

EVALUATION OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER COMBINED AUTHORITY'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) were commissioned by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to evaluate the success, or otherwise, of the implementation of recommendations made in respect of its Overview and Scrutiny arrangements in June 2022. The review which arrived at those recommendations was undertaken by a member-led task group, chaired by Clive Memmott OBE and the secretariat to that review was provided by CfGS.

This evaluation took place against an agreed evaluation criteria which provides the structure to this report.

Method

CfGS observed webcasts of its meetings held in March (22nd) and February (8th) and the reports accompanying those meetings. These meetings were selected as the final two in the Committee's calendar in which substantive items were discussed in public. Assumptions were made that this should demonstrate the greatest impact of the review's recommendations especially in respect of the questioning and overall confidence of the Committee's Members.

Over the course of the evaluation, we have received individual feedback from a total of 12 Members and 7 Officers.

The development, issue and analysis of the findings of a survey to all Members and Substitute Members of the GMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with the option to all Members to have an interview with the Senior Governance Consultant conducting the evaluation. We received 9 survey responses out of a total pool of 40 Members and 3 interviews were carried out with Members separately.

A further 8 interviews with officers were carried out, totalling 19 respondents. These individuals were selected as they operate closely to the operation of the scrutiny function and could attest to the success or otherwise of the changes made.

The methods used are proportionate to the scale of the evaluation required by the GMCA in reviewing its scrutiny arrangements. The style of this report will mirror the evaluation criteria and feature the outputs (the immediate product/s delivered) and outcomes (something that follows as a result or a confidence).

Summary Findings

We have found evidence that suggests strong or good progress in respect of implementing all, but one of the actions suggested in the original review. The accompanying report details this evidence against the evaluation plan. Moreover, there is a strong level of consistency amongst the responses from both Members and Officers (within the GMCA and outside of it). The one which remains outstanding is: -

Action 11 – Watching brief roles. It is understood that this action has not been progressed within 2022/23. It should be clarified in 2023/24 whether this action will be implemented or not.

Members and officers should be very encouraged by this and should continue to embed the actions suggested and in active implementation in 2023/24 and beyond. In undertaking this evaluation issues have arisen for consideration and suggestions made in which to accelerate the delivery of existing actions which are outlined in the next section.

Areas for Further Consideration

Member Confidence

This was a key area of focus in the evaluation. We received mixed views from Members as to whether their knowledge and therefore confidence in undertaking their role has been increased as a result of the changes made. This is partially explainable given the churn of Members over the course of the year due to other commitments and the use of substitutes. Nevertheless, Members should have confidence in their activities and we encourage the GMCA to continue

to offer learning, development and briefing opportunities, in alignment with Member support plans, to all Members and consider asking questions in respect of confidence at their wash up meetings.

GMCA Portfolio Lead Attendance

Observing meetings of the Scrutiny Committee towards the very end of the year, it appeared that attendance of Executive Members of the GMCA at meetings held in public was not as strong as it was earlier in the year. This matter was raised at Committee as sub optimal and was raised again with the Senior Governance Consultant by Members and Officers during this evaluation. However, it was noted that the GM Mayor had attended the majority of meetings, especially when any items within his portfolio areas were being considered so that he could respond personally to questions from the Committee.

Membership

The output of the survey generated comments in respect of Members' ability to attend meetings. In some cases, Members sharing their inability to travel to meetings in Manchester. Some Members expressed frustration that there are Committee Members who appear to attend unprepared, having not read papers. It is essential that districts ensure they nominate Members to attend the GMCA's Overview and Scrutiny Committee based on their available time, experience and authority to contribute and ensure connections between their local scrutiny committees and that of the GMCA. This is further demonstrated in the recently published English Devolution Accountability Framework (2023) in which:

'Membership on committees should be prized and competed for. Retention of members for several years should be common. Members should be able to devote time to the role. And the committees should have the profile and cachet to ensure that their findings are brought to the attention of the public wherever necessary'.

This should be balanced against the issue of remuneration for Members. It is understood a local arrangement is being progressed but the wider issue will be addressed should the Levelling Up Bill receive Royal Assent.

Work Programming

Whilst Members are making good progress on arriving at an impactful and strategically relevant work programme, there are opportunities in which to ensure that the organisation better plans its executive decisions to allow Scrutiny Members the opportunity to shape policy in good time. Specifically, ensuring decisions are being placed on the forward plan in good time.

Ongoing Evaluation

We have heard that Members are welcoming the wash up sessions at the conclusion of the Committee and the independent evaluation of changes made in 2022/23. This Member led self-evaluation is very positive and encouraging to see so valued by Members and Officers. We would encourage the Committee continue this activity and consider a full review of its form and function as the role and function of the GMCA grows to ensure the scrutiny function remains effective.

Committee Meetings

A small number of comments were made in respect of the available time at Committee to ask questions. There was a perception that too much time was afforded to Portfolio Leads and Officers presenting, which ate into the precious time of Members to ask questions. If needed, we would encourage the Committee to arrive at some principles around officer attendance and expectations in respect of presenting.

The original report and recommendations are enclosed at **Appendix 1**.

Output	Outcome	Evidence Gathered
<p>Single 20-member scrutiny committee with clear role</p>	<p>Members and officers generally positive about the role and remit of the scrutiny function</p> <p>An understanding of scrutiny's role informs the way that other parts of the CA engage with it (and this engagement is more proactive)</p> <p>Members and officers understand what scrutiny is for and its potential to add value</p> <p>Evidence that scrutiny benefits from the involvement of a wider range of members, who bring a broad array of skills</p> <p>A wide range of members feel involved and informed</p>	<p>Strong progress is being made against the delivery of this recommendation.</p> <p>We have heard a significant number of positive accounts from Members and officers about the outcomes reached as a result of moving to a single Committee model but this should be balanced against the potential for a significant workload with the need for effective prioritisation and a 'steep learning curve' for Members.</p> <p>We have heard of work programming sessions in which alignment of agenda to the Greater Manchester Strategy is a critical consideration. We have seen smaller agendas which allow Members to go into requisite depth at meetings and have observed considered questioning, often on complex matters. We have also heard of briefing sessions to inform Members of specific issues outside of formal meetings so Members can come to Committee with additional levels of preparation. To that end, we are content that Members, supported by Officers, are effectively prioritising their efforts to allow for the successful implementation of single committee.</p> <p>The survey shared that eight out of nine respondents were clear that they have gained a better knowledge of scrutiny across a range of issues and priorities as a result of the changes made. Seven of those nine of the view that Committee members have worked well together. The same level of success was echoed at the value in which the informal wash-up sessions bring.</p> <p><i>'Initially I found it a bit complex but become more familiar as I progressed'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>'Now that scrutiny is focussed on one committee there is the opportunity to improve member knowledge through briefings training of taking part in task and finish groups'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>'I've seen the level of interest and engagement improve. There's a clear joining of the dots across all of the GMCAs functions. Questions are excellent.'</i> Officer, GMCA</p> <p><i>'Puts things into context, seeing the bigger picture is helpful'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>'The Chairing of these meetings has been exceptional'</i> Officer, GMCA</p>

<p>Sufficient accountability of the Mayor and GMCA Portfolio Leads</p> <p>Members have been successfully assigned to rapporteur / watching brief roles</p> <p>Meetings with the Mayor which are more focused and planned</p>	<p>Members feel they are able to hold the Mayor to account more effectively</p> <p>Senior officers feel they are held to account more effectively and more proportionately</p> <p>Deeper member knowledge brings nuance and sophistication to the selection of items for the work programme (see below)</p> <p>Members of the committee all feel they're playing an active part in business in and outside of meetings</p>	<p>Good progress is being made against the delivery of this recommendation. It is understood that the rapporteur / watching brief roles for members of the Committee are yet to be adopted by the Combined Authority so questions on this recommendation were not asked.</p> <p>There was a clear sentiment expressed that the Mayor values the work of the Committee, attends regularly and welcomes the feedback from the Chair of the Committee at meetings of the Combined Authority. Particular references were made to the successes of the in-depth discussion of the trailblazer devolution deal and the introduction of bus franchising. We heard accounts that suggested executive Members and officers were placing more significance on scrutiny broadly, including attendance at meetings and seeing it as part of broader governance processes at the GMCA.</p> <p>We did note that the attendance of executive Members was not as strong later in the municipal year than it was earlier in this year.</p> <p><i>'I think I have found my feet quite quickly in the new system - it is difficult though as a member - you do have to be prepared to be pretty assertive whilst knowing that there is much you do not know'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>'Having the Mayor there really helps as we can't scrutinise officers who aren't political and much of the policy is'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>'He (the Mayor) does get grilled'</i> Officer, GMCA</p> <p><i>'The questions are on par with external boards and Audit Committees'</i> Officer, GMCA</p>
<p>Appropriate, value-adding and member-led work programming</p> <p>Practice of bringing decisions to scrutiny before being submitted</p>	<p>Work programme feels more obviously member led; members feel empowered; scrutiny work seems individually and collectively to add more value</p>	<p>Good progress is being made against the delivery of this recommendation.</p> <p>We witnessed the work programme placed on the agenda at Committee meetings and were made aware of the forward plan of executive decisions being shared with Members at the point of production. We have heard that Member involvement in shaping the work programme is much improved. We also heard that there appears to be some hesitancy of officers in placing items on the forward plan in case there is any movement with project timescales, however it is imperative that scrutiny are aware of forthcoming business/decisions as early as possible to ensure that they can undertake pre-policy scrutiny as required. Completing the Forward Plan should be common practice, with the understanding that this remains a working document which is flexible to change.</p>

<p>to Mayor / Board has stopped – agendas reflect a shift to a different pattern of work</p> <p>Agendas reflect a pattern which reflects scrutiny’s overall role</p> <p>Semi-regular planning meetings, or at least discussions, with districts</p> <p>Start of focused and well-designed task and finish work</p>		<p><i>‘Informal work programming sessions are excellent. Members feel they have involvement and officers have closely supported’</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>‘The conveyor belt of CA papers going to scrutiny has stopped. Decisions are now being made to consciously send papers to OSC that are taking scrutiny along a policy making journey’</i> Officer, GMCA</p> <p><i>‘I think that there has been a marked improvement in way officers take the Scrutiny process more seriously. This was particularly clear during the budget process’</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p><i>‘Here we can see the revamped arrangements (to Overview and Scrutiny) clearly adding value’</i> Mayor of Greater Manchester</p> <p><i>‘I am witnessing members connecting significant policy areas together as evidenced at the meeting where members were able to view the Devolution Deal proposals through the lens and levers of business rate retention’</i> Officer, GMCA</p> <p><i>‘The task and finish group was great - an awful lot of work to do but immensely rewarding. Intense volume of work and difficult to fit in. Thank goodness for online possibilities. Excellent officer support’</i> Scrutiny Member, GMCA</p> <p><i>‘The task and finish group raised awareness of how fragmented the strategy was and highlighted the importance working with other stakeholders to improve the environment in future’</i> Scrutiny Member, GMCA</p>
<p>Appropriate access to and use of information</p> <p>Information sharing arrangements in place with a focus on GMS performance reporting</p>	<p>Members feel that they get access to useful information in a timely way, including from districts</p> <p>Members feel able to use information to inform the work programme</p> <p>Operative improvement in</p>	<p>Good progress is being made against the delivery of this recommendation.</p> <p>Five of nine Members have seen a clear improvement to the way in which information, briefings and decision notices are supplied to Members. Some explanation of this could be attributed to late papers to Committee and reports which may fail the plain English test on occasion. Improved drafting and issuing papers on time should support members to be better equipped.</p> <p>There was acknowledgement from those closest to the operation of the scrutiny function that receipt of the GMCAs forward plan to a regular timescale is essential to informing Members of upcoming decisions. The alignment of the GMS to items discussed at Committee is clearly evident throughout the Committee’s agenda for 2022/23 but of note are the Greener Focus (24 August) and Equalities Focus (28 September) items. Furthermore, the incorporation of an item considered in private session on 8 March demonstrates the willingness of the CA to share highly sensitive</p>

	<p>quality of scrutiny of the GMS, assessed by member and officer views</p>	<p>information with the Scrutiny Committee. This conveys a clear level of trust and openness between the executive and scrutiny.</p> <p>It was also evident that an improved flow of information to Members was leading to improved questioning, as the CfGS observed and heard from interview and survey participants. Members were drawing on their experience in their district capacity at scrutiny meetings connecting the local to the sub regional. This is encouraging to see and Members must retain a strong connection to local scrutiny and bring relevant knowledge and issues to the Committee's attention.</p> <p>Specific questions were asked of Members in the survey in respect of information</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>'Some of the language is complex so must be abbreviated in some instances'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>'There have been some instances where we are not given enough time to read content'</i> Scrutiny Member</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>'We are seeing Members create connections between policy areas and knit together the system'</i> Officer, GMCA</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>'Members are being selective'</i> Officer, GMCA</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Forward plan of key decisions is shared with Members as soon as it is available and is shared with the Committee at each meeting.</i> Officer, GMCA</p>
<p>Clear outcomes following scrutiny activity</p> <p>Task and finish work designed to focus on a small area of changeable policy</p>	<p>Members and officers feel scrutiny's work overall more focused on adding value</p>	<p>There is good progress being evidenced against these recommendations.</p> <p>Good quality and timely contributions are being made to enhance policy making at the CA. We heard positive accounts of the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee attending the GMCA and providing a report to it. Roundup newsletters are issued quarterly to appraise Members of their progress and Member confidence is growing in their work, although, as covered earlier, confidence is not as strong as it could be.</p> <p>There was significant support for the task and finish group which reviewed flooding and water management – both in terms of being appraised of complex issues with responsibilities spanning public and private sector partners, convening those partners and making recommendations to effect change. The success of the task and finish work has been covered elsewhere in this evaluation but there are opportunities in which to use the lessons learnt from the T&F to ensure strong planning going forward – specifically, ensuring a clear scope at the outset to prevent 'scope</p>

<p>Ongoing evaluation plans in place (may not yet have been properly deployed)</p>		<p>creep', resources and timescales for the work. It is understood that a list of potential future T&F opportunities have been arrived at by the Committee.</p> <p><i>'The Task and Finish took longer than anticipated because of the scale and capacity of Members'</i> <i>Scrutiny Member</i></p> <p>The ongoing evaluation plans are demonstrated in this evaluation and the commitment to evaluate regularly to ensure the scrutiny function remains effective. The informal wash up sessions have been warmly welcomed by Members, with seven out of nine members of the view they have been effective in evaluating the success of the sessions. The Committee may wish to track effectiveness over the course of the year to ensure continuous improvement and as mentioned elsewhere, track Member confidence in being able to undertake effective scrutiny.</p> <p><i>'Members are more motivated and enthused about Scrutiny's potential'</i> <i>Officer, GMCA</i></p>
<p>Effective support arrangements</p> <p>Further discussion on remuneration (subject to the content of the LU Bill)</p> <p>Training and support plans for members and officers drawn up (particularly in light of rapporteur responsibilities)</p> <p>Skills matrix (or similar) drawn up as part of</p>	<p>Members more confident in carrying out their role (and understand better what the role and powers of scrutiny are at CA level)</p> <p>Members more motivated and enthused about scrutiny's potential</p> <p>Officers more proactive in engaging with scrutiny</p>	<p>There is good progress being made against this recommendation, with opportunities for improvement.</p> <p>The confidence of Scrutiny Members was mixed – with only five of nine respondents sharing their confidence has improved. There could be opportunities to test confidence of Members at the wash-up sessions which take place immediately after the Committee, next municipal year. It is understood that a package of training and briefings are supplied to Members in a timely fashion but attendance at the briefings can be, on occasion, low. Seven out of nine Members were of the view that they were provided with adequate training and support. Even with such positive responses, the GMCA should emphasise the training offer to new Members and consider making training mandatory.</p> <p><i>'I have very little knowledge of the functions of GMCA'</i> <i>Scrutiny Member</i></p> <p><i>'More Training to new comers on the committee is needed'</i> <i>Scrutiny Member</i></p> <p>It is essential that appointing districts nominate Members with the time, authority and expertise to contribute effectively, especially given the increased priority of Government to ensure strengthened accountability of all Combined Authorities. Remunerating Members was a feature in a very small number of the responses from officers and Members. It is understood that a local arrangement is being progressed but the wider issue will be addressed should the Levelling Up Bill receive Royal Assent.</p>

<p>measures to ensure that districts are nominating the most appropriate members</p>		<p><i>‘Some political groups do not see the importance of this Committee’</i> <i>Scrutiny Member</i></p> <p>In speaking with officers who interface with the scrutiny function, all were positive in their experiences since the changes made that came into effect in 2022/23 municipal. Officers often cited they were clearer on the purpose of scrutiny, that there was a positive feeling of ‘being scrutinised’ and that officers are recognising its role and integrating it into the overall governance of the GMCA. We observed consistent attendance of the most senior officers at the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.</p> <p><i>‘I’m more clear on the purpose of Scrutiny now...Early on I would have struggled to tell you what scrutiny was. It now feels more important and more impactful’</i> <i>Officer, GMCA</i></p>
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