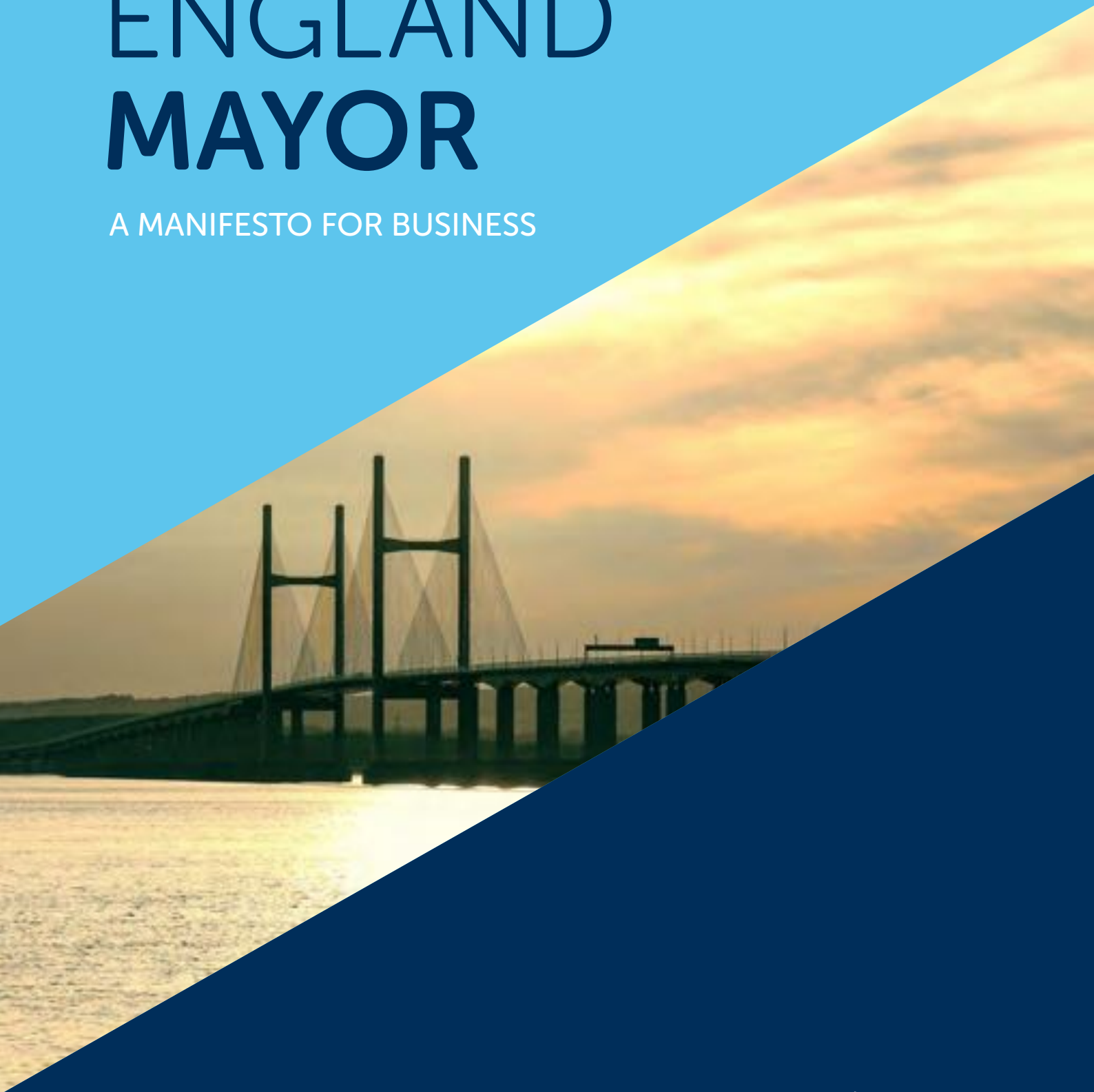


# WEST OF ENGLAND MAYOR

A MANIFESTO FOR BUSINESS





# INTRODUCTION

Businesses are at the heart of our community and are vital for the West of England's economic recovery and long term prosperity and growth, creating and sustaining jobs, skills and opportunities for residents. Businesses can also help unlock solutions to the challenges that we still face – from climate change, recovering from recession, driving innovation or providing jobs and homes for young people.

Business West conducted a survey in February 2021, which gathered the opinions and priorities of 400 businesses across the region. It's the biggest survey of its kind focusing on the upcoming Mayoral elections. In a world of increasing competition between city regions both in the UK and globally for talent and investment to drive growth, strong political leadership is vitally important. The West of England needs a clear and loud advocate, focused on unlocking areas that hold the region's growth back and who can deliver against the urgent needs of businesses.

Business West, as the Chambers of Commerce and West of England Initiative, is the main voice for the business community in the region, and as the largest Chamber of Commerce within the British Chambers network, champions issues that matter to our over 23,000 members, customers and businesses we engage with. We deliver national, regional and local policy impact and provide advice and business support at grassroots level locally.

The new West of England Mayor will be in a critical position to enable our region to rise to the challenges we face in 2021 and beyond. Business West Chambers of Commerce and Initiative commit to work closely with the successful candidate to deliver a powerful shared agenda and programme of change and prosperity for the businesses and communities we serve.

'The new West of England Mayor will be in a critical position to enable our region to rise to the challenges we face in 2021 and beyond!'



# THE VOICE OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND IN WESTMINSTER AND OVERSEAS

Businesses want the next Mayor to work across local authority boundaries and outwardly lead for the region on the national and international stage to promote, attract and retain talent, investment and vibrancy across the region’s economy, to the benefit of all.

Our survey showed:

- 70% of business felt that the region needs and deserves more leadership from the West of England Mayor; and
- Businesses also want North Somerset Council to join WECA, with 64% believing it would promote the prosperity of the region overall.

Business awareness and recognition of the role and postholder needs to markedly improve – our survey indicated that awareness of the current West of England Mayor was significantly lower compared to metro mayors in other regions, such as Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, and Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London. Awareness, recognition and understanding of the role will only improve through outreach into and working with the business community.

## WE CALL ON THE NEW MAYOR TO



Represent the West of England’s interests in Westminster and encourage inward investment from within the UK and overseas, championing the strategic advantages that the Bristol and Bath city region offers.



Leverage the formal powers and softer influencing platform of the West of England Mayor to work in partnership with public and private sectors, especially on cross boundary core issues, such as transport and connectivity, strategic planning and skills.



Work collaboratively with partnerships such as the Western Gateway to raise the profile of the region on the national and international stage.



Provide leadership on the biggest issues our society faces in the 2020s – decarbonisation of the economy and prosperity for all being the most important.



# THE TRANSPORT AND DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE THAT OUR REGION DESERVES

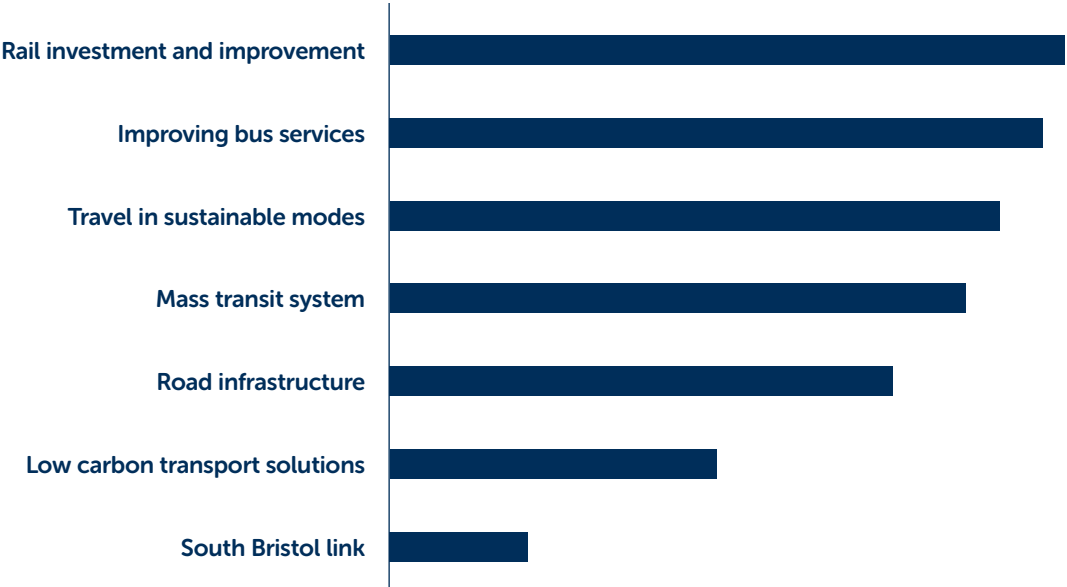
Poor connectivity is a longstanding issue for the West of England, which is believed to suffer from a legacy £6bn funding shortfall. Transport and mobility congestion caused by high car dependency and a lack of accessible alternatives is an ever-present challenge, with an annual pre-pandemic cost of £300m to the local economy.

The importance to business of our deep seaport and airport cannot be overstated, but requires support to maintain vital links to national and international markets and for tourism.

WECA and its constituent councils having declared climate emergencies brings a new urgent impetus to decarbonise transport and look to digital alternatives where possible.

According to our survey, transport was the most important area of Mayoral responsibility and a plurality (30%) of businesses believe that transport is a more pressing issue than 4 years ago. We must build back better, thus we call on the Mayor to make transport and connectivity their main priority.

Transport priority areas ranked by importance to businesses



WE CALL ON THE NEW MAYOR TO



Deliver a strong cross regional transport investment plan across all modes of transport under an effective Combined Transport Authority.



Transform active travel (walking and cycling) and micro mobility for short and medium distance travel, investing in segregated, safe and continuous cycling<sup>1</sup> and walking<sup>2</sup> routes, to prompt rapid behavioural change. These measures should lead to quick and cost effective reductions in CO2 emissions linked to transport (32%), improvements in air quality and free the roads up for commercial including freight journeys.



Invest in and promote a comprehensive mass public transport system and improvements to the current rail network and services. Only 1 in 11 residents commutes by public transport in the region, illustrating worrying inadequacies of the current network.

An efficient and reliable public transport system that makes sense for residents and covers under-served areas will reduce the current transit pressure from the roads and cut emissions.



Invest in broadband and digital capability to support more agile working and learning from home and modern workspaces – building on new work patterns developed during lockdown restrictions.



Invest in the charging infrastructure to support the transition to electric and other new vehicle technologies as they emerge.

<sup>1</sup> We are proud of being a partner in Bristol Cycling Works work within the city to improve cycling infrastructure for safe commuting by bike.  
<sup>2</sup> We support the priorities set out by Bristol Walking Alliance, in particular the £105m of improvements to increase pedestrian use and accessibility - <https://bristolwalkingalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-BWA-Election-Asks.pdf>

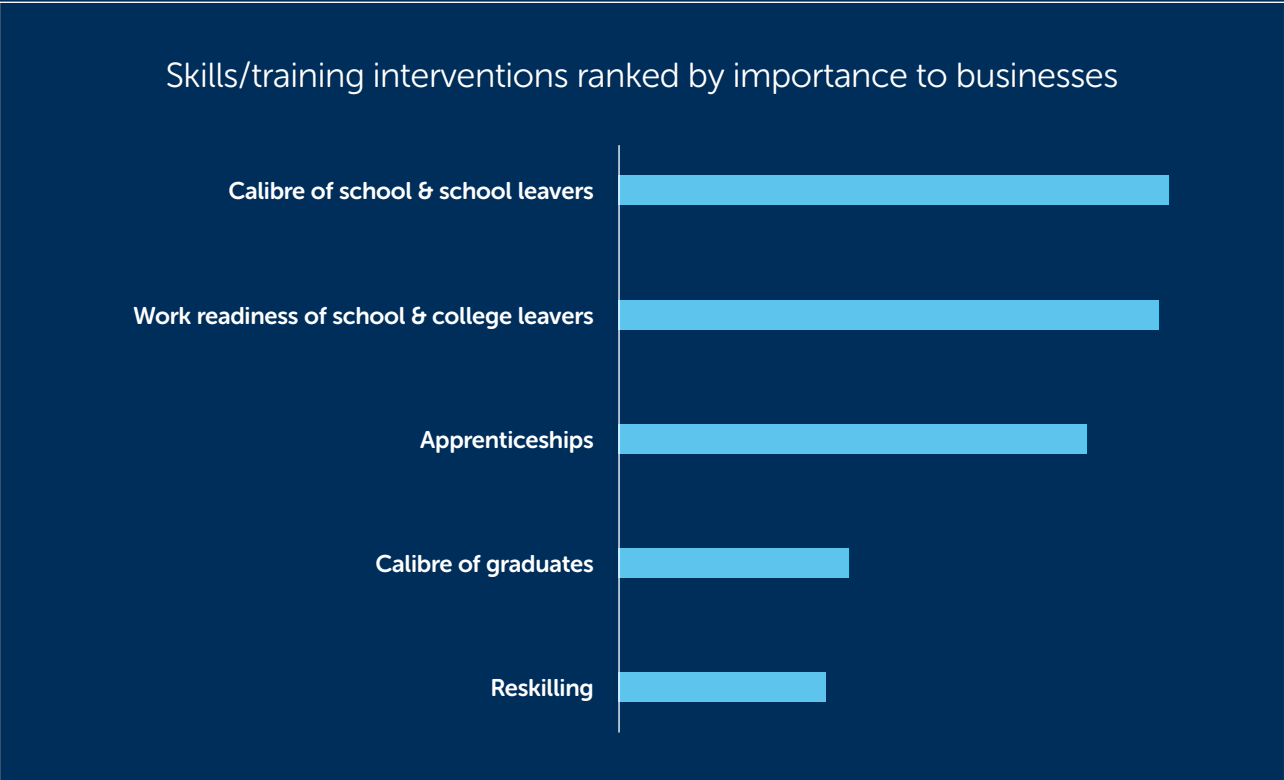


# BOOSTING THE EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS PROSPECTS OF OUR RESIDENTS

Whilst the West of England boasts one of the highest proportions of graduates in the country, educational attainment and skills inequality remains unacceptably high, and the work readiness of school and college leavers in our region remains a barrier to employment. The ‘Levelling Up’ agenda applies equally to disadvantaged areas within our region as it does between different regions within the UK; and Covid-19 disruption to education and training risks long term scarring, particularly for young people and their future career prospects.

Businesses in growing sectors find it difficult to attract people with the right skills and attitudes in the local labour market and are looking to the further education sector to meet their needs much more closely than has been the case to date.

Retraining and re-skilling opportunities must be prioritised to provide real job opportunities from employers particularly in growth areas including: Digital skills, Green skills, Construction and Health and social care.



## WE CALL ON THE NEW MAYOR TO



Work closely with business organisations, such as Business West, to ensure the business voice is at the heart of WECA’s Employment and Skills Plan and proposed Local Improvement Skills Plans. Delivering a West of England skills plan that fully addresses business needs, especially in fast growing sectors that offer the best chance of highly productive and satisfying careers within the region.



Work with the local business community and education sector to urgently improve and transform the work readiness of school and college leavers. Supporting the joined up delivery of quality experiences of work industry placements, apprenticeship and trainee schemes and government initiatives such as Kickstart. Utilising existing WECA programmes such as Workforce for the Future to ensure businesses are properly supported to provide opportunities for all.



Focus energy on the Inclusive Growth agenda, ensuring equality of opportunity across the region and boosting the life chances of disadvantaged communities to secure meaningful job and career opportunities to share in the growth and prosperity generated in the region. It is an unacceptable waste of talent for people to be left behind and marginalised within our economy.

# DELIVERING AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE LAND USE

The West of England has some of the least affordable housing in the UK, particularly in the cities of Bristol and Bath. Excessive property prices for housing and commercial use harms the competitiveness of the region and slows growth, making business operations more expensive, and the area less attractive to potential talent.

Increased housing pressures on working families and low income groups present major social costs including homelessness and overcrowding. This ongoing issue must be addressed urgently.

## WE CALL ON THE NEW MAYOR TO



Work closely with the four local authorities to deliver an ambitious and sustainable WECA Spatial Development Strategy that balances land use to create new strong healthy communities whilst addressing the undersupply of (in particular affordable) homes and commercial space.



Engage with the business community to take informed decisions in relation to the region's current and future job creation markets, guaranteeing that new development is connected to current and planned transport infrastructure and services facilities. Urgently review the Green Belt under the principles of sustainable development.



Protect vital existing employment land provision, across office and industrial uses and deliver new employment space to underpin the growth of our economy and key sectors.



# ENSURING THE PROSPEROUS FUTURE OF OUR REGION'S ECONOMY

The West of England is a forward looking, diverse and culturally rich region, interconnected with cities and regions nationally, in Europe and across the world. It has a strong, balanced economy, a business community renowned for its creative and technological potential, and is brimming with energy and enterprise.

The West of England needs a Mayor that supports and leads businesses in all sectors of the economy to adapt and rise to the challenges facing business and economic leaders in the 2020s: climate change, the digital transition and the post Covid-19 recovery, and to focus on health and our environment.

## WE CALL ON THE NEW MAYOR TO



Become a leading figure for the region's efforts to combat Climate Change – for instance 80% of respondents thought the Mayor has a significant role in driving developments towards Net Zero. It's vital that sufficient resources are invested to honour the WECA's 2030 carbon neutrality pledge including support for the South West Energy Hub's research and development agenda.



Take forward the vision for Bristol, Bath and the West of England as the leading 'Digital hub' of the UK, building further the region's reputation and recognition as a thriving creative and tech hotspot. To reach its full potential this capability needs supporting infrastructure and skills, and to attract external investment especially in R&D.



**'The climate emergency and sustainable inclusive growth is an issue for the whole of the West of England - it must be fundamental to the Mayor's agenda and should be an ask for central government for powers and devolved funding.'**

West of England Mayoral survey, February 2021



# PLACING BUSINESS AT THE HEART OF THE REGION

Businesses are the engine of the West of England society and way of life. The West of England Mayor can only succeed by regularly listening to business needs and priorities, to inform WECA's approach and explain its projects, ambitions and achievements.

Our research suggests a substantial lack of communication with businesses in the region, meaning they don't thoroughly appreciate the value of devolution in the West of England.

## WE CALL ON THE NEW MAYOR TO



Refocus the important Local Industrial Strategy to also support a rapid recovery from the Covid-19 recession as well as long term growth. Awareness of the Local Industrial Strategy was particularly low, with 47% of those surveyed not being aware of its existence or what it contains.



Business Support: Utilise the recovery and renewal work of the WECA taskforce and by all the local councils to better foster a stronger enabling environment for business to flourish and grow, strengthening the collaboration opportunities between the different regional organisations and actors, and act as a vehicle to transfer and commission where it is needed.



Deliver targeted and effective support for hard hit businesses and sectors to grow back better following the pandemic induced recession through the WECA recovery plan and renewal plans of Bristol One City and the other local authorities. Helping city, town centres and local high streets to recover and reinvent themselves. Support for hard hit sectors like aerospace, hospitality, culture and our visitor economy is key.

## CONCLUSION

The role of the West of England Mayor is to provide strong political leadership and soft influencing power for the region. Businesses want the successful candidate to come in with an agenda to work with business and make the area a more inclusive, resilient and healthy place to live, work and thrive. Business West Chambers of Commerce and Initiative commit to working in partnership with the successful candidate to deliver a powerful shared agenda and programme of change and prosperity for the businesses and communities we serve.





01275 373 373 | [info@businesswest.co.uk](mailto:info@businesswest.co.uk)  
[www.businesswest.co.uk](http://www.businesswest.co.uk)

 [linkedin.com/company/business-west](https://www.linkedin.com/company/business-west)  
 [@bw\\_businesswest](https://twitter.com/bw_businesswest)