

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Standards, Audit and Performance Committee
held via Microsoft Teams
on Thursday, 3 December 2020 at 2.00 pm**

Present

Members

Councillors Adams, Blundell, Dee (Vice-Chair) and Sahota (Chair)

Officers

Rod Hammerton	Chief Fire Officer	CFO
Simon Hardiman	Assistant Chief Fire Officer	ACFO
Joanne Coadey	Head of Finance	HoF
Ged Edwards	Planning, Performance and Communications Manager	PPCM
Germaine Worker	Head of Human Resources and Administration	HHRA
Adam Matthews	Group Manager Shropshire	GM
Lynn Ince	Executive Support Officer	ESO

External Bodies

Mr Richard Percival	Grant Thornton, External Audit
Mr Peter Chadderton	Audit Services, Shropshire Council

1 Apologies for Absence

Councillors Milner, Minnery, Price and Thompson.
Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) Dave Myers
James Walton, Treasurer
David Rowley, Grant Thornton
Ceri Pilawski, Audit Services

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Dee declared an interest in item 14 on the agenda – Pension Board Minutes – as she is in receipt of a Fire Service Pension. Councillor Dee undertook to leave the meeting for this item.

3 Public Questions

None

4 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee meeting, held on 24 September 2020, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

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 wished to receive in order to fulfil their role on the Committee effectively.

The Committee noted that there are likely to be changes to its membership after the elections in Shropshire in May and agreed that it would revisit the issue of training after the Fire Authority's Annual Meeting in June 2021.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the constitution of the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee (attached at the Appendix to the report); and
- b) Agreed that training for the Committee would be revisited after the Fire Authority's Annual Meeting in June 2021.

6 Standards, Audit and Performance Committee Work Plan 2021

This report put forward a 2021 Work Plan for Standards, Audit and Performance Committee for consideration and approval by Members. The report also reviewed implementation of the activities listed in last year's Work Plan.

The CFO requested that the items on the Work Plan relating to receiving summary reports on Service Targets including Retained Duty System Performance Monitoring be amended to 'Monitor performance against key performance indicators and report on direction of travel'. The Committee agreed this amendment.

Resolved that the Committee approve the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee Work Plan 2021, attached as the Appendix to the report, subject to the amendment to item 12 as set out above.

7 External Audit – Annual Audit Letter

The Committee received the External Auditor's Annual Audit Letter, which summarised the key findings of the work carried out for the year ended 31 March 2019.

Mr Percival presented this item and explained that this is the last Annual Audit Letter that will be brought to the Committee as from next year an Auditor's Opinion and Auditor's Annual Report will be issued instead with a greater focus on the Value for Money (VfM) opinion.

Mr Percival then highlighted the Executive Summary on page 3 of the report which sets the audit opinion and states that the deadline for the audit having been achieved, the audit is now completed and closed. The Executive Summary also includes a point of note / reference regarding the valuation of the Authority's land and buildings.

Referring to page 11 of the report, Mr Percival explained that the 2019/20 audit fee includes £3,975 fee variation in respect of additional work brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Mr Percival clarified that this fee variation is being sought from all Grant Thornton clients who are audited under the CIPFA Code and as such does not reflect the support from the audit team. The additional amount is the minimum figure but further discussion on the issue is needed with the Finance Team.

The Committee asked Mr Percival for further explanation on the VfM Opinion i.e. what it includes and if there is anything that is specific to the Fire Authority. Mr Percival explained that there is an obligation for an auditor determined VfM conclusion to be issued. This will include consideration of financial stability, governance arrangements and the 3 Es of economy, efficiency and effectiveness including partnership working. The greater emphasis on the auditor VfM opinion will have a fee implication in future audits.

Members asked for further detail on the impact of Covid-19 on the audit as the Executive Summary on page 4 of the report indicates that all went well. Mr Percival explained that the main issue came from the auditors not being able to be on site during the audit. Even with the best set of working papers and excellent support from the Finance Team, there are still questions that need to be asked and collateral evidence that needs to be obtained. Remote working made this process slower and more difficult leading to additional work on the audit. Whilst it was hoped that this could be contained within the additional agreed audit fees, the work took longer than envisaged and Grant Thornton are seeking to recoup the costs of this additional work through the fee variation.

The CFO added that the 15% increase to audit fees is being applied across the Board and whilst the Authority recognises the challenges to auditors, the Treasurer has been asked to raise the issue through the PSAA. He also explained that officers are supportive of the VfM opinion changes. There will be an increase to the audit fees, but a more valuable and useful opinion will be received.

Resolved unanimously that the Committee note the Annual Audit Letter for the Year Ended 31 March 2020.

8 Internal Audit Plan 2021/22

The HoF reported to the Committee that the Internal Audit Plan 2021/22 would normally be brought to this Committee at this time for agreement. The Plan has however been extended for one year to enable officers to explore changing internal audit providers.

The Plan will be brought to the next Committee meeting in April and officers will investigate internal audit providers further.

In response to questions from Members, the HoF explained that Shropshire Council have provided Internal Audit services for a long time, but officers are keen to look to the market. Shropshire Council will still be able to tender for the contract and Telford & Wrekin Council will also be considered as they now provide the Payroll and HR Systems for the Authority.

Resolved that the Committee note the verbal update given.

9 Annual Governance Statement 2021/22 Improvement Plan

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

The PPCM presented this report and gave the following update on the areas of review detailed in the Appendix to the report;

Process

The Finance update is due to be completed in March 2021.

Systems / Infrastructure

The ICT work detailed has now been completed.

Building Facilities

The submission deadline for tenders for the Telford Central Project has been extended to 8 January 2021. The date for the award of contract however remains as 26 February 2021.

Members queried if this would mean that the project completion date would also move back. The PPCM explained that so long as the award date remains as planned the completion date should not be affected. The CFO added that the Covid pandemic has affected the tender process with engagement with the market occurring initially but there then being a delay from sub-contractors. A delay has been requested to allow the completion of tenders and it is hoped that the project will continue on time although there is a greater deal of uncertainty than with the Shrewsbury Project which was undertaken in 2010/11.

Collaboration

The Integrated Risk Management Plan will be considered by the Fire Authority at its meeting on 16 December 2020.

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

10 Corporate Risk Management Summary

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

The PPCM presented this report and advised the Committee that there have been no changes to the Risk Register entries since the last report to this Committee.

Resolved that the Committee note the contents of the report.

11 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 covers details about the progress made against outstanding recommendations,

The PPCM presented this report and advised that the number of outstanding recommendations has reduced from 70 to 24 which mainly relate to Finance and Payroll issues. The PPCM also advised that Internal Audit have just restarted undertaking audits.

Members noted that 6 out of the 13 'significant' risks are related to Finance and queried if these are technical or substantive problems. The HoF explained that due to the number of new systems, the issues are a mix of embedding processes and tightening up technology. Officers are however pleased that there are no 'fundamental' recommendations related to Finance. The CFO added that the Finance Department has been restructured to address these issues before the next reporting period.

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.

12 Performance

12a Service Targets April to November 2020

This report presented a summary of the Service's performance from April to November 2020.

The ACFO presented this report and advised that the Service is currently achieving against 6 of its 7 targets. He also provided the following commentary on the Service's performance.

Target 1a – Response Standard

The Service is currently achieving 85.6% against a target of 89%. This remains a challenging target, but an improvement has been seen on the last reporting period. The technical issue with the mobile data terminals on appliances has been rectified and an associated improvement can be seen in the figures for the target.

Target 2a – All Accidental Fires

Performance is good about this target with 42% of accidental fires categorized as accidental dwelling fires.

Target 2b – Accidental Dwelling Fires (ADFs)

Performance is strong against this target with the potential for the Service to achieve a 10% reduction on this target if performance remains the same until the end of the reporting year.

Target 2c – Deliberate Fires

Performance for this target is currently 215 incidents against a target of 347 which equals a 385 reduction on target for the year to date.

Target 3a – Fire Related Deaths and Serious Injuries

Performance remains the same as for the April to June reporting period with one serious fire injury being recorded since April and no fire related deaths.

Target 3b – Injuries to Staff through firefighting

The Service is on track to achieve this target with 12 injuries to staff recorded from April to November against a target of 19. One of these incidents has been reported through the RIDDOR process.

Target 4a – Fires Confined to Room of Origin

The Service is currently achieving 89.75% against a target of 89.5% but this target is susceptible to significant variation so officers will continue to monitor performance against this target closely.

Members suggested that the delay in responding to rural areas should encourage a push for good quality highways in all parts of the county. The ACFO explained that the road network modelling undertaken by the Service is dependent on road conditions.

The Committee asked if there was to be a Christmas Fire Prevention campaign this year. The ACFO confirmed that there was and that it was being tied in with electrical fire safety week. The ACFO also explained that the Service bases its campaigns on the NFCC calendar.

In response to a suggestion from Members, the ACFO undertook to work with the Service's Comms Team to ensure that the prevention activities undertaken by the Service are receiving maximum publicity with the general public.

Members commented that the number of injuries to staff should be zero and queried if there was an issue with training which was giving rise to injuries to staff. The ACFO explained that the Service does strive for a zero figure, but most incidents reported are slips, trips or falls i.e. incidents with a human element rather than an issue with training received. The ACFO further explained that the type of injuries reported are being addressed through improved management of incident areas. He also advised that training is undertaken in an extreme but controlled environment and small-scale burns are not unusual in this environment. Employees are also encouraged to report all injuries for history and background etc. The CFO added that he would be more worried if performance was at zero as this would suggest that injuries are being under-reported

The Committee asked why the target for injuries to staff was set at 19. The CFO explained that this was due to 5% year on year reduction for the target. He also advised that, as part of the Integrated Risk Management Plan, performance and direction of travel are being looked at as better ways of measuring performance.

Resolved that the Committee note the report

12b Wholetime and On Call (Retained Duty System) Performance Monitoring September – October 2020

This report provided a summary of information, for September - October 2020, regarding the performance and management of availability across Wholetime and On Call (Retained Duty Systems) in Shropshire.

The GM presented this report and informed the Committee of the following issues

- Wholetime availability has remained at 100% for the reporting period
- The five wholetime recruits have completed their initial training and have joined their allocated watches
- On call availability for the year to date is 98.21%.
- in addition to the figures for September and October as set out in the report, On Call availability for November is 97.93%
- The Group Support Team (GST) has seen an increase in the total support provided to stations.
- The closing date for the On Call Sustainability survey is tomorrow (4 December). There has been a high rate of return so far

Members asked if local councilors could be involved in On Call recruitment campaigns for specific stations. The GM confirmed that the Service is keen to get local councillors and Fire Authority Members involved in On Call recruitment and would actively encourage them to engage but there is more work to be done on this with the hope being to set up working groups for station specific recruitment.

Members asked for further information on the establishment levels for Albrighton. The GM did not have this to hand but undertook to provide the information to Members after the meeting. The GM did advise that due to the Covid-19 situation there have been variations in station availability with some stations having increased availability due to employees being furloughed from their primary employment and changes to work locations.

Resolved that the Committee note the report

13 Ethical Framework Matters

This report dealt with ethical framework matters, namely a review of the Members' Code of Conduct and related documents.

The Committee commented that they were pleased to see the Nolan Principles included in the Authority's Member Code of Conduct.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the review of, and agree the proposed amendments to, the Members Code of Conduct;
- b) Note the review of related procedures and documents, and agree the proposed amendments to
 - Code of Conduct Complaints Procedure
 - Code of Conduct Complaints Form
 - Disclosable Pecuniary Interests Form
 - Dispensation Procedure; and
- c) Make recommendations accordingly to the Fire Authority.

Councillor Dee left the meeting at this point (3.25 pm)

14 Pension Board Minutes

Resolved that the Committee note the minutes of the Pension Board meeting, held on 10 September 2020.

Councillor Dee returned to the meeting at this point (3.27 pm)

15 Exclusion of Press and Public

Resolved that the Committee being satisfied in all the circumstances of the case that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing this information, formally resolve that the press and public and press 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 4 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

16 Corporate Risk Management Summary (Paragraph 4)

The Committee received Appendix C to report 10 – 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 10.

The meeting closed at 3.45 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....