



Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday 6 November 2023 at 10.00 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor Cathy Bayton (Chair)
Councillor Naeem Akhtar (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Philip Bateman MBE
Councillor Andrew Burrow
Councillor Ian Kettle
Councillor Nigel Lumby

Association of Black Country Authorities
Coventry City Council
City of Wolverhampton Council
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Shropshire Non-Constituent Local
Authorities
Birmingham City Council
Business Representative
Warwickshire County Council
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

Councillor Ewan Mackey
Amanda Tomlinson
Councillor Adrian Warwick
Councillor Vera Waters

In Attendance

Dan Essex
Lyndsey Roberts
Laura Shoaf
Kate Taylor

Governance & Scrutiny Manager
Statutory Scrutiny Officer
Chief Executive
Head of Finance Business Partnering
and Strategic Planning

**Item Title
No.**

161 Inquorate Meeting

This meeting was inquorate for minute nos. 168 - 171 and therefore those decisions would be submitted to the WMCA Board on 17 November 2023 for approval.

162. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Emma Marshall (Redditch) and Councillor Paul Moore (Sandwell).

163. Chair's Remarks

(a) Letter received from the Police and Crime Commissioner

The Chair referred to a letter received from the Police and Crime Commissioner regarding the Mayoral Q&A session that was held on 19 October. He had requested an opportunity to attend a future meeting of Overview & Scrutiny Committee to discuss the amalgamation of the Police and Crime Commissioner's role into that of the Mayor. As the minutes of the Mayoral Q&A session would be presented to the next meeting of the WMCA Board, it was noted that an invitation would not be extended to the Police and Crime Commissioner to attend a future meeting.

(b) Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill

The Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill had now received Royal Assent and therefore constituent members would now be remunerated at the end of November, which would be backdated to June.

(c) Homes for the Future: Draft Strategy

The Chair explained that she had made the decision to remove the Homes for the Future Draft Strategy report from the agenda, as it was still being finalised with discussions continuing between internal departments and therefore would not have been shared with members in sufficient time to undertake effective scrutiny. The Chief Executive commented that papers need to be acceptable for public consumption and that the information needed to be verified before being released. The Chair acknowledged that there was awareness of this issue and that the process should be sought to be improved.

164. Minutes - 4 September and 19 October 2023

The minutes of the meetings held on 4 September and 19 October 2023, be agreed as a correct record.

165. Matters Arising

(a) English Devolution Accountability Framework – Scrutiny Protocol Progress Update (minute no. 148 refers)

The Governance & Scrutiny Manager explained that Government's scrutiny protocol was expected to be published as part of the Government's Autumn Statement on 22 November 2023, and would be presented for the committee for review following its publication.

(b) Wolverhampton Metro Extension (minute no. 147(b) refers)

In regard to passenger tram services to Wolverhampton railway station, Councillor Philip Bateman indicated that he had not been kept apprised on potential opening dates prior to this information being released in the media. The Chief Executive agreed to look into this matter further and would liaise with Councillor Philip Bateman directly.

166. WMCA Homelessness Taskforce: Update and Key Priorities

The Chair of the Homelessness Taskforce and the Senior Programme Manager presented a report on the current work programme and priorities of the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce.

The Homelessness Taskforce was working to reframe how homelessness was viewed, emphasising the concept of "ultimate exclusion." They shared statistics around the current homelessness picture and updated the committee on how they were working across sectors and regions to address the issue.

Gratitude was expressed to the team and the efforts of the taskforce to eradicate homelessness were commended. The homelessness taskforce raised one of their proposals to raise the local housing allowance (LHA) to reduce the use of temporary accommodation and the long-term economic benefits of increasing this, eliminating the right to purchase social housing, and expanding the availability of affordable homes were discussed.

The committee explored collaboration with the private sector, the difficulties of assisting people experiencing homelessness and concerns about rent-to-buy programs. In addition, the importance of breaking down silos was emphasised as members highlighted the issue of families facing disadvantages due to the limited availability of exempt accommodation.

Suggestions around investigating more effective resource allocation were explored as plans at Walsall to acquire vacant properties were shared. The financial strain on local authority homeless services was raised as the need for a collective effort and problem-solving was emphasised. In response to a question from the chair the Homelessness Taskforce representatives confirmed that collaborative efforts are underway with other regions, but the picture was similar across the country.

Resolved:

- (1) That the homelessness being experienced by vulnerable citizens across the WMCA region is actively inhibiting our ability to create a more prosperous, fairer and inclusive region for all, and that the Homelessness Taskforce has been one of the means by which the WMCA and its partners have collaborated to address this, be noted.

- (2) The Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered how the WMCA, and its partners could align efforts to accelerate progress towards the joint aim of designing out homelessness in all its manifestations, including by continuing to embed homelessness prevention into the mainstream strategies, processes, and programmes of the WMCA through cross-directorate activity and endorse the Taskforce's adoption of a broader focus on all forms of homelessness.
- (3) The Homelessness Taskforce's identified priorities for 2023/24 and beyond, including specific actions to commission a suitably experienced and qualified organisation to help investigate and articulate an evidenced based economic case; and note that the committee to considered how government could be lobbied to improve the current Local Housing Allowance (LHA) model, be endorsed.

167. WMCA Air Quality Framework and Implementation Plan

The Head of Environment and the Air Quality Framework Programme Lead presented the WMCA Air Quality Framework. It was report that the Air Quality Framework and Implementation Plan would be going to WMCA Board on 10 November 2023.

The Air Quality Framework Programme Lead shared the methodology and process of developing the framework including consultation. The Head of Environment updated the committee on the implementation plan and shared how the framework would align with strategic objectives and WMCA Governance before closing with funding wins and other activity to date including funding successes and survey results.

The committee discussed concerns about the potential health risks associated with log burners and the need for stricter regulations. The success of Walsall in requiring a full assessment of the impact of log burners within permitted regulations was highlighted and raising public awareness of the dangers of log burners was also emphasised. Various strategies to improve public awareness of air quality issues, including road signs, air quality alarms for homes, and incorporating air quality information into weather forecasts were suggested.

The group discussed the environmental mitigations and their consideration within the air quality framework. The Environment Lead confirmed that a local nature recovery strategy and an appendix to the framework was being developed by WSP.

It was confirmed that the Air Quality Framework and Implementation Plan would include the Overview & Scrutiny Committee within its governance structure.

Resolved:

- (1) The draft Air Quality Framework Implementation Plan for approval at the November 2023 WMCA Board be endorsed.

- (2) This paper be endorsed for presentation to the WMCA Board in November 2023.
- (3) The recommendation, made by the Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Air Quality, Congestion and Environmental Impact Members Engagement Group to identify a stretch target for more ambitious air quality limits in the WMCA area than currently set out through the Environment Act 2021, be noted and supported.

168. Levelling Up Zones, Investment Zone, and Place-based Strategies

The Partnership and Strategic Engagement Lead and the Head of Policy and Public Affairs presented a paper to the committee on Levelling Up Zones, Investment Zone, and Place based Strategies. They shared that the work had been undertaken by local authority officers in conjunction with the WMCA around levelling up zones and the west midlands investment zone.

The aim of the Levelling Up Zones would be to focus the efforts of local, regional and central government to align diverse policy, funding and fiscal measures to support outcomes bespoke for each area. The government has also launched an Investment Zone Policy Prospectus, which aim to drive economic growth in 8 combined authority areas in England. The single settlement would be for transport, skills, housing and regeneration, net zero and local growth projects. They concluded and shared that the WMCA was working with local authorities to develop a new approach to place-based investment.

The committee discussed the retaining of business rate incentives for businesses located in the identified growth zones and the potential benefits and challenges of such a policy. It was noted that the scheme would be based on the principle of “fairness”. The committee concluded by recommending that the paper be noted. Officers agreed to continue to monitor the situation and to work with the government to develop a scheme that was fair and effective.

Recommended:

It be recommended that the WMCA Board note the development of Levelling Up Zones and Investment Zone propositions and the opportunity available through the single settlement to develop ‘place-based strategies’.

169. Grant Register

The Head of Finance Business Partnering and Strategic Planning presented the Grant Register. The committee received an update on new grants that had been awarded to the WMCA since the last report. In response to a question from the chair, the Head of Finance Business Partnering and Strategic Planning, confirmed that the biodiversity fund was allocated into regional spend.

Recommended:

The Grant Register be noted.

170. Work Programme

The Work Programme was presented by the WMCA Scrutiny Officer.

Recommended:

The Work Programme be noted.

171. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would be held Thursday 14 December at 2:00pm. It would be a Mayoral Q&A on the Proposed Draft Budget 2024/25. In preparation for the Q&A a workshop would be held on Friday 1 December at 10:00am, which would be held in a hybrid format, and attendance was encouraged.

The meeting ended at 12.00 pm.

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