

Comments from the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Comments from Overview & Scrutiny Chair to Committee

Governance and the Best Value Letter

The Best Value Notice received from Government on Tuesday, 5 March is the key current issue for the Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA). It is a disappointing but unsurprising development, but we believe it to be a much needed “wake-up call”.

We asked the Mayor what he will do differently and he rightly emphasised the need for everyone to work on the relationships and the need for a reset.

We don't agree with the Mayor's claim expressed at the Scrutiny committee that the current problems are historic dating from “18-24 months ago”; indeed to claim this seems to point to a lack of ownership of the current problems and lack of progress since November 2022. In actual fact both the Scrutiny Committee and the Audit Committee have been remarking that we have seen good progress on the Transformation Programme where it is in the gift of officers to make progress, but we have seen little progress on the two statutory recommendations raised by the auditors in November 2022: for the Mayors and Council leaders to improve their working relationships via independent mediation; and for a formal protocol to be agreed to commit to consultation on key proposals, which should be defined at an earlier stage.

We heard no specific commitments from the Mayor to do anything differently. In actual fact he went on to use very combative language about relationships with Unitary Authorities, for example regarding the way the Transport and Housing Advisory Board works and his reasons for not allowing BSIP to be discussed at that Board at any meeting since December 2022, despite requests for it to be on the agenda and for consultation on key proposals within the programme. Some of the statements he made were at best controversial and appeared at times to blame officers in an inappropriate way.

As such the Mayor's answers did not give us any clear plan of action of how he will work towards a reset nor assurance that he will take a conciliatory approach to resolving either strategic or operational issues.

We strongly recommend that everyone carefully considers their responses to the outcomes of the November 2022 Grant Thornton Value for Money Governance Review, the February 2023 SOLACE Independent Review and what is said in the Best Value Notice. Each of the parties must accept the need for a reset of working relationships, for a reform of the constitution and for the need to take a collective approach to this. In particular to:

- Make use of the support, facilitation and mediation offered; currently this seems to be limited to a one-hour meeting, but there is no doubt that the process will take considerably longer.
- Consider the involvement of Scrutiny and Audit in the process and how they can be productively involved in the set up and operation of the Independent Panel
- Consider how the proposed Scrutiny Task and Finish group on the Constitution might be set up and contribute to the process of revising the Constitution.
- Consider the impact of the imminent new system in Bristol, which will be more transparent and deliberative, and may actually necessitate the need for change.

- Move at pace and deliver quick wins wherever possible to build trust incrementally, including but not limited to:
 - Making changes to the constitution at an operational level that is within our gift,
 - Reconsidering and reforming the role, purpose and operation of the Advisory Boards as a key forum for improving collaboration.
 - Considering how the current CEO and Monitoring Officer (both interim) can add value to the process for as long as feasibly possible.
 - Securing the attendance of all committee members, including the Mayor, at preparatory meetings in the run up to each committee

We look forward to playing our role in this process, including the proposed SOLACE one-year on review.

Other issues include:

We welcome the proposed multi-year investment in a new Employment and Skills Fund. We would suggest that EDI needs to be a key focus as well as developing the skills of people who may want to be self-employed, both of which can help to tackle deprivation.

We note the wide-ranging programme to deliver the Climate Emergency Strategy and strongly agree with the need to develop a carbon accounting/measurement process as soon as possible to assist with the goal of achieving Net Zero by 2030. This should apply not only to WECA's operations but for all proposed projects that it commissions or delivers directly.

We note the Delivery Assurance processes being put in place and how difficult it will be to demonstrate the impact of this, as projects will continue to slip and budgets be under pressure even if the process is highly successful. We welcome the proposed Internal Audit of this process and would encourage a capacity building approach to be taken alongside an inspectorial one.

Cllr Ed Plowden

15 March 2024