

WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
COLLABORATION AND TRANSFORMATION COMMITTEE

6 NOVEMBER 2023

1. WMCA TRAILBLAZING DEVOLUTION DEAL

Report of the Clerk of the Authority

RECOMMENDED

- 1.1. THAT Members note the details of the recently approved WMCA Trailblazer Devolution Deal.
- 1.2. THAT members consider how the Collaboration and Transformation Committee members, and wider Fire Authority, could facilitate greater WMFS involvement in relevant aspects of the Trailblazing Devolution Deal as it is implemented.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 2.1. To provide members with an update on the WMCA Trailblazing Devolution Deal and the potential risks and opportunities presented to WMFRA/WMFS as a result.
- 2.2. To consider what steps Authority members could take to engage with the combined authority on the implementation of the deal to ensure that WMFS are considered as key partners.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. The Government's February 2022 Levelling Up White Paper promised as part of its commitment to "Deepening Devolution" that it would open negotiations with West Midlands and Greater Manchester Combined Authorities over "Trailblazer" devolution deals designed to provide a blueprint for other combined authorities.
- 3.2. Following a period of development throughout 2022 in which 16 devolution proposals were developed ranging from transport to crime, climate change to health inequalities. The agreed deal,

published in March 2023, was more limited, focused primarily on areas concerned with the growing the local economy.

3.3. Key elements of the deal include:

- Government Department-style multi-year financial settlements. Instead of multiple small pots of money that the authority has to bid for annually, it will receive a “single settlement” with greater local power over spending decisions and reduced reporting and evaluation from central government. This would come into effect from the next spending review, expected in November 2024.
- Introduction of “Levelling Up Zones” which will feature 100% business rate retention for 25 years and will complement the separate “Investment Zones” announced by the government in March 2023 which offer a range of tax incentives for new and expanding businesses.
- Increased access to central government data and greater data sharing within the region.
- A new rail partnership for the West Midlands which will give greater control over ticketing and rail planning, and devolution of the bus service operators grant, giving greater control over how bus services are supported.
- Devolved funding for housing (including for the Affordable Homes Programme worth at least £200 million) and brownfield redevelopment funding (worth £100 million)
- Devolution of non-apprenticeship adult skills functions and grant funding in the next Spending Review (2024), local flexibilities, which will increase over time, over Free Courses for Jobs and Skills Bootcamps during this Spending Review.
- Piloting the devolution of net zero funding, including for buildings’ retrofit, through allocation rather than competition in the period from 2025 onwards.

3.4. It is notable that key areas in the original WMCA proposal, including Crime, Community Safety and Resilience, were not taken up by central government, although they remain committed to further development and expansion of the West Midlands devolution deal.

- 3.5. This deal was ratified by a unanimous vote of the constituent local authorities at the WMCA Board meeting on 13 October 2023. Steps will now be taken to implement the various elements of the deal, some of which will not come into effect until 2025.
- 3.6. By agreeing the deal, the WMCA are now also subject to greater accountability and scrutiny, including quarterly engagement with all West Midlands MPs, a more robust “Mayor’s Question Time” and a requirement to present to Parliamentary Select Committees when requested.
- 3.7. More details of the content of the deal and WMCA’s implementation plan can be found in the published papers from the WMCA Board meeting held on 13 October (see Background Papers).

4. **ELEMENTS OF GREATEST RELEVANCE TO WEST MIDLANDS FIRE SERVICE**

Of those areas that remain within the finalised plan, there are a few of particular interest to West Midlands Fire Service, and where further engagement may be of benefit.

Housing and Retrofit

- 4.1. Housing and regeneration are already key levers for the WMCA, and the devolution deal provides greater flexibility and funding for redeveloping brownfield sites and deliver social and affordable housing. There will be implications for Service in terms of where new developments are focused and the methods of construction for affordable housing. There will also be opportunities presented by increased action to repurpose and redevelop sites which might otherwise be at risk of dereliction and therefore increased risk of fire.
- 4.2. The WMCA’s ambitions around retrofit are significant, and the devolution of funding will enable greater flexibility in how this is achieved. West Midlands Fire Service will have an interest in the approaches being taken to retrofit and their implications for community risk, especially where new or innovative approaches are used.

Data

- 4.3. The proposals around data will see an increase in the availability of data from central government to local government and in the other direction, and the deal is explicit in saying that “The government will work with WMCA to continue to explore options, legislative and otherwise, to safely streamline the sharing of data between the government, the wider public sector and WMCA and its constituent local authorities”. WMCA have ambitions to publish more data as well, taking inspiration from the London Datastore, which brings together city-wide data from multiple authorities and public services in the capital.
- 4.4. WMFS already share data with partners and central government, including providing our performance/operation data to the Birmingham City Observatory for public access. However, there are clearly opportunities to access more data in areas such as transport, economy and climate resilience which could inform the services Community Risk Management Planning and wider strategy. Equally, there may be opportunities to make our own data more accessible at a regional level to support greater transparency and accountability.

Transport

- 4.5. Transport has also been a key area for WMCA before this deal, and much of the devolution proposals relate to greater control over funding for existing and planned transport developments. However, the “Transport Sandbox” designed to give the WMCA greater flexibility to push regulatory boundaries for innovative transport solutions such as automated vehicles, zero-emissions transport and dynamic traffic management. At a minimum, the service will need to understand these new approaches and their potential risks, and there may be opportunities to influence the regulatory changes proposed in line with our statutory responsibility around road safety.

5. **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

No initial Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken as this paper does not relate to service policy change.

6. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no matters within this paper that need to be brought to the attention of the Monitoring Officer.

7. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications from the devolution deal to West Midlands Fire Service. However, there may be funding opportunities as a result of individual TDD workstreams, which will need to be considered individually.

8. **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

The WMCA have a target of Net Zero for the West Midlands Region by 2041. There are no direct environmental implications to the service as a result of this paper as it is to note.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

[C&T Committee Report: WMCA Trailblazing Devolution Deal - 12 December 2022](#)

[WMCA Board Papers – 13 October 2023](#)

[News Item – WMCA ratifies devolution deal](#)

[West Midlands Combined Authority Trailblazer deeper devolution deal – DLUHC Policy Paper](#) (published March 2023)

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