

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Tuesday, 10 February 2026 at 6.00 pm at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Fenton (Chair)

Councillors:

Dhatt

Fitzgerald

E A Giles

Councillors:

Jeffcoat

Kordala

Singh

Apologies: Councillors Ashraf, Davies, Hinchliff and Lewis

Officers Present: Sandeep Shingadia (Transport for West Midlands Representative), Billy Dunlop (Senior Member Engagement Officer (WMCA), Lola Burrell (Senior Member Engagement Officer (WMCA), and David Knight (Democratic Services Officer).

4/26 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

5/26 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2025 were confirmed as a correct record.

6/26 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

7/26 West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Corporate & Scrutiny Updates

Members were provided with a presentation highlighting the priorities of the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Concern was expressed at the apparent shift of power from Westminster to the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) as highlighted by a £2.5bn funding package for 2025–2029 which aimed to localise decisions on housing, transport, and jobs. Concerns were also raised that the development of the WMCA would reduce local representation and would not have equal benefits across the region.

In response it was noted that the (WMCA) had been required to work closely with local councils including Sandwell so as to deliver on

regional, economic, and infrastructure goals. The WMCA acted as a partnership co-ordinator to move powers and funding from Whitehall to the region, rather than replacing local councils, who would continue to deliver services and retain their identities. For example, to coordinate transport planning, investment, and delivery across the region to ensure that strategic regional transport initiatives were aligned with local needs and development plans.

The WMCA had developed a transport investment pipeline that had a £6 billion, long-term strategic plan (2017–2032) aimed at delivering a modern, integrated transport network. The plan included major Metro extensions, rail station developments, rapid transit bus routes, and active travel projects to connect the region, boost the economy, and unlock new housing.

The WMCA would continue working collaboratively with the seven-constituent member council to advance a unified voice to central government and align regional strategies on economic growth, transport, and, notably, a commitment to retrofit over one million homes by 2041.

Regarding Sandwell's ability to meet government-mandated housing targets without developing on green spaces, including areas surrounding Sandwell Valley, it was noted that the WMCA had been working with neighbouring authorities to see if it was possible to accommodate some of this unmet need.

It was noted that following WMCA's adoption of recommendations from the Rosewell Review of capital transport delivery, as of February 2026, the WMCA Board had formally agreed on new, streamlined systems for project assessment, including the classification of 160+ projects to ensure funding was directed toward those that could deliver the greatest impact. In addition, there had been an implementation of a new, tighter approach to project assurance, with certain programs exempt from standard, more rigid approval processes, allowing for faster deployment.

WMCA had undertaken a review on its systems, processes, and capital transport delivery projects at the end of January 2026. This review would be critical for the WMCA to manage its ongoing capital projects and ensure future investments were sustainable.

The Government held the WMCA to account through an Integrated Settlement Outcomes Framework, which monitored performance across six key thematic areas. This framework, which was part of a 4-year funding deal that started in April 2025, ensured that there was accountability for delivering local outcomes like net-zero, employment rates, and housing energy efficiency. It was noted that projects were organised into categories based on maturity and strategic impact, with a focus on prioritizing advanced and economically significant projects for funding.

The WMCA would undertake a stocktake that would inform the overall categorisation of such projects and shape the growing, prioritized list of upcoming projects (e.g. such as housing developments, transport

infrastructure, or industrial investments) that had not been fully delivered.

It was understood that if political leaderships in the seven constituent councils of the WMCA changed and they no longer supported the Net Zero target, the WMCA would face significant challenges due to its collaborative, partnership-based structure as the WMCA did not have direct, unilateral power to enforce Net Zero policies on its constituent local authorities. However, the WMCA could take action to manage such a situation (e.g. The WMCA could act as a "convener" and "strategist," using regional leadership to maintain focus, even if some local areas slowed down). This would include demonstrating the "co-benefits" of Net Zero such as improved health, lower energy costs, and job creation to persuade new local leaders.

Therefore, it would be important that the messaging was as clear as possible as net zero remains vitally important for places like Sandwell, which had poor air quality which was exacerbated by the presence of major motorways throughout the borough.

Members noted that the WMCA Strategic Outline Case (SOC) for transport would focus on the right solutions to meet the outcomes to create an integrated, sustainable network to support economic growth, housing, and "45-minute region" accessibility policy that aimed to create a sustainable, inclusive, and integrated transport system where residents could access key employment, education, healthcare, and leisure destinations across the region within 45 minutes by public transport or shared mobility which would reduce the need for private car ownership. It would also prioritise connecting areas to High Speed Two (HS2) stations, enhancing bus/rail/metro networks, and implementing innovative projects like Very Light Rail to further reduce emissions and congestion.

The Board agreed that regional connectivity (via HS2, Midlands Connect) would be vital for attracting investment and increasing local connectivity (buses, Metro, active travel), especially in relation to everyday mobility. The WMCA had therefore prioritised local connectivity to support the "everyday economy" and ensure that residents, 27% of whom did not have a car, could access key services.

The WMCA wanted to see 50% of all trips being made by either public transport, cycling, or walking. This represented about 15% to 20% shift which would take investment in infrastructure and behavioural change around the way in which people travel.

The Board noted the movement to end deregulated transport networks, particularly bus services which had been driven by the desire to reverse decades of declining passenger numbers, rising fares, and reduced service coverage. Deregulation, implemented in 1986, had allowed private operators to choose profitable routes, which had resulted in a "broken" system outside of London where less-profitable, essential routes were cut as operators often prioritised profits, leading to a focus

on busy corridors while abandoning less profitable, often suburban, routes.

Franchising would help the WMCA to change the look and feel of the transport network by allowing local control over routes, fares, and timetables. In replacing the current model, this may have stabilised the network, improved reliability, and better integrated services to curb the projected 40% patronage drop by 2041.

The WMCA would determine routes and schedules to ensure services met local needs, rather than relying on commercial operators.

WMCA intended to invest in bus priority routes to reduce traffic congestion and improve service reliability. The system had been sustained by public funding; franchising aimed at delivering better value for money and reversing the decline in ridership. The first tranche of franchising would start in September 2027 and there would be three tranches by 2029 when the entire West Midlands would become fully franchised.

It was noted that WMCA had made use of the experience of Greater Manchester to transition from a deregulated, private sector model to a publicly controlled, franchised system that adopted a "London-style" franchised bus system. The intention was to have better-connected services, simpler fares, higher standards, improved reliability, and increased local control over routes and fares.

The WMCA, through Transport for West Midlands (TfWM), had utilised a network of transport champions and community engagement strategies to gather local insights and improve public transport services. These champions formed part of a broader effort that ensured transport planning had become inclusive, safe, and tailored to the needs of local communities.

It was identified that post covid, there had been a lot of changes in the way people were traveling. It was understood that people had been undertaking a "hybrid" working model. Therefore there had not been the usual peak time travel of 9am to 5pm, five days a week. There had also been an increase in the number of leisure trips on the public transport network (**e.g.** evenings and weekends were far busier than they used to be). WMCA held historic data including bus patronage which had historically been in long term decline, not just in the West Midlands, but nationally. However, on some routes, WMCA had seen improvements to patronage and stabilisation as a result of investment that has happened to make journey times not necessarily faster, but more reliable.

The Board noted that the Black Country region contained high density of bus stations and interchanges compared to neighbouring Birmingham, owing to its history of separate industrial town development and Midland Red bus operations. While it was part of the West Midlands Combined Authority, which managed 12 major bus stations across the whole

region, the Black Country featured a concentrated network of town-centre interchanges. Whereas fixed rail transport in the Black Country had traditionally suffered from a focus on radial commuter routes to Birmingham, leaving significant gaps in orbital connectivity and inner-conurbation access. While major projects like the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro extension were underway, key gaps and challenges remained. Despite the opening of new stations at Willenhall and Darlaston some residential areas remained underserved, requiring long, indirect trips to reach local destinations. With a primary gap being the lack of direct rail links connecting major Black Country centres (Dudley, Walsall, Wolverhampton) to each other, which forced reliance on buses or travel via Birmingham.

The WMCA had established a Project Management Office (PMO) to enhance, standardize, and provide assurance for the delivery of its diverse, large-scale investment, regeneration, and transport projects.

The PMO acted as a central hub for project appraisal, governance, and performance reporting to ensure projects met strategic goals. The PMO ensured that projects, particularly in the Transport for West Midlands Investment Programme areas, followed rigorous appraisal, assurance, and risk management processes. The PMO acted to align project delivery within the WMCA's overall mission of a prosperous, connected, and net-zero West Midlands.

The WMCA had also brought together various strategy functions under a single Strategy Unit to enhance collaboration, align regional policy with delivery, and create a cohesive, evidence-based approach to growth. This restructuring had been designed to better manage complex challenges that could not be solved by a single team acting in isolation.

Furthermore, it was confirmed that the WMCA and the Mayor of the West Midlands would be taking over the functions of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and the governance of the Fire and Rescue Authority. Although the Mayor would hold a governance role, the Chief Constable would retain operational independence over day-to-day policing, and the Fire Service would continue to operate under the existing professional leadership, with staff transferring to the WMCA.

The Chair of the Board placed on record her thanks and appreciation to WMCA officers in attendance on a comprehensive presentation.

8/26

Work Programme for 2025/26.

The Board noted its work programme for the remainder of 2025/26.

Meeting ended at 7.55 pm