

LCR – UNISON North West Consultation Response

Skills and Employment

We are concerned about the pressures on further education (FE) colleges to consider mergers as a consequence of inadequate central government funding and the Area Review process. Where an FE college is not independent it may be less focused on the needs of the locality where it is based, students may experience higher travel time and costs, and some young people may be deterred from undertaking college courses

In reviewing post-16 education provision, it is important to note and address the current unavailability of sixth form provision in Knowsley. The demise of the last remaining sixth form in the Borough shows how there is a need for coherent and comprehensive planning of our system of education provision in the LCR to ensure that all our young people have access to high quality courses and opportunities.

We are concerned about the emphasis in the consultation document on careers advice and guidance being “employer led”. UNISON represents members employed by *Career Connect* and our members are concerned that employer led advice is too narrowly focused on the immediate needs of local employers. Instead, careers advice should aim to encourage young people to achieve their maximum individual potential in education and training - to equip them for participation in the labour market both in the short term and the long term.

We note that while the Combined Authority is undertaking an important role in education for 16-19 year-olds, local authorities are playing a diminishing role in the planning and support of pre-16 education due to the prevalence of academy schools. We believe that it is important that school provision is properly planned and democratically accountable.

We are supportive of the increased number of apprenticeships but believe there needs to be greater emphasis on their quality. Apprentices need to receive high quality training in safe working environments. Unions can play a key role in helping to ensure that apprenticeships are not exploitative and that young people benefit.

Amongst the social and economic challenges facing the LCR that were identified in the recent joint universities’ report¹ was relatively low household incomes. This reflects issues around skills and unemployment – but we believe that it also points to the need to ensure that wages are higher. We would like to see the development of a LCR strategy to improve incomes from employment, which should include a plan to ensure that all employees receive, at the very least, a *real* living wage (currently £8.25 per hour).

Housing and Planning

We would encourage more focus on the central role of social housing in meeting future needs in LCR. Social rents are 40% lower than the average private rent in England. The private rented sector is characterised by weak tenancy rights and often low quality.

¹ ‘The State of Liverpool City Region Report: Making the Most of Devolution’, January 2016.

We are concerned about cuts to the rental income available to housing associations and councils which are predicted to cut back plans for new-build social homes by at least 25,000 across the country. We would like to see an LCR-level target for building social housing.

More generally, there is a need for higher household incomes to enable people to afford their rent or mortgage costs. In efforts to ensure that housing is affordable, consideration must be given to wage levels.

It is important that the proposed Land Commission ensures that public buildings are kept in our communities to ensure that public services are accessible to people across LCR. There must be no rush to dispose of valuable and important public land.

Transport and Highways

Buses: It is very important that decisions about bus fares, frequency, routes and service quality are made by people who are democratically-accountable. Moreover, bus services are of great strategic importance in the achievement of the goals of devolution around economic growth and employment. For both democratic and strategic reasons, UNISON believes that it is very important that powers are devolved to the LCR-level and that the LCR has, and utilises, the ability to franchise bus services.

UNISON believes that bus franchising offers far greater democratic and strategic control than can be achieved through a voluntary partnership agreement with bus operators. Our preferred model would involve long-term franchises with enforcement of the contract standards. In franchising arrangements it is important that small companies have a chance to win contracts and that minimum standards such as paying the 'real' living wage (set by the Living Wage Foundation) are guaranteed.

The consultation document makes reference to a 'local review' that will inform the decision over whether to utilise the ability to franchise bus services. UNISON would like more clarity over how such a review would be conducted and would like to ensure that we play a part in that process.

We are concerned that LCR should have sufficient funding available to improve bus services without having to increase fares.

Tunnels: UNISON notes that the LCR suggests making tunnel tolls lower and/or more variable. We believe that the revenue from the tolls is currently an important source of income that keeps other elements of the city-region's transport system running. We would not want a cut in tolls to mean cutbacks in transport services. However, we could welcome toll reductions if they could be funded through extra central government resources – perhaps through a debt write-off for Mersey tunnels.

Rail: We are concerned that there should be sufficient money available for locally funded procurement of new rolling stock for Merseyrail and for investment in the station infrastructure. We share the concerns of our colleagues in the RMT and ASLEF unions about the dangers of potentially removing guards from new trains. It is also important that the LCR has high-quality rail links with London and with other major cities across the North of England.

Clean Air: The consultation documents do not make reference to either cycling or walking as modes of transport. Both could be expected to be important elements in strategies around clean air and improving health outcomes. We are aware that work is being done on these issues and would welcome that being more explicitly integrated into the wider LCR transport strategy.

Roads: We are concerned that efforts by the LCR to improve a 'Key Route network' may be ineffective if the financial resources are not made available for investment. It will not be sufficient to draw up money from the local authority level as our councils have been hit by years of funding cuts and they simply do not have adequate resources. Improvement to our highways will require investment, not just a potential change in responsibility of some key routes.

Business Support and Growth

We want people and businesses to be attracted to the LCR by the high quality of life – through excellent public services, skills, broadband, energy and transport.

We want to avoid devolution to the Northern cities resulting in destructive competition for business investment through tax incentives or deregulation. We are concerned too by the possibility of gentrification of our city centre – as new buildings may offer limited benefits for the people who live here.

Finance

We believe that there is some scope for devolution achieving improvements in economic performance and/or reductions in social need but we believe that policy-makers should be cautious about over-committing to this. LCR has a long way to go to be fiscally self-sufficient, and we believe that this may not be achievable for some time. It would be wrong if social need was unmet due to an overly-ambitious fiscal target.

Constitutional and Governance

Decision-making in the Liverpool City Region should be characterised by clear lines of democratic accountability and meaningful public engagement. In regard to decisions taken at an LCR-level that may have an impact on employment – including decisions that affect the workforce employed in delivering public services – it is important that structures and procedures are put in place that involve trade unions so that the workers' voice can be heard.