



West Midlands Combined Authority

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 19 October 2023 at 10.30 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor Cathy Bayton (Chair)	Association of Black Country Authorities
Councillor Naeem Akhtar (Vice-Chair)	Coventry City Council
Councillor David Barker	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Philip Bateman MBE	City of Wolverhampton Council
Councillor Andrew Burrow	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Ian Kettle	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Nigel Lumby	Shropshire Non-Constituent Local Authorities
Councillor Ewan Mackey	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Emma Marshall	Worcestershire Non-Constituent Local Authorities
Councillor Paul Moore	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Jamie Tennant	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Adrian Warwick	Warwickshire County Council
Councillor Vera Waters	Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

In Attendance

Ed Cox	Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero
Dan Essex	Governance & Scrutiny Manager
Councillor John McNicholas	Transport Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Lyndsey Roberts	Statutory Scrutiny Officer
Andy Street	Mayor of the West Midlands

Item Title No.

157. Welcome & Introductions

The Chair welcomed the Mayor and members of the committee to the first mayoral question time for 2023/24 that would be focussing on WMCA policy-related matters.

158. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Amanda Tomlinson (Business Representative) and Councillor Lauren Rainbow (Birmingham).

159. Questions to the Mayor from Members of the Committee

The committee pursued a number of general lines of enquiry with the Mayor, including governance and accountability, the economy, skills, green policies and housing.

The Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill that was expected to receive Royal Assent shortly would simplify the process for amalgamating the Police & Crime Commissioner role into that of the Mayor. If agreed, the WMCA together with the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner would consider the practical arrangements of such a merger, including its governance structures. In terms of managing workloads, the Mayor considered that the appointment of a deputy, the use of delegated decision making and efficient structures were key elements to support the Chief Constable to improve the delivery of operational policing.

In respect of the events within the Middle East, the Mayor had met with the Jewish and Muslim communities, and both were understanding of the importance of each other's reactions to the Israel-Gaza conflict, which was critical for harmony between the different communities within the region. Discussions were also held with the Chief Constable regarding the guidance provided by the Home Secretary and how police officers were responding to events within the community.

Through the Deeper Devolution Deal, it had been agreed that the region's MPs would be able to scrutinise the Mayor in four Q&A sessions throughout the year. The Mayor shared his thoughts on the value of these Q&A sessions and believed that he was accountable to citizens of the West Midlands through members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, as their democratically elected representatives.

The Government and the WMCA recognised that the current system of funding for mayoral combined authorities was fragmented and reliant on centrally administered funds. With a single settlement arrangement, the Government would give the WMCA single capital and revenue funding that would provide long term certainty and would enable the WMCA to work more effectively. It was also recognised that there was a need to review the current process in which funds were allocated to improve the pace at which programmes and projects were delivered.

With regards to the economy, the Mayor provided an overview of the lessons learnt following the transfer of the key functions of the Local Enterprise Partnerships to the WMCA and explained how the authority ensured that the business voice continued to influence decision making within the WMCA. In relation to the cancellation of the Birmingham to Manchester leg of the HS2 scheme, it was reported that the WMCA would commission an economic impact review and would continue to look at how links to Manchester could be improved. A further discussion was held on the delivery of the Midland Rail Hub.

The committee explored questions regarding the current performance of the labour market, including high unemployment and vacancy rates, the nature of vacancies, reskilling and skills bootcamps. The Mayor also shared his views on the impact of the Government's announcements related to its net zero policies, climate emergencies and partnership working with local authorities to progress to net zero.

Whilst it was recognised that the 2023 scorecards published by Climate Emergency UK had shown that the WMCA had performed well in relation to its work around the climate emergency, the Chair highlighted that the four Black Country authorities were below average and therefore work needed to be undertaken to ensure that these authorities were on target and were able to deliver net zero.

In respect of the 'green' agenda, the importance of energy creation and security to enable the UK to be self sufficient was highlighted. It was noted that the WMCA had currently focussed on reducing energy consumption.

The committee explored the opportunities for the WMCA to encourage housing associations to use modern methods of construction to help deliver the number of affordable and social homes required. Although 20% of new homes in developments supported by the WMCA must be classed as 'affordable' under its funding programmes, members enquired about the energy standards that were being encouraged.

The committee highlighted the importance of the non-financial support options that might be available via the WMCA to help support local authorities that currently experienced financial difficulties.

[Councillor Philip Bateman declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item, in relation to Birmingham International Airport, as a Director representing Wolverhampton]

Resolved:

The following observations be shared with the WMCA Board for consideration and response as appropriate:

(1) HS2 (Cancellation of Birmingham - Manchester leg)

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee would like to understand when an analysis of the economic impact of the cancellation of the Birmingham - Manchester leg would be undertaken and would wish to review the report when completed.

It was considered that Overview & Scrutiny Committee members should be kept abreast of the transportation transformations to be delivered within the Network North document, the implementation of the Midland Rail Hub and on the timeline for delivery.

(2) Energy Creation

Although it was recognised that the current focus on the WMCA was to reduce energy consumption, Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered that the WMCA should also explore options for energy creation to help keep energy affordable for residents.

(3) Community Engagement

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee recognised the considerable work undertaken by the WMCA, but stressed the importance of ensuring that this was communicated to local authorities and the public to ensure that maximum benefit from its activities was being achieved.

(4) Labour Market Overview Information

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee would welcome sight on the local labour market information referred to by the Mayor within the Q&A session on a regular basis.

(5) Housing – New Builds and levels of energy standards to be supported by WMCA funding.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee requested to receive details of the levels of energy standards being encouraged by the WMCA.

160. Date of Next Meeting

Monday 6 November 2023 at 10:00am

The meeting ended at 12:30pm.