

Chair's statement from Scrutiny meeting 23 January 2023 10.30am

The committee welcomed the Metro Mayor Dan Norris for the first 45 minutes of the meeting, and he heard the statements on buses and answered various questions from the scrutiny committee members.

General comments and requests:

- Given the increased importance and size of the CA it seems odd that UA scrutiny meetings are broadcast live and recorded but the CAs are not. It was explained that the new offices of the CA will have proper conference facilities to do this, and the plan is to broadcast Scrutiny meetings in the new financial year. In future most scrutiny meetings will be at the WECA offices.
- We welcomed the Metro Mayor acknowledging the importance and value of scrutiny and his personal presence and engagement at the start of our meetings.
- Cllr Riddle raised a question to the Metro Mayor about whether recent job roles advertised around the area of PR and Communications were really needed, given that money was tight.
- There is an issue with volume of papers and time to read them. Currently we have papers being distributed on the Thursday or Friday of week 1 for a scrutiny meeting on the Monday of week 2 and the CA meeting on the Friday of week 2. For the CA meeting on 27/1/23 there are 180 pages to be read and digested, at least a 3-to-4-hour process, in a very short period. Members felt that they did not have time to consider the papers in sufficient detail due to the length and complexity of the reports. Members requested earlier site of the papers.
- It was agreed that for next year we need a separate meeting on the budget papers in January 2024 but that we needed earlier dialogue with officers on the budget construction and assumptions in November 2023. For this year's papers members requested another informal session at around the end of February, and suggested periodic informal sessions would be useful.
- Members also requested that a Forward Plan should be put in place and then Scrutiny members could decide in advance items of importance to focus on including the setting up of working groups, especially with the expansion of the Combined Authority functions. In the UAs scrutiny decide the issues they want to scrutinise with the exception of the annual budget review.
- Members asked about the possibility of constitutional changes, e.g how can the metro mayor not have a vote on the CA 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.
- Members welcome the frank and helpful replies from the interim CEO about the problems and the need for an improvement.
- It was decided in the 75 minutes left of the meeting that just two papers would be examined and presented.

Item No. 1 Mayoral and Combined authority Budget 2023/4 and Medium-Terms Financial Strategy

Comments:

- The scrutiny committee recognised that the CA is transforming in size and purpose at great pace. The emphasis in its next chapter of development is maintaining its abilities to win more money for the region from Whitehall but also to spend that money won, on time and in full.

So the budget sees an 256% increase in grant funding and a 36% increase in staff from 235 persons to 320 persons. That increase in numbers translates into an 82% increase in staff costs from £9.6m to £17.6m as outlined in appendix 1.

- Members welcomed the plans to replace all interims with permanent staff by October.
- Members interrogated Figure 2 which shows that the AEB will stay flat at £16.5m per annum and Figure 11 that showed the individual cost centres. It was noticeable that ICT costs have risen sharply in 22/23 and are rising sharply again in 23/24. Officers explained this as mainly licenses, their number and greater cost.
- It was noted that the Transforming Cities Fund (TCF) is apparently going to be fully allocated and that no money will be given back to Whitehall as an underspend—a concern of some four months ago.
- In relation to Western Gateway, it was noted that £816,000 was being spent. Officers said that this is funding from government was to fund the CEO and 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
- Improvement of Local Cycling & Walking Improvement Plan (LCWIP) – the team are developing a plan, which will aim to define a network that can be integrated with Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, so that the Combined Authority can go to consultation this year.

Item No. 2 Investment Fund report

Comments:

- It was noted that all the awards and funding for project approvals are summarised in the report
- There was concern over the pace of delivery and inflationary pressures. It was confirmed that £11.6m had been allocated to cover inflation at the Combined Authority committee meeting in September 2022. It was questioned whether this would be enough.
- The committee said that they would find links to the business cases in reports useful as well as effects on individual council wards.
- Members would like ongoing monitoring information on the progress of the projects, especially the larger ones being delivered outside the Public Sector

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