

West of England Combined Authority Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 23 January 2023, 10.30 am - 12.30 pm
Council Chamber, Civic Centre, High Street, Kingswood BS15 9TR

Members of the Committee present:

Cllr Winston Duguid, Bath and North East Somerset (Chair)
Cllr Hal MacFie, Bath and North East Somerset Council
Cllr Tristan Clark, Bristol City Council

Cllr Geoff Gollop, Bristol City Council
Cllr Brenda Massey, Bristol City Council
Cllr Ed Plowden, Bristol City Council
Cllr Steve Smith, Bristol City Council
Cllr Matthew Riddle, South Gloucestershire Council

Also in Attendance was:

Metro Mayor Dan Norris

Officers In Attendance:

Richard Ennis, Interim Acting Chief Executive
Stephen Fitzgerald, Interim Director of Investment and Corporate Services
Stephen Gerrard, Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services
Alistair Kirk, Interim Director of Infrastructure

Roger Hoare, Head of Environment
Selonge Russell, Head of Finance and Procurement
Pete Davis, Head of Grant Management and Assurance
Stephen Bashford, Head of Business & Skills

Minutes

1	Welcome and Evacuation Procedure The Evacuation Procedure was noted.
2	Apologies for absence Apologies for absence had been received from Cllr Brian Allinson (South Gloucestershire Council), Cllr Steve Pearce (Bristol City Council) and Cllr Huw James (North Somerset Council).
3	Declarations of Interest under the Localism Act There were no declarations of interest made.
4	Minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2022 The minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
5	Chair's Announcements No announcements were made by the Chair.
6	Items from the public (questions; statements; petitions) Four questions had been received from two members of the public in advance of the meeting. These questions and replies had been published on the Authority's website and had been circulated. In addition two statements had been received from members of the public in advance of the meeting. These two members of the public attended the meeting to submit their statements in person: David Redgewell, South West Transport Network and Railfuture Severnside and Robbie Bentley, Bristol Disabled Equalities Forum. The statements had been published on the Authority's website and had been circulated.

The Metro Mayor Dan Norris attended the meeting and participated in a question and answer session with members of the Committee. During the session the following matters were discussed:

- Members referred to the volume of papers they were required to read in the brief period of time following publication of the agenda and papers for the Combined Authority and Joint Committee meetings. Concerns were raised that Members were unable to consider the reports in sufficient detail due to their length and complexity and given the time constraint. It was noted that further consideration as to how this issue could be addressed would be undertaken subsequent to the meeting.
- The Metro Mayor acknowledged the importance of scrutiny and encouraged the work of the Combined Authority to be challenged. He further indicated his support for the introduction of a process that allowed a vigorous and honest exchange of views.
- The Chair commented that Scrutiny Committees in the other Combined Authorities appeared to be more proactive and selective in the issues considered and suggested this would be a positive approach to adopt. Other suggestions put forward which could aid the Committee included: providing a precis version of the reports; providing links to the business cases in reports; include additional information regarding the effects on individual Council Wards, and; consider introducing a case management system which might help with the perception of openness and transparency at the Combined Authority.
- Members had seen and endorsed the action plan relating to the Auditors' Governance Report, in particular the section on relationships. They invited the Metro Mayor to comment on whether, in his view, working relationships with the leaders of the constituent Councils had improved. He responded by noting that relationships were complex and that it was important to be honest about disagreements and about how to get things done. He also acknowledged the importance of adopting a strategic approach to regional government.
- Members expressed concern regarding the Equalities Impact Assessment and consultation for the Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP).
- Members felt it would be important to support Direct Response Travel (DRT).
- The Committee referred to the increase in staff at the Combined Authority as a result of it becoming an Integrated Transport Authority. The Metro Mayor advised that the anticipated transfer of Transport Officers from Bristol City Council to the Combined Authority upon its creation had not occurred, resulting in the Combined Authority having to recruit to fill those important roles.
- Cllr Riddle invited the Metro Mayor to comment on the large number of vacancies in PR and Communications currently being advertised by the Combined Authority. The Metro Mayor confirmed that they were all required.
- Members noted that there were challenges in spending the CRSTS award of £0.5 billion quickly as many of the projects were still in the business case development phase.
- Members expressed concerns in relation to the Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) with respect to utilising remaining funds within the Transforming Cities Fund (TCF) and whether the BCR is still sound when transferring funds.
- Members queried whether the Combined Authority's treasury management supported environmental and social aims.
- Members queried whether Overview and Scrutiny meetings could be broadcast live and recorded as per the Combined Authority Committee and Joint Committee meetings. Officers confirmed that in future Scrutiny meetings could be held at the Combined Authority's new offices at 70 Redcliff Street where there would be conference facilities to enable them to be broadcast.
- The Committee asked for earlier dialogue with officers on the budget construction and

assumptions in November 2023. They also asked for an additional session in January 2024 to scrutinise the budget.

- Members also requested that a work programme be put in place which would help to decide in advance the items that they would like to focus on. This should include the setting up of working groups, especially with the expansion of the Combined Authority functions.
- Councillor Steve Smith asked about the possibility of constitutional changes with, for example, the Metro Mayor not having a vote on the Combined Authority's budget. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that constitutional changes required unanimous agreement at committee meetings and changes to the Order would require parliamentary time to make necessary statutory changes.

The Chair thanked the Metro Mayor for his attendance at the meeting.

7 **Review of items for 27 January 2023 West of England Combined Authority Committee and Joint Committee**

The Committee discussed the following reports due to be considered by the West of England Combined Authority Committee at its meeting on 27 January 2023: the Mayoral and Combined Authority Budget 2023/24 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy and the Investment Fund Programme. The comments made by the Committee were collated and circulated to members of the West of England Combined Authority Committee in advance of its meeting.

Mayoral and Combined Authority Budget 2023/4 and Medium-Terms Financial Strategy

The Committee recognised that the Combined Authority was transforming in size and purpose and at great pace. The emphasis in its next chapter of development would be continuing to seek further Government funding whilst delivering projects already in place on time and within agreed budgets. The committee noted that the Authority had a 256% increase in grant funding and a 36% increase in staff (from 235 persons to 320 officers). This translated to an 82% increase in staff costs from £9.6m to £17.6m as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report.

Members welcomed the plans to replace all interims with permanent staff by October 2023.

Members interrogated Figure 2 which stated that the Adult Education Budget (AEB) would stay flat at £16.5m per annum and Figure 11 that showed the individual cost centres. It was noticeable that ICT costs had risen sharply in 2022/23 and were rising sharply again in 2023/24. Officers explained that the increased ICT costs were mainly in relation to licenses for the additional staff.

It was noted that the Transforming Cities Fund (TCF) would be fully allocated and that no funds would be given back to the Government as an underspend which had been a concern raised previously.

Members noted that £816,000 was being spent in relation to Western Gateway. Officers advised that this was funding from Government for the CEO and to provide a secretariat.

The use of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funds for training bus drivers was welcomed as well as the ongoing work on training HGV drivers.

Members noted that officers were developing a plan so that the Combined Authority could go out to consultation this year on the Local Cycling & Walking Improvement Plan (LCWIP).

Investment Fund report

	<p>It was noted that all the awards and funding for project approvals were summarised in the report.</p> <p>The Committee expressed concern over the pace of delivery and inflationary pressures. It was confirmed that £11.6m had been allocated at the West of England Combined Authority Committee meeting in September 2022 to cover inflation but concerns were raised on whether this amount would be sufficient.</p>
	<p>The next meeting will be held on: Monday, 13 March 2023, 10.00 am, Bristol City Council Council Chamber, City Hall</p>