

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Strategy and Resources Committee
 held in the Oak Room, Headquarters
 on Wednesday, 13 September 2023 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Councillors Aldcroft, Cook, Hartin (Vice-Chair), Minnery, Offland (Chair), Price and Wynn

Officers

Simon Hardiman	Chief Fire Officer	CFO
Guy Williams	Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Support)	ACFO (SS)
James Walton	Treasurer	
Joanne Coadey	Head of Finance	HoF
Andrew Kelcey	Head of Resources	HoR
Adam Matthews	Head of Operations and Risk	HoOR
Germaine Worker	Head of Human Resources and Administration	HHRA
Donna Trowsdale	Development Officer	DO
Lynn Ince	Executive Support Officer	ESO

1 Apologies for Absence

None

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None

3 Public Questions

None

4 Minutes

Resolved, with Councillor Wynn abstaining as he had not been present at the meeting, that the minutes of the Strategy and Resources Committee held on 22 March 2023 be agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

5 Committee Training

The Committee was asked to consider what training if any they wished to receive in order for them to fulfil their role on the Committee.

The ESO advised that a finance awareness session was to be included in the Member Development Day which had been postponed from 12 September 2023. The Development Day will be rescheduled for later in the year and the finance awareness session will be included on the agenda for it.

Councillor Cook stated that as a new member of the Fire Authority he would welcome any training that would help him with his role. The HoF said that she is happy provide a finance overview to any new Committee members and that this could be arranged through the ESO.

6 Financial Performance to July 2023

This report provided information on the financial performance of the Service, and sought approval for action, where necessary.

The HoF presented this report and highlighted the following points to the Committee.

- This is the first financial monitoring report for 2023/24. A revenue budget of £26.562m was approved by the Fire Authority in February 2023. This budget is split into three areas: Executive and Resources; Service Delivery and Corporate Governance, with each area having a pay and non-pay budget.
- Overall pay budget expenditure is 31% on average which is in line with expected spend at this point in the year. Some areas of pay expenditure such as On Call firefighters and overtime payments are a month behind as these activities are paid for in the following month.
- The average non-pay expenditure across all budgets is 15%. This is not expected to run in line with the pay budget.
- The graphs on pages 2 and 3 of the report show a breakdown of spend to date across the three budget areas.
- The table on page 4 of the report details the exceptions identified in the budget up to July 2023.
 - The 35% overspend on Overtime is likely to reduce due to changes to training delivery.
 - The On Call Duty System underspends are due to reduced numbers and activity and the budget will be restructured to reflect this going forward.
 - There has been a higher return on investments due to interest rate increases. It is likely that this will start to reduce as the Service has less money invested because of spend on the Telford Central Project.
- A total underspend of £387k has been identified so far, this year.
- As set out on page 5 of the report, the Service is seeking approval for an additional Operational Support Technician resource in the Workshops Department.

The additional post will assist with routine checks and repairs of operational equipment which enable the mechanics to focus on safety critical checks. The temporary role has been filled but the individual need to be trained now. This is why this request has not been left to the November budget setting considerations.

Members asked how much the Service is expecting to receive in Government Grant to cover the expenditure relating to the Protection Department. The HoF advised that she did have the exact figures to hand but assured the Committee that expenditure has been tailored to the grant. The CFO added that the grant is linked to the findings of the Grenfell Tower inquiry where Services were found to be short of Protection Officers.

Members asked when the overall increase in capital costs, such as insurance etc, will start to feed into the budget. The HoF explained the relevant budgets have been increased from the Inflation Contingency as required. There are currently no issues foreseen with inflation being beyond what is expected.

Resolved that the Committee recommend that the Fire Authority

- a) Note the position of the revenue budget;
- b) Approve virements to the revenue budget, where requested;
- c) Approve the request for an ongoing staff resource in Workshops; and
- d) Note performance against prudential indicators to date in 2023/24.

7 Capital Update on Activity and Finance

This report provided an overview of all the capital schemes within the Service and their current status.

The HoR presented this report to the Committee and highlighted the following information in the Appendix to the report.

- No major building projects are being undertaken by the Service at present, other than the Telford Central Project
- The Tweedale station improvements are due to be completed this year.
- A paper on the Telford Central Project will be taken to the October Fire Authority meeting to set out the position of the project in relation to costs and completion.
- The orders for the Light Vehicle Replacement have all been placed.
- A new inflatable rescue boat has been delivered and is now in use in the Service. The old boat has been donated for use in the Ukraine.
- All the replacement fire kit has been received and issuing of this across the Service is nearly complete.
- Volvo has advised that it will not be producing diesel vehicles after January 2024, so the purchases of Officer Emergency Response Vehicles (OERVs) have been brought forward to provide resilience. Serious consideration is also being given to the use of electric vehicles for OERVs.

- The BA Upgrade Scheme will focus on improving decontamination of kits.
- The new outreach vehicle is in Service and is being used in its base form.
- The purchase of replacement audio-visual displays for Fire Control is underway.
- Work continues on the Alerters and Station End Equipment scheme; the new alerters have been delivered to the Service and are being prepared for distribution to On Call employees.

Members asked where drone capability fits into the Service's operational budgets. The ACFO (SS) explained that the Service currently has two drones and crews from Newport and Tweedale stations are completing training on flying and operating them. The HoOR added that the drone capability will go live on 1 November 2023 and that there is immense legislation surrounding the use of drones that must be complied with. Officers are now also looking at the use of a rapid response camera to provide resilience and remote strategic command in conjunction with the drones and body worn cameras (BWC).

The CFO explained that the use of new technologies, such as drones, involve an increased use of cloud-based technology which has led to the Service using more revenue expenditure for licences rather than capital spend for physical attributes. The change in technology is also having less of an impact on ICT provision as the systems are increasingly being managed remotely. Members then asked if that is the case, where do officers perceive the threat for the budget with these changes. The CFO responded that consideration needs to be given to that budgets will look like going forward, for example greater use of technology will involve far more revenue-based expenditure. There is also the issue of cyber risk which is gaining momentum daily.

Members asked for more information on the issue of cyber risk and the recruitment of staff to prevent these things happening. The CFO responded that the Service does currently carry vacancies in its ICT Department and always has done due to issues with attracting and retaining suitable staff. There is some in-house knowledge around cyber risk, but the Service also uses Darktrace software (artificial intelligence) as well. Members suggested that the Service is probably going to have to look at increasing budgets in future to ensure that it has an appropriate standard of resourcing to deal with this issue. The CFO explained that the ICT review has identified two standards: platinum and gold; to achieve the platinum standard a budget increase of £500k and recruitment of 16 staff would be required.

Following on from the CFO's comments, the HoF advised that the drones and the BWCs have been dealt with through revenue budgets. Members and officers also need to be aware that overspends in the ICT budgets may be due to a change in spend type.

The Efficiency and Productivity review will need to identify the savings that have been achieved by the move to a cloud-based system. The ACFO (SS) also advised that some functions, such as access cards, have been kept in-house to ensure data security and reduce associated vulnerabilities.

Members asked what happens if the cloud-based systems are breached. The CFO explained that the Service has a disaster recovery system which will back up to a server and which will probably restore an older version of the data concerned.

Members asked for further detail on the replacement of the fire kit. The HoR explained that the new fire kit was designed to be as light as possible and to help to avoid heat stress for the wearer. The Service was starting to see increasing issues with wear on the inner liner of the kit. These were raised with the supplier and manufacturer who have both taken immediate steps to rectify the issue. The HoR stated that he has nothing but praise for how the company has resolved the issue.

Resolved that the Committee note the progress so far on current schemes.

8 Update on Apprenticeship Levy Spend 2022/23

This report provided an update on the apprenticeships funded through the levy, since the update report in 2022.

The DO presented this report and advised the Committee of the following points.

The Service pays 0.5% of its salary bill, into the apprenticeship levy on a monthly basis. The target of new apprenticeship starts for public sector organisations with more than 250 employees was removed in August 2022.

The table on page 2 of the report shows that there was a peak in the number of apprenticeships in 2019/20 and 2022/23 which can be attributed to operational firefighter apprenticeships. Completed apprenticeships are now up to eight across the Service. There has been recruitment of three apprentices since the last update report, two in ICT and one completing an apprenticeship in business administration.

The areas that the Service hopes to recruit apprentices to in the future are set out on page 3 of the report. There is also discussion about the potential for further operational firefighter apprentices in 2024. If it is decided that this recruitment will be undertaken, the sharing of apprenticeship levies across organisations may need to be explored to fund it.

The Service currently has circa £22k in its levy account which will be used to pay providers. It should be noted that this amount will increase as monthly payments are made into the levy.

Referring to the issue of the additional resource requirement in Workshops that was discussed at item 5 on this agenda, Members asked if this was creating risk in relation to succession planning. The HoR explained that Workshops looks like an ideal place to bring in an apprentice, but this is not possible as the Service cannot afford to have any of its mechanics not fully skilled and/or trained due to the levels of demand on the department. There is also the issue that an apprentice would not have an acceptable level of transferable skills if they trained within Workshops due to the specialised nature of the work involved.

The HoR added that work is being undertaken to look at funding the development of a mechanic to enable them to compete for the fleet manager role in the future and there is the potential that this will be done through an apprenticeship.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the contents of the report; and
- b) Approve the recommendations in the report that
 - Managers continue to consider apprenticeships as a method of development for their staff as part of the Individual Progress and Development Review process; and
 - Consideration is given to apprenticeships as a method of recruitment to fill vacant posts.

9 Exclusion of Press and Public

Resolved that having been satisfied in all the circumstances of the case that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing this information, that Members formally resolve that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

10 Capital Update on Activity and Finance (Paragraph 3)

Resolved that the Committee receive and note Appendix B to report 7 – Capital Update on Activity and Finance – which contains exempt information.

The meeting closed: at 3.20 pm.

Chair _____

Date _____