against women and girls.

The Combined Authority must be alert to the needs of all sections in society and promote equal representation on bodies that advise and scrutinise its work. The metro mayor will be called upon to support many networks. This complex web of relationships is crucial to building a well-connected community. It is important that every part of our local society is encouraged to participate and be represented.

## **Social partnership**

The development of the strategy need to involve and engage the workforce. This can only be done by harnessing the role of trade unions in the area. The South West TUC is ready to assist. We believe the Local Enterprise Partnerships are weaker without workforce representation and the Mayor of the Combined Authority will be welcomed at the forums of trade unions as well as workplace level.



Church House, Church Road, Filton, Bristol BS34 7BD

0117 947 0521

[southwest@tuc.org.uk](mailto:southwest@tuc.org.uk)

[www.tuc.org.uk/southwest](http://www.tuc.org.uk/southwest)

September 2017