

Overview and Scrutiny

Topic 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.

Response from Productivity and Skills Directorate:

In response to the first point, it's important to recognise that people do not exclusively train or work in the areas they reside. Where they choose to learn is influenced strongly by travel and by word of mouth recommendation from friends and family as well as by aspiration, identification with a provider. Across the breadth of our provision we therefore strive to achieve two things:

1. Firstly, to provide a baseline entitlement offer in each locality comprising basic skills – English, maths, digital and language – as well as level 2 and level 3. This offer is provided by our FE Colleges and our local authority adult education providers who ensure there is a good local offer.
2. Secondly, to deliver a higher level specialist training offer. It is not possible or viable to replicate every specialist training in every locality because of the costs of equipment, staffing, premises etc. however we work to ensure that this offer is accessible across a broader geographical area, for example through use of learner support funds.

When AEB was first devolved, WMCA Board stipulated that each LA area should receive the same level of funding as they had had under the national system, so as not to destabilise. This distribution was based on historic delivery patterns and not a needs based formula. Furthermore it should be noted that demand is not equal to need and patterns of participation emerge based on more personal factors.

Since devolution, we have worked closely with LAs, colleges and training providers to ensure that the training offer in each LA is better aligned to local need than was the case pre-devo. This includes proactively investing and shaping in areas where the offer is weaker. We have worked closely with our Local Authority Officers Group to ensure that funding is used to shape programmes that reflect local priorities and complement other local activities. As a result, skills training is now more strategically aligned to local economic need and Local Authorities are better placed to influence provision in their local areas.

Across the region, we now are spending more in each area on better quality training linked to better outcomes, with a more appropriate mix and balance of provision on offer. Since devolution, each Local Authority has seen an increase in AEB funding spent in their area, as well as an increase in learner numbers between 2017/18 and 2021/22. On top of this there has been an additional £24m per annum invested through new funds that the WMCA has secured – Free Courses for Jobs and bootcamps.

In the case of more specialist provision, we recognise that learners may need to travel further. Where this is the case, our learner support funds can assist with costs such as travel, childcare etc so that these potential barriers can be reduced. Research over a number of years shows that travel to learn patterns increase in distance with the higher the level of qualification – hence the commitment to a baseline offer in each area.

We recognise that there is more to do to engage a broader range of residents in learning and training – although this has to be done within a fixed quantum of funding. In 2023, we will be launching a new behaviour-led comms campaign to attract learners. We will also be reviewing our learner support offer, to better help residents with the costs of learning, such as transport and childcare. We will also be exploring where additional support, such as mentoring, can improve residents chances of finding work or progressing in employment as a result of their training.

Topic 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.

Response from TfWM:

There are a number of challenges that the capital delivery programme is facing, as reported to the December Board. These include issues with the impact of inflation and other global events on the supply chain, which are increasing costs and imposing delays to delivery. TfWM is mitigating these by working closely with delivery partners and restructuring its teams to give a focus on more robust portfolio management of projects and resources. The statutory transport plan will be consulted on during 2023 and set further ambitious targets to meet the 2041 net zero challenge. This will also include behaviour change with a requirement for improved operational performance of all public transport and active travel options. Revenue funding to support and subsidise services where needed and improved reliability and punctuality will be key to deliver this target.

Topic 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.

Cross-Directorate Response:

As with other bodies in the public sector, the WMCA faces considerable resourcing constraints at present, in the wake of the pandemic and the ongoing period of inflation. All Directorates are keenly focused on mitigating these pressures and ensuring that they can continue delivering across the breadth of the WMCA's commitments and ambitions.

Topic 4: Investment Zones

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

Housing, Property, and Regeneration Directorate Response:

A note on terminology: our devolution deal proposal encompasses our locally-developed “Levelling Up Zones” concept. This is conceptually distinct from “Investment Zones”, which will be applied for as part of a separate, national scheme managed by Government – for which we are still currently awaiting the revised criteria.

The “Levelling Up Zone” (LUZ) concept remains a core element of the region’s asks for further devolution to the West Midlands. It is important to note that the efficient, productive and timely collaboration between local authorities, the WMCA and wider partners, which resulted in the Investment Zone proposals to Government during October 2022 (under the original and since withdrawn criteria for that scheme), has put the region in a strong position for ongoing development of the LUZ agenda. The strong pipeline of commercial and residential schemes this work has evidenced will inform the Trailblazer Devolution Deal proposals and supporting evidence base, the pipeline for devolved Housing and Land funds and the development of the next iteration of the West Midlands Investment Prospectus and other business cases to Government.

The WMCA is committed to the principle that the West Midlands needs defined Levelling Up Zones along our key transport corridors to drive economic growth and wider Levelling Up (as set out by the Housing and Land Board, Investment Prospectus and in the original IZ submissions) that would benefit from new infrastructure funding, new approaches to public land and enhanced and discretionary tax retention and reliefs in LUZs.

Topic 5: Communication

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

Comms Response:

The communications team is in agreement with this comment and has developed a strategy for promoting clear, positive and proactive stories throughout 2023. The media and digital teams review outlets daily to monitor sentiment and handle negative or inaccurate stories as appropriate.