



West Midlands Combined Authority

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Friday 16 October 2020 at 11.30 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor Lisa Trickett (Chair)	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Cathy Bayton (Vice-Chair)	Association of Black Country Authorities
Councillor Ahmad Bostan	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Paul Brown	Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership
Councillor Chris Cade	Warwickshire Non-Constituent Local Authorities
Councillor Mike Chalk	Worcestershire Non-Constituent Local Authorities
Councillor Peter Fowler	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Robert Grinsell	Joint Coventry/Solihull Representative
Councillor Angus Lees	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Lucy Seymour-Smith	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Stephen Simkins	Association of Black Country Authorities
Councillor Kate Wild	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

In Attendance

Michael-Akolade Ayodeji	Young Combined Authority
Councillor Philip Bateman	Transport Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Deborah Cadman	West Midlands Combined Authority
Councillor Liz Clements	Transport Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Paul Clarke	West Midlands Combined Authority
Louise Cowen	West Midlands Combined Authority
Dan Essex	West Midlands Combined Authority
Tim Martin	West Midlands Combined Authority
Aisha Masood	Young Combined Authority
Lyndsey Roberts	West Midlands Combined Authority
Councillor Jackie Taylor	Transport Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Andy Street	Mayor of the West Midlands

Item No.

71. Welcome & Introductions

The Chair welcomed the Mayor, members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, members of the Transport Scrutiny Sub-Committee and representatives from the Young Combined Authority to the first mayoral question time of 2020/21 that was focussing on WMCA policy-related matters. She also reported that Councillor Richard Brown had recently been appointed as Coventry City Council's Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance & Resources and congratulated him on this.

72. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Richard Brown (Coventry), Councillor Dean Carroll (Shropshire authorities) and Mike Lyons (Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP).

73. Declarations of Interests

Councillor Philip Bateman declared a non-prejudicial interest in respect of his membership of the Canal & River Trust Advisory Board and his receipt of a transport workers pension. Councillor Stephen Simkins declared a non-prejudicial interest in membership of the Canal & River Trust Advisory Board. Councillor Jackie Taylor declared a non-prejudicial interest in respect of her membership of the Midlands Connect Partnership Board and the West Midlands Rail Board of Directors.

74. Questions to the Mayor

The Mayor provided an opening statement to members of the committee. He indicated that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the most important role for the WMCA had been to ensure that transport services continued to be provided to those where no other transport options were available. He outlined a range of measures taken by Transport for West Midlands in support of this. The Mayor also highlighted other activity of the WMCA during the last six months, including ensuring that adult education providers had continued to be paid, the work of the Recovery Forum and Economic Impact Group in mitigating the impacts being experienced across the region, and the submission to Government of the 'Recharge West Midlands' investment case, which this committee had been given the opportunity to comment on at its meeting on 7 September.

Members in attendance, along with Michael-Akolade Ayodeji and Aisha Masood from the Young Combined Authority, then questioned the Mayor on the delivery and impact of WMCA policies. A range of topics were covered, including matters relating to the WMCA's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic and community recovery work being undertaken, Government funding allocations to the region arising out of the 'Recharge West Midlands' investment case, further funding asks to support wider recovery work, along with the support required for the different economic sectors and those facing the prospect of imminent unemployment once the Government's furlough scheme ended.

The Chair noted that the Government's furlough scheme was due to end in the coming weeks and there were significant concerns that this would result in a sharp increase in unemployment in the region. She enquired whether this required a more concerted effort to project and support those likely to be impacted, for example by establishing a jobs taskforce, that could offer targeted support where required. The Mayor recognised that it was not possible to protect and retain every job within the West Midlands, but drew attention to the initiatives being undertaken by both the Government and the WMCA to protect as many jobs as possible. These included the WMCA undertaking a co-ordinating role for the Government-funded Kickstart programme which had attracted around 3,000 applications for roles within the West Midlands, and the 'Recharge West Midlands' investment case which had already secured funding for the region that would, amongst other outputs, support the creation of jobs.

Councillor Cathy Bayton expressed concern at the level of engagement that had been undertaken with the voluntary sector in respect of the proposed resilience fund, given the importance of understanding the sector's needs and vulnerabilities. The Mayor indicated that the voluntary sector resilience fund had yet to be signed off by the WMCA Board and therefore there was still the opportunity for its contents to be influenced by appropriate stakeholders.

Councillor Ahmad Bostan stressed the importance of financial support being provided to businesses impacted by an area being placed into the 'tier 2' local COVID alert level. The Mayor shared this view, and indicated that he had written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer urging changes to the support scheme to provide greater assistance to business affected by the move into tier 2.

Councillor Lucy Seymour-Smith noted recent studies that indicated over 70% of women wanting to return to work after maternity leave were struggling to do so. The Mayor shared these concerns, accepting that the pandemic was likely to have a disproportionate impact on women and those from disadvantaged communities. Funding was being targeted to try and address these structural issues, highlighting a recent initiative to encourage more women to seek employment in the digital sector. The WMCA was able to help shape, for example through the allocation of its adult education budget to support level 3 training.

Councillor Stephen Simkins expressed his concern that people required to retrain to seek alternative employment may find themselves without income for up to eight weeks during this retraining period. He urged the Mayor to lobby for the quicker payment of support to help people transition back into employment. The Mayor indicated that he was working with local authorities to help where he could, but stressed the need to still ensure proper process was followed with the use of public money.

Councillor Robert Grinsell questioned the Mayor on the investment benefits for both projects relating to HS2 and UK Central. The Mayor indicated both projects had big economic transformational opportunities for the region with HS2 being the biggest producer of jobs in the region for over the next five years. The Mayor also advised the committee of a summit being held for SME's who would supply HS2 with 818 companies registering their interest. He stated that there needed to be a focus on the big opportunities these projects presented to the region.

Councillor Peter Fowler thanked the Mayor for meeting with representatives of Equity to discuss the challenges being experienced by the region's creative industries. He also commended the Community Recovery Prospectus prepared by the Recovery Co-ordination Group that had identified 30 key community recovery 'asks'. The Mayor confirmed that these were featuring in discussions he was having with the Government and other key Partners to help mitigate the regional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Councillor Stephen Simkins expressed his concern for those individuals going through the retraining process and not having access to any income and enquired whether funds could be passported straight through to local authorities instead of going through bidding processes. He also expressed concern that the Shared Prosperity Fund had not progressed sufficiently to provide clarity once the UK was unable to access EU funding. Regarding the Skills Fund, the Mayor stated that the WMCA did work directly with local authorities by had processes in place in which funding was allocated. The Mayor indicated that there had been no clarity from Government on the introduction of the Shared Prosperity Fund, but would continue to lobby Government on this.

In response to a question from Councillor Jackie Taylor, the Mayor expressed his personal view that more local responsibility for administering the NHS Track & Trace service should be devolved to the regions, and he continued to press this point. In response to Councillor Angus Lees's concerns regarding protecting the economy, ensuring the safety of businesses and members of the public, the Mayor indicated that he felt a good job had been done in terms of providing the region with clear messaging through, amongst other things, his weekly press conferences and the campaigns ran by Transport for West Midlands on the need to wear face coverings.

Councillor Cathy Bayton stressed the importance of good quality residential development and noted with concern instances of development that did not provide positive living arrangements, including community infrastructure necessary to support sustainable living. She urged the Mayor to be more proactive in pushing for higher quality affordable housing. The Mayor indicated that the region was out-performing other parts of the country in delivering housing numbers as well as the proportion that were designated affordable. The Government was currently consulting on planning reform proposals and he intended to make his own submission to this consultation to push for higher standards for new development.

The Chair thanked the Mayor for his attendance and looked forward to welcoming him to the 2021/22 draft budget question time session being held with the committee on 11 December 2020.

Recommended:

The following observations be shared with the Mayor for consideration and reflection:

- Whilst recognising the value of the 'Recharge West Midlands' asks of the Government, does it adequately address the existing embedded and systemic inequalities in the region and the challenges currently being faced by residents across the West Midlands seeking to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic?
- Does the WMCA have a clear plan to enable it to transition its policy objectives to meet the new and emerging challenges across the region, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and automation, especially within sectors and communities still impacted by previous transitions?
- Is there sufficient ambition with the devolution discussions with the Government to deliver the WMCA the powers and resources necessary to meet the economic and social challenges of the region, and does the WMCA maximise its other sources of funding to address these challenges?
- Do the outputs of the WMCA meet its stated ambitions, and can better use be made of aligning the region's priorities in order to close the inequality gap that currently exists and, as a consequence deliver lasting inclusive growth?
- Has the WMCA developed sufficient policies that will drive its inclusive growth ambitions and deliver lasting change?

The meeting ended at 1.00 pm.