

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Thursday 1 February 2024 at 6pm
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Fenton, E Giles and Lewis.

In attendance: Shokat Lal (Chief Executive), James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Brendan Arnold (Interim Section 151 Officer), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager) and Alexander Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

Representing the West Midlands Combined Authority
Councillor Bayton (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee) and Councillor McNicholas (Chair of Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee).

Laura Shoaf (Chief Executive), James Hughes (Member Relationship Manager), Sam Maybee (Strategic Advisor) and Lyndsey Roberts (Statutory Scrutiny Officer).

13/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fisher, Hinchliffe, Owen, Taylor and Tipper.



14/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made. Councillor Moore advised the meeting that he was a member of the West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

15/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 4 and 15 January 2024 are approved as correct records.

16/24 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

17/24 **Draft Budget 2024/25 – Recommendations to the Cabinet**

At its meeting on 15 January 2024, the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board considered the draft proposals for the Budget 2024/25. This had been a changed approach to previous years, with an all-day session held to allow members to scrutinise, in-depth, the proposals for individual directorates' budgets. Further discussions had been held and additional detail was provided where requested.

The Scrutiny Management Board identified a number of recommendations to propose to Cabinet as well as items for its own work programme.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board is assured that there is a clear plan, underpinned by data, for the Council's Budget 2024/25;
- (2) that the Cabinet and the Executive team review the proposals for Borough Economy again to ensure the assumptions upon which they are based are robust and take account of the missed income targets from 2023/24;

- (3) that the Cabinet and Executive team review:-
 - (a) Council, the Housing Revenue Account, Capital Programme, Public Health and Sandwell Children's Trust contracts and agreements to ensure they are fit for purpose, take a whole-council approach to meeting the Council's strategic objectives and represent value for money;
 - (b) contract monitoring management processes to ensure they are robust and ensure value for money;
- (4) that the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board consider reports within the next three months on detailed proposals to achieve savings in:-
 - (a) Children's External Educational and Care Placements; and
 - (b) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Transport;
- (5) that the following topics be included on the work programme of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board:-
 - (a) the customer journey;
 - (b) the effect on performance and sickness levels of reduced budgets;
 - (c) funding for the Voluntary and Community Sector.

18/24 **Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

19/24 **Cabinet Forward Plan and Work Programme**

The Board received and noted the Cabinet Forward Plan and the Board's work programme.

20/24 **West Midlands Combined Authority Scrutiny Annual Report**

The Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board welcomed representatives of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to the meeting.

The WMCA Scrutiny Annual Report set out an overview of the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2022/23. The Chairs of both of those committees presented the report and outlined the structure and operating methods of the Committees.

The WMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee had contributed to shaping and delivering a comprehensive ask of government regarding the deeper devolution deal.

It was reported that the Scrutiny functions themselves had been reviewed and, whilst previously there had been a sub-committee for Transport scrutiny, with the importance of transport, the amount of money invested, it was felt that a Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee would ensure proper scrutiny of transport in the region could be carried out.

Following on from 2022/23, there had been a focus by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on performance of the Combined Authority, making sure that all elements were delivering against the WMCA Strategic Plan.

A key issue for the WMCA scrutiny function was attendance and participation from appointed members. Proposals to seek multi-year appointments to build understanding of the scrutiny function was being considered by the WMCA. The Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board confirmed that meetings were chaired well at the Combined Authority and that the quality of discussion was good.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- The WMCA had acknowledged that it needed to improve engagement with local authorities across the region, with a Member Relationship Manager appointed to help deliver on this important issue.
- A survey of all councillors in the region had been carried out in December 2023, but response rates had been low.

- WMCA colleagues would be willing to attend a pre-Council meeting marketplace event to meet Sandwell councillors and improve awareness and understanding of the work of the Combined Authority.
- An assessment of bus franchising was underway and was expected to be reported to the WMCA Board in Summer 2024.
- It was reported that in the West Midlands, 50m trips were made on trains, 45m on the Metro but circa 300m were made by bus.

Resolved that:-

- (1) the Assistant Chief Executive ensure that the Council's Member Development Programme includes the role and purpose of the West Midlands Combined Authority and invites the Combined Authority as part of the Programme;
- (2) the Chief Executive and Leader consider the merits of multi-term appointments to the West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny function;
- (3) the Assistant Chief Executive invite representatives of the West Midlands Combined Authority to attend some of the 'marketplace' sessions held before meetings of Council.

21/24

Exclusion of the Public and Press

Resolved that the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting. This is to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, relating to the financial or business affairs of any person, including the authority holding that information.

22/24

West Midlands Combined Authority Activity – Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

The Scrutiny Management Board received a report on West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) activity in Sandwell. This included where investment had been to date, progress and areas where the WMCA was working with Sandwell MBC.

Some key areas of WMCA activity included:-

- Black Country Strategic Transport Plan (one of four for the West Midlands) that would form part of the statutory transport plan;
- additional funding for potholes and resurfacing;
- funding streams such as the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Commonwealth Games Legacy funding;
- various housing and regeneration schemes;
- Net Zero Neighbourhoods.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- Education was a key route out of poverty and the WMCA's work on the skills agenda was vital, with an annual increase in WMCA adult education budget received from the Government.
- The State of the Region report would be circulated once it was published.
- Further information on district heating plans could be brought to a future meeting.
- The working relationship between Sandwell MBC and the WMCA had been reset and was greatly improved, with Sandwell engaging in the right way and ensuring its voice was heard as part of the Combined Authority.

The Chair thanked WMCA colleagues for attending the meeting.

Meeting ended at 7.13pm

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