



West Midlands Combined Authority

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 20 October 2022 at 10.00 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor Cathy Bayton (Chair)	Association of Black Country Authorities
Councillor Andrew Burrow	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Ian Kettle	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Nigel Lumby	Shropshire Non-Constituent Local Authorities
Councillor Martin McCarthy	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Lauren Rainbow	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Mike Sutherland	Staffordshire Non-Constituent Local Authorities
Councillor Jamie Tennant	Birmingham City Council
Amanda Tomlinson	Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership
Councillor Vera Waters	Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

In Attendance

Councillor Naeem Akhtar (joined via teams)	Coventry City Council
Dan Essex	Governance Services Manager
Lyndsey Roberts	Scrutiny Officer
Laura Shoaf	Chief Executive
Andy Street	Mayor of the West Midlands

Item Title No.

97. Welcome and Introductions

The Chair welcomed the Mayor and members of the committee to the first mayoral question time of 2022/23 that would be focussing on WMCA policy-related matters.

98. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mike Chalk (Worcestershire Non-Constituent Local Authorities), Councillor Ellen Fenton (Association of Black Country Authorities), Councillor Paul Sweet (City of Wolverhampton Council) and Amanda Tomlinson (Black Country LEP).

99. Questions to the Mayor from Members of the Committee

The committee pursued a number of general lines of enquiry with the Mayor, including the cost of living pressures, economy, local enterprise partnerships, environment, skills and transport.

The committee questioned the Mayor on the impact of the Government's economic policies on businesses, individuals and families within the region. The Government's action to help address the cost of living pressures by providing energy support to individuals and small businesses was welcomed by the Mayor, but he expressed his disappointment at the wider impacts of the uncertainty caused within financial markets. In addition, he highlighted the WMCA's activity to help support the region through negotiations with transport operators on the cost of fares and the decision not to impose a precept. The WMCA also continued to lobby the Government for sustainable local funding.

In terms of the WMCA's 'ambitions versus resource', the impact on the capital programme due to inflationary pressures was recognised and with regards to the Trailblazer Devolution Deal, the WMCA had made it clear to Government that resources would be required in order to achieve successful outcomes.

The committee commended the WMCA on the work undertaken to help address rough sleeping within the region. It was recognised that, as a region, further improvement needed to be made to the sufficient supply of affordable and social homes, and as part of the Trailblazer Devolution Deal the WMCA would be seeking the devolution of further funding for this.

Members explored questions regarding the economy, including the introduction of the West Midlands Investment Zones and the future of a Gigafactory facility at Coventry Airport. The Mayor emphasised the Government's commitment for this proposal and the search for a private operator continued. In addition, he shared his thoughts on planning and environmental regulations and the potential funding mechanism for future Investment Zones.

In response to a question raised regarding the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill and future plans for the Police & Crime Commissioner and the West Midlands Fire Authority, the Mayor shared his personal view on the benefits of a combined role, although he had previously indicated to the WMCA Board that he did not consider that this issue would arise during his current term of office.

In terms of the region's local enterprise partnerships, there were many ways in which the business community could influence and input into the WMCA's decision making processes through its membership on the Economic Impact Group, Regional Business Council and on other WMCA boards and committees. The committee noted the collaboration work currently ongoing to ensure that the business voice continued to be heard within the WMCA's decision making processes.

The committee enquired about the withdrawal of bus services, in particular school services in Coventry, which was believed to be because of driver shortages. The Mayor explained that public consultation on changes to services on 1 January 2023 was currently underway that may lead to potential changes on routes, however this was due to the financial sustainability of services and not driver shortages. In terms of subsidised services, social issues were also taken into consideration.

In relation to the delivery of the Wednesbury - Brierley Hill metro extension, the committee sought clarification as to whether the funding was available to deliver the extension. Whilst there was a funding challenge, earlier in the year the WMCA Board had reiterated its commitment to deliver the Wednesbury - Brierley Hill metro scheme in full, and funding solutions to achieve this were currently being explored. Members explored questions around other funding options, including the use of transport levies. A report would be submitted to the WMCA Board in January 2023 regarding a funding solution.

The committee sought the views of the Mayor on the effectiveness of the current schemes in holding bus operators to account and the use of shares in order to improve bus driver retention. The Mayor supported the principle of employee share ownership schemes and considered that the Enhanced Bus Partnership Scheme to be effective, but expressed some disappointment with the operational performance of National Express West Midlands.

The committee emphasised the importance of achieving modal-shift for the West Midlands to achieve its target of becoming net-zero by 2041 and noted the number of schemes that were being trialled or delivered throughout the West Midlands that contributed towards meeting this net-zero target.

Members discussed the pace at which funding was allocated to deliver improvements to help alleviate congestion that had an impact on the mobility of labour.

Members explored the views of the Mayor with regard to building on Greenbelt or brownfield land. The Mayor supported a 'brownfield first' approach and reflected on previous builds within the region in which a majority of homes had been built on brownfield sites. However, the challenges on future locations and builds was recognised.

In terms of retrofitting and energy efficiency solutions, the Mayor reported on the introduction of the Smart Hub that was a community based scheme. In addition, members explored questions and discussed the processes to match the needs of employers with students' aspirations and ensuring colleges met the demands, place shaping, the creation of predictable demand, sustainable good quality employment and building confidence in young people.

Recommended:

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

(1) Adult Education Budget, Skills and Job Opportunities

The overall impact of higher education spend and the likelihood that any sub-regional disparity in this would affect the future of the region as individuals would seek employment and training opportunities outside of their boroughs.

Access to learning and employment and how to change the mind set of individuals to take up the opportunities that were on offer was vitally important.

(2) Investment and pace of delivery

Investment into the reliability and speed of investment to deliver the infrastructure and services needed to enable individuals to travel to work seamlessly and for businesses to operate effectively was highly important and remained a key challenge. The 2041 net zero target was also reliant on getting public transport right.

(3) Resource vs Ambition

Overview & Scrutiny Committee recognise that resource vs ambition had become a common theme and would be keeping a close eye on this throughout the year.

Risk of shared failure and the consequences of this was highlighted as an ongoing concern for members. Whilst the breadth and diversity of the WMCA's ambitions was welcomed along with the recognition of the challenges within the region, it was thought that focussing on those areas (housing, skills, transport and climate change) which caused the greatest concern for residents of the region should be the priority focus for the WMCA.

(4) Investment Zones

Overview & Scrutiny members to be kept abreast on the development of these Investment Zones.

(5) Communication

Members stressed the importance of a strong communications strategy to counteract negative stories.

100. Date of Next Meeting

Monday 7 November 2022 at 10.00am

The meeting ended at 12:00pm