

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Standards, Audit and Performance Committee
held in the Oak Room, Headquarters, Shrewsbury
on Thursday, 29 July 2021 at 2.30 pm**

Present

Members

Councillors Burchett, Evans (Chair), Hignett, Lea, Price and Thompson

Officers

Rod Hammerton	Chief Fire Officer	CFO
Simon Hardiman	Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Support)	ACFO (SS)
Dan Quinn	Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Delivery)	ACFO (SD)
James Walton	Treasurer	Treasurer
Joanne Coadey	Head of Finance	HoF
Germaine Worker	Head of HR and Administration	HHRA
Adam Matthews	Group Manager	GM
Lynn Ince	Executive Support Officer	ESO

External Bodies

David Rowley	Grant Thornton, External Audit
Pete Chadderton	Audit Services, Shropshire Council

1 Apologies for Absence

Councillors Minnery and Sahota (Vice Chair)
Mr Sohal, External Audit
Ms Pilawski, Audit Services, Shropshire Council

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None

3 Public Questions

None

4 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee meeting, held on 22 April 2021, be signed by the Chair as a record of the meeting.

5 Committee Constitution and Training

This report brought the latest version of the Committee's constitution to the notice of its Members. It also asked Members to consider what training they wish to receive in order to fulfil their role on the Committee effectively.

The Committee noted that under the section headed Chair, the wording should read: 'The Chair of the Committee shall **normally** be elected from a member of the largest opposition group'. The ESO undertook to amend this.

Members requested that the Mental Health First Aid awareness training be offered to the wider Fire Authority for attendance. Officers undertook to do this.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Noted the constitution of the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee (attached at the Appendix to the report); and
- b) Advise that they wish to receive the following training in order to fulfil their role on the Committee effectively:
 - Statement of Accounts
 - Treasury Management
 - Cyber Risk
 - Risk Management

6 External Audit Interim Audit Findings Report 2020/21

Mr Rowley, External Auditor, presented the Interim Audit Findings Report 2020/21 and advised the following

- The headline of the report is that the audit is likely to have a clean outcome with no fundamental issues identified
- In relation to the Local Government Pension Scheme there will be a liability adjustment on asset values. This issue has been caused by a timing difference in the production of the pension fund draft accounts and the rebound value of the financial markets caused by the pandemic. It is not believed that there are any control issues related to the issue.
- A number of classification issues have been identified, the largest of which are related to short term investments being incorrectly classified as cash and cash equivalents
- Personal Protection Equipment valuations are a regulatory interest – work is ongoing on this issue and there may be movements and / or adjustments related to the outcomes of this.
- The statutory reporting deadline for the Final Accounts is in September and the Audit Findings Report will be brought to this Committee in September

- There is a new way of assessing the value for money (VFM) conclusion, the statutory reporting deadline for which is in November. No significant risks have been identified in relation to VFM at present, but this is an ongoing process.

Resolved that the Committee note the Interim Audit Findings Report 2020/21.

7 Annual Governance Statement Improvement Plan 2019/20

This report summarised the progress made to date against the improvements contained in the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) Improvement Plan 2020/21.

The ACFO (SS) presented this report and talked through the six areas for progress outlined in the report.

The Committee queried the completion dates set out in the report and the ACFO (SS) advised that these dates would be confirmed at the next meeting of the Committee.

In response to Members' questions about the break-in at Newport Fire Station, the ACFO(SS) explained that a crime number had been issued and a Service debrief had been held for the incident. The ACFO (SS) also confirmed that no equipment had been taken during the break-in. Several steps are being taken to mitigate this risk including new appliances being fitted with CCTV and CCTV also being included as part of the ongoing station refurbishment programmes.

The Committee also noted that work has started at Tweeddale. This work is being carried out in line with the Telford Central Project which will allow for Tweeddale to be used for training if needed.

Members queried the reference to equipment that is reaching end of life and asked what the replacement schedule for this is. The ACFO (SS) explained that all ICT equipment is on maintenance schedules and the only part that needs replacing is the station end equipment for alerters.

Members also asked for further detail regarding the 10 new pumping appliances being delivered in two batches. The ACFO (SS) was unable to provide further information on this in the meeting but undertook to provide it to members outside the meeting.

Members also queried the measures that are being taken to improve access and security on stations. The ACFO (SS) explained that the new access system will be run off employees' ID cards.

Resolved that the Committee note the progress made against each of the improvements contained in the Annual Governance Statement Improvement Plan 2020/21.

8 Internal Audit Annual Audit Report

This report provided Members with details of the work undertaken by Internal Audit for the year ended 31 March 2021. It reported on progress against the annual audit plan and also provided the Head of Audit's opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's governance, risk management and control processes when considering the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards or Guidance, as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.

Mr Chadderton presented this report and reported the following in relation to the audits undertaken by Internal Audit:

- 100% of work has been completed
- A 'Reasonable' assurance level has been given which is the same as last year
- The table at paragraph 6.9 in the report summarises performance for the year
- The table at paragraph 6.16 shows that 35 recommendations were made on 2020/21 audits which is a reduction from the 93 that were raised in 2019/20
- None of the recommendations made were rated as 'fundamental'
- The table at 6.23 in the report shows that no issues were identified in the feedback given on customer feedback survey forms for completed audits
- Limited assurance has been given on the Payroll system due to the implementation of the new systems. The number of significant recommendations outstanding in relation to this has reduced but this has not changed the assurance level
- An 'unsatisfactory' opinion has been issued for the Recommendation Follow Up Audit as there are significant issues that have not been completed by the agreed action date. Of the 34 recommendations that were noted at the start of the year, 18 were still outstanding at the time of the audit, although some of these are due to the Covid pandemic. The Head of Audit's opinion therefore includes the recommendation that some areas require 'robust action plans.'

The CFO commented that Internal Audit is an excellent exercise which has highlighted part of a wider problem with audit recommendation follow up; it is recognised that Covid has impacted on this issue, but this is no longer an excuse. The Service is currently undertaking a 'Take Stock, Catch Up and Forge Ahead' programme to prepare for the HMI Inspection in November 2021 and all parts of the audit recommendations will be recognised and incorporated into this work.

In reference to the outstanding significant recommendations related to the use of corporate credit cards and web-based accounts, the CFO advised that the pandemic has prevented an audit of the marketplace and central controls being carried out, which needs to be done to meet the recommendations of audit. This will be undertaken to enable the direction of travel for Recommendation Follow Up to move back to reasonable.

Members referred to the timeliness of delivering the report due to covid and highlighted that this had only been achievable with the co-operation of the Fire Authority.

Members also noted that the low number (three) of customer feedback surveys that had been returned. Mr Chadderton explained that it is not compulsory for these forms to be completed and that quality assurance is also carried out through other methods such as general engagement meetings. It is also worth noting that feedback is more often given on audits which achieve a 'good' level of assurance.

Members asked what plans were in place to ensure that the assurances referred to in paragraph 6.11 of the report are fulfilled. Mr Chadderton explained that the Fire Authority monitors its recommendations on a quarterly basis with Internal Audit monitoring on an annual basis. The HoF informed Members that internal processes are in place to address the recommendations concerned.

Resolved that the Committee endorse

- a) Performance against the Audit Plan for the year ended 31 March 2021;
- b) That reasonable assurance can be provided that the system of governance, risk management and internal control is operating effectively and can be relied upon when considering the Annual Governance Statement for 2020/21; and
- c) The Head of Audit's reasonable year end opinion on the Authority's internal control environment for 2020/21 based on the work undertaken and management responses received.

9 Internal Audit Plan 2021/22

This report informed the Fire Authority of a one-year extension to the Internal Audit programme of audit work for 2021/22, as set out in the appendix to the report.

Resolved that the Committee note the one-year extension to the audit plan for 2021/22 and approve the programme of audits for 2021/22 as set out in the report.

10 Risk Management Group Internal Audit Progress Monitoring Report

This report provided an update on the monitoring of recommendations made by Internal Audit, which is undertaken by the Risk Management Group. It specifically covered details about the progress made against outstanding recommendations.

Members asked who sits on the Risk Management Group. The CFO explained that it is an internal group that consists of senior officers and a member representative, which is the Risk Management and Audit Champion.

Resolved that the Committee note

- a) The progress made against the outstanding recommendations; and
- b) That the Risk Management Group will continue to monitor progress against all recommendations, reporting to this Committee on a regular basis.

11 Corporate Risk Management Summary

This report updated Members on the status of risks on the Corporate Risk Register.

The ACFO (SS) presented this report and advised that one new risk, related to the new firefighting Personal Protective Equipment maintenance standard, has been added to the Fire Authority's Risk Register.

Members asked for further information on the fitness standards risks that are on the Risk Register. The GM explained that the new fitness standards include a national standard for vo2 max of 42.3. 15% of the operational workforce, equivalent to 60 employees, are not currently achieving this standard. To address this, fitness equipment, consisting of a treadmill, a wattbike, kettle bells and mats, has been purchased for each station and Associate Trainer provision arranged to support the use of this equipment. Progress has been made and the percentage of employees not achieving the required standard is reducing. The treadmill provided is the same specification as the equipment used for testing and so gives accurate results to users.

The CFO explained that not meeting fitness standards gives a fatality risk for employees on the fireground but the risk of not staffing correctly leads to risk to communities and the potential for litigation. The Service made the decision to bring in the revised standard slowly to balance the risks associated with it but it has taken a long time to achieve implementation. It should be noted that the VO2 max standard takes no account of gender or age etc, but it is not unachievable.

The GM added that nationally there is a wide spectrum of approach to testing VO2 max standards with some services not undertaking any testing at all and each fire and rescue service having its own method of testing. The GM also advised that On Call employees can access the fitness equipment at any time and training on the use of the equipment has been provided to ensure this is done safely. On Call staff are appreciative of this provision. The Service is also encouraging lifestyle changes for employees, for example through the ongoing provision of the Cycle to Work Scheme.

Members asked for further detail on the impact of the new standard for firekit maintenance (BS8617) which includes a requirement to replace kit at 10 years regardless of condition and level of use. The CFO explained that this will affect a large quantity of kit which under current Service policy is replaced when it wears out.

The Service is probably about two years off the replacement of kit under the new standard which has the potential for increased costs therefore an appropriate amount of capital funding will be allocated to address the issue.

Members asked for clarification regarding how long risks are retained on the Risk Register for. Officers undertook to provide further detail on this outside the meeting.

Members asked if the 'pingdemic' was affecting the Service. The ACFO (SD) explained following the Public Health England change to the definition of a close contact in January there were a number of mitigations in place to maintain availability across the Service with firefighters on the list of those that are exempt from self-isolating. The ACFO (SD) reported that absence levels are currently at 3.6%.

Resolved that the Committee note the report.

12 Summary of Compliments and Complaints 2017/18 to 2020/21

This report advised Members of summary details regarding the compliments and complaints received during 2020/21, with comparisons to the previous three years.

The ACFO (SS) presented this report and, highlighted the complaints received regarding Firefighter Taster Days and the Positive Action campaign. The ACFO (SS) confirmed that all the activity undertaken as part of this campaign was in line with the Equalities Act.

Members commented that they found the forwarding of compliments received to Members useful and informative.

Resolved that the Committee note the report.

13 Performance Monitoring Summary of Annual Performance against Service Targets 2020/21

This report summarised performance against the Service Targets over the last year, the learning that has come from trying to meet them and the influence this performance data will have on developing new performance standards for 2020/21.

The ACFO presented this report and highlighted the following issues:

Response Standard

- This target has not been achieved in 2020/21 but it would have been achieved if performance was measured using the methodology applied to response statistics by the HMICFRS

All Accidental Fires

- Tabled document shows the Direction of Travel which is positive

- A change in social behaviour has been seen with more incidents involving garden buildings etc
- A five-year summary report against the last Integrated Risk Management Plan will be brought to Committee

Accidental Dwelling Fires (ADFs)

- The annual target has not been achieved but there has been a significant reduction in the number of ADFs recorded

Members queried if there were any particular identifiable causes of fires. The ACFO (SD) advised that electrical fires are always a risk, but it will be interesting to see if, and how, the causes of ADFs change as we move through the pandemic.

Members also asked if there would be any increase in the number of appliances given the significant population growth in the county. The CFO responded that there would not be any increase in appliances as population growth gives a dispersion of the threat from fire particularly with new build properties; this effect can be seen on response standards. The ACFO (SS) added that building control and regulations for new build properties also reduce levels of risk.

Deliberate Fires

- There has been a 26% reduction in levels of deliberate fires but it is recognised that this could potentially be an effect of Covid restrictions

Fire Related Deaths and Serious Injuries

- There have been two serious injuries and no deaths recorded during 2020/21

Injuries to Staff through firefighting

- The target has been achieved but this may be in part due to the effects of the pandemic

Members queried how the target figures are arrived at. The CFO explained that an extended trend line is used which gives a 25% reduction over a five-year period. It is recognised, nationally, that there are diminishing returns on targets and also that the target must be achievable to avoid the risk of demotivating staff

Members asked if there are any rescue related death figures. Officers confirmed that there are not, as they are not currently one of the Service's targets

Fires confined to room of origin

- The target has been achieved

Performance Monitoring

- Wholetime availability is 99.8% which is one shift below optimal crewing.
- On Call availability is 97.98% which can be attributed to the effect of the pandemic

- The Group Support Team (GST) has given circa 5000 hours of cover during the year – 56% of this cover has been at Minsterley and Prees
- Church Stretton crews should be recognised as they have achieved 100% availability for several years

Members questioned at what point would the amount of support given to a station by the GST become unsustainable. The GM responded that whilst GST support is key to maintaining availability, succession planning is also hugely important.

The move to increased homeworking, which may allow more people to apply for the On Call Service, will be reflected in future recruitment campaigns and communications. The GM also clarified that the GST undertake other work whilst providing cover on stations.

The ACFO (SD) advised that the Service is undertaking an On Call Sustainability Project to assess how the On Call Service can be maintained and/or developed going forward. The GM advised that any assistance from Fire Authority Members regarding potential recruits and / or the championing of the On Call Service would be appreciated

Resolved that the Committee note the report.

14 Pension Board

14a Annual Report 2021

Resolved that the Committee note the Pension Board Annual Report 2021

14b Minutes

The ACFO (SS) presented these minutes and informed the Committee that the Immediate Detriment cases are a major issue for the Service and communications will be sent out next week, to those employees who are affected by it.

Resolved that the Committee note the minutes of the Pension Board meeting held on 28 June 2021.

15 Exclusion of Press and Public

Resolved that the Committee being satisfied in all the circumstances of the case that public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interests in disclosing this information, formally resolve that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information, as defined in paragraph 4 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

16 Corporate Risk Management Summary (Paragraph 4)

The Committee received Appendix C to report 11 – Corporate Risk Management Summary, which was considered in closed session as it contained exempt information.

Resolved that the Committee note exempt Appendix C to report 11.

The meeting closed at 4.40 pm

Chair

Date