

Comments from the Audit Committee held on 4 March 2024 to the MCA Committee held on 15 March 2024

- Appointment of Independent Members – The Audit Committee have endorsed the appointment of Christine Fraser and Jennifer Whitten as additional independent members (bringing the total number of independent members to three). The Committee asks the West of England Combined Authority to ratify these appointments at its Annual General Meeting (AGM) and further to confirm the appointment for an initial term of 4 years for Christine and 3 years for Jennifer.
- At the last West of England Combined Authority committee meeting the Mayor raised concerns about confidentiality. He suggested meeting with David and I to discuss this which eventually happened at the end of last month.

I confirmed that Audit Committee took confidentiality very seriously and recognised that on occasion we would receive information that was not in the public domain.

We recognise that we must be trusted by officers to receive that information. My conversations with officers have indicated that trust is in place.

I made the point to the Mayor that if there was ever a deliberate breach of such confidentiality, I would expect the matter to be referred to the Monitoring Officer for appropriate action to be taken. Audit Committee was unanimous in sharing that view. However, we also stressed that if there was no evidence, making an allegation in public was not appropriate as it damaged the authority as well as the integrity of the committee.

I would of course emphasise that Confidentiality is appropriate when commercially sensitive or personal information is being discussed, but not if is being used to prevent information that would be of concern to residents and councillors, or if it is about poor practices or poor governance.

- Audit Committee received the transformation programme meeting report. This was the earlier version of today's report before the BVI Notice was issued.

We need to keep in mind that the Value For Money report and the statutory and other recommendations were tabled in December 2022. In March 2023 following discussion at Audit Committee we commented to the MCA Committee, amongst other things on:

1. “SR1(improve working relationship), we have seen no evidence that this is happening why is there no detail of the programme of activities and the Regional Priorities”
2. “IR2(constitution) as more and more flaws in the constitution become apparent what action has been taken. specific timeline to be established for addressing each area of weakness”. This work must now have the highest importance in view of the BVIN. We call for an urgent report on the timeline and progress and emphasise the importance of using the interim Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer’s knowledge and experience to conclude this issue.
3. “Without categoric confirmation that the actions are happening the action plan is only an attempt to placate auditors and audit committee”.
4. Now roll forward to our report at the January 2024 Committee....” We were disappointed to note that whilst the issues in the Transformation Plan that relate to officers are making ... progress, that those that relate specifically to the Mayor and leaders are not. We have repeatedly emphasised the importance of co-working. The MCA has to operate as a consensus... we see a failure to acknowledge or try to resolve the failures highlighted by the first 2 statutory recommendations in Grant Thornton’s VFM report. (There appeared to have been no improvement made to, SR1 Working Relationships and SR2 Consultation on Key Proposals
5. In January 2024 we warned “If the MCA and the metro mayor are incapable of solving those issues very quickly the solution will be taken out of the MCA’s hands. We suggest the Committee commit to co-working and prioritise external consultants such as SOLACE to expedite the adoption of consensual working with the constituent L.A.’s.”
6. The Committee welcomed that the leaders had arranged a meeting to discuss the Strategy and Purpose but were concerned that it had taken 15 months to arrange an hour-long meeting when so much officer time had been invested in this work;
7. Relationships at meetings – the Chair again wishes to place on record that the Audit Committee wants to see an end to the practice of long adjournments and short notice tabled amendments at the main Committee as this makes proceedings extremely hard to follow and confusion about the decisions that had been reached.
8. Audit Committee welcome the work that Overview & Scrutiny are undertaking on reviewing the constitution. We asked that particular

attention be given on call-in arrangements and the terms of reference for the committees, with defined roles codified for O&S and Audit Ctte and the discretion for the Committees to tweak their own TORs. This work is now critical, and members will welcome the subsequent comments from DLUHC.

9. Overall, as well as being disappointed at the lack of progress from the political leadership, we are also disappointed that Audit Committee comments have been repeatedly ignored by the MCA. I am reassured to find they appear to be whole heartedly shared by the DLUHC.

In addition to the above

- Audit Committee is keen to see regular oversight and scrutiny into health and safety policies due to the potential reputational damage to the authority due to its expanding work;
- Audit Committee has carried out its annual review which will be reported to the main Committee's AGM in June 2024;
- The Committee received "lessons learnt" updates on Birthday Buses and WestLink. The Committee appreciated the attempt to provide something innovative and asked that any data gathering be used to inform future decision-making. Members were concerned that there was insufficient clarity on key performance indicators before these projects were undertaken with too much emphasis placed on Department for Transport requirements and not enough attention to Value for Money indicators. This meant it took longer to spot inappropriate trends in usage and demographics.

Geoff Gollop

On behalf of the West of England Combined Authority Audit Committee
14 March 2024