

UNISON North West

GMCA Phase Two Consultation Response

Fire and Rescue

The Scheme sets out changes to the democratic structures governing the fire service in Greater Manchester. A distinction is made between strategic decisions – that must be made by the Mayor, and decisions that can be delegated to a Fire Committee – that will consist of councillors appointed by councils and the Mayor. It states in the Review that “[t]he committee could be particularly useful in reviewing delivery arrangements and helping to consider options around new ways of working and further collaboration and integration of blue light services” (5.7).

UNISON represents support staff in the fire service, as well as in the police service. We have serious concerns about any moves toward the integration of these functions. The needs, skills and knowledge of the services are very different and a requirement for generic working would add to pressures on already overstretched emergency workers.

It is important that any attempt to achieve efficiencies through closer integration of functions (Finance, ICT and HR are listed as examples in the Review document) is done in accordance with the principles agreed in the *GM Workforce Engagement Protocol*. The Protocol acknowledges that staff may have concerns that integration might mean a transfer to a new employer, privatisation, worsening of pay and terms and conditions, or job relocation. The Protocol sets out a commitment to positive employee engagement and a partnership approach. In order to reassure staff that this is how change is to be pursued in GM, it would be useful if reference to the Protocol is made routinely in official GM documents and it will be essential to ensure that the councillors appointed to the Fire Committee operate in accordance with the Protocol.

Waste Disposal

Reference is made in the Review to the integration of back-office GMWDA functions (Finance, HR and ICT are again listed) (6.3). We would again have a concern that decision-makers should follow the *GM Workforce Protocol* in any process of change.

Education, Skills and Employment Support

In principle, we are supportive of the movement of powers currently held by the Secretary of State to the GM level.

The Review document lists one of the “readiness conditions for full devolution” as being that the Area Review process leads to “a sustainable provider base” (7.1.5). Rather than waiting for the outcome of the Area Review, it would be better if strategic decisions about further education (FE) provision arrangements were made at the GM-level, as part of the devolution process.

There is a real danger that closures/mergers in FE driven by the Area Review process could have an impact on the capacity of GM to achieve objectives on employment. The loss of local college capacity could also impact on other public services, such as transport. It would be better – for both democratic and strategic reasons – to delay the Area Review process such that better, joined-up, decisions can be taken on FE provision for Greater Manchester.

The learning and skills sector contributes significantly to increased skills attainment leading to employability and economic growth. For individual citizens that can mean improved work opportunities, higher wages and positive impact on health and wellbeing.

For students with SEN or those in offender learning the impact can be potentially even more significant.

Therefore we welcome the role of GMCA to bring co-ordination and focus to adult learning across GM.

The Area Review process has little credibility with trade unions, college leaders, students and local politicians - however it is happening fast and by the end of the year there will be mergers and new group structures affecting most of GM.

There is a serious issue of accountability here - changes to college governance rules, the move to group structures with boards of management and the increase in provision by private training providers (esp of apprenticeships) reduces accountability. GMCA needs to create mechanisms to ensure accountability.

We want to see the GM Workforce Protocol apply to Learning and Skills sector. We have raised with college leaders, the Interim Mayor and GMCA Skills Lead our desire to see a Workforce Engagement Board type arrangement for the Learning and Skills sector.

This can impact on the smoothness of transitions to different structures and contribute to ensuring professional standards for support staff apply across GM.

Transport

It is very important that decisions about bus fares, frequency, routes and service quality are made by people who are democratically-accountable. Moreover, bus services are of great strategic importance in the achievement of the goals of devolution around economic growth and employment. For both democratic and strategic reasons, UNISON believes that it is very important that powers are devolved to the GM-level and that the city-region has, and utilises, the ability to franchise bus services.

UNISON believes that bus franchising offers far greater democratic and strategic control than can be achieved through a voluntary partnership agreement with bus operators. Our preferred model would involve long-term franchises with enforcement of the contract standards. In franchising arrangements it is important that small companies have a chance to win contracts and that minimum standards such as paying the 'real' living wage (set by the Living Wage Foundation) are guaranteed.

Overview and Scrutiny

In broad terms, we believe that decision-making should be taken as close to the people affected as possible so we are supportive of moves to devolve powers down from the central government level to the city-region.

Clearly there is an important role for effective overview and scrutiny arrangements at the GM level. Regarding the position of chair of the scrutiny committee, we understand that the legislation has requirements around who is eligible for the position, but we would question whether it should always be necessary for the chair to be from a different political party than the Mayor in a context where 9 out of 10 councils are currently led by the same party.

Equalities

In the process of appointing councillors to GM-level committees, the Scheme outlines the intention to ensure a political and geographical balance. It is very welcome that these appointments will also be made in a way that ensures that gender balance and diversity are also taken into account (6.2).