

Approved WMCA Budget will fund schemes that can support economic recovery and help protect environment

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A budget of more than £900m, including funding for infrastructure, regeneration and job training schemes that can support the region's post-COVID-19 economic recovery and help protect the environment, has been approved by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

The 2021/22 WMCA Budget includes a package of major transport projects to help drive economic growth and cleaner air as well as funding to unlock and transform the region's derelict industrial sites for new, energy efficient homes and jobs, relieving pressure on the Green Belt.

An Adult Education Budget (AEB) of £142m, the biggest of any UK region outside London, will be used to give people, especially those impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, the skills needed to get back into work quickly and to secure jobs in growing sectors such as construction, digital and the emerging green industries.

But in approving the budget, the WMCA Board warned of the financial uncertainty caused by the ongoing

coronavirus pandemic with recent independent research also suggesting the West Midlands could be hit harder than any other UK regional economy.

Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, said: “The investments outlined in this budget will help the West Midlands make significant strides towards a quick and effective recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, as well as tackling the climate emergency facing our region.

“We’re investing hundreds of millions of pounds in our green public transport network, with zero carbon and Sprint buses, new rail stations, cycling infrastructure, and of course Metro extensions – with almost £100m alone being spent over the next year on the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill extension.

“Meanwhile more than £116m is being spent on the remediation of derelict brownfield land, saving acres of greenbelt from development, and we’re investing £142m to level up our skills, getting us ready for the huge boost in the green jobs of the future as we look to help get people into work.

“What these investments will do is help to create and protect jobs at what is such a critical time for many people’s livelihoods, whilst also helping us on our way to becoming carbon neutral by 2041.

“We are managing to deliver all of this without costing the taxpayer any more money, as this will be the fourth year in a row where we have not introduced a mayoral precept, meaning not an extra penny from us will be added to people’s council tax bills.”

The approved budget includes £363m for the WMCA’s transport arm – Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) – to deliver schemes that will improve connectivity, drive economic growth and help cut carbon emissions by making it easier and more attractive for people to switch to public transport.

Projects include:

- The expansion of the electric-powered Metro tram system
- The opening of new railway lines and stations at Darlaston, Willenhall, Moseley, Kings Heath and Hazelwell
- The development of a ‘Sprint’ rapid bus network using zero emission vehicles
- Support for the continuing conversion of buses from diesel to hybrid
- More cycling and walking routes
- Concessionary travel for older people, the blind, disabled and children

In addition, there will be £11m available for subsidised bus services, £7m for Ring and Ride and nearly £4m to enhance transport for the Commonwealth Games.

More than £116m is committed for housing and land projects and in particular the WMCA’s ‘brownfield first’ policy to unlock and redevelop derelict urban land and help safeguard the Green Belt.

Investments will accelerate the on-going transformation of former industrial sites to deliver energy efficient, affordable new homes and modern commercial premises for businesses to grow and create jobs. There will also be support for the regeneration of town centres and for the research and development of

modern methods of construction and zero carbon homes.

Key brownfield housing schemes include:

- Up to 750 new homes on a former sewage works at Friar Park in Sandwell
- 252 homes on the former Caparo steel works at Walsall
- The construction of a further 138 homes using cutting edge construction technology on derelict land at Icknield Port Loop in Edgbaston

Around £120m in capital grants will be allocated to local authorities to help fund major infrastructure projects with significant investment in Coventry (Station Masterplan, City Centre South, Very Light Rail, City of Culture), Solihull (UK Central Programme) and Birmingham including £20m for the Commonwealth Games.

The £142m of skills funding will be used by the WMCA's productivity and skills team, working closely with local authorities, to fund training courses that give people the opportunity to upskill and get back into work, with more training matched to those industries suffering skills shortages, including higher level skills.

Cllr Bob Sleight, Deputy Mayor and WMCA portfolio holder for finance said: "I would like to thank all those who have done such tremendous work in putting together a balanced budget in what are extremely difficult times, not least because of the substantial loss of revenue the combined authority has suffered as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on our public transport.

"But it's important to recognise the significant funding in this budget for new transport infrastructure, brownfield regeneration and skills and training, all of which can help take forward the green agenda and provide support for a future economy that is more focused on innovation and new green technologies.

"Clearly there are challenging times ahead and we will be refreshing our medium-term priorities early in the new financial year with the aim of recapturing our pre-pandemic economic success while driving innovation and carbon reduction."

The WMCA Budget report also highlights how, ahead of Chancellor Rishi Sunak's Budget announcement on March 3, the authority is continuing to seek the additional funding set out in its Spending Review Submission while lobbying for additional capacity and ongoing funding to tackle the impact of COVID-19.

Photo credit: West Midlands Combined Authority