

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Strategy and Resources Committee
Held via Microsoft Teams
on Thursday, 17 September 2020 at 2.00 pm**

Present

Members

Councillors Carter, Hartin (Vice-Chair), Lavery, Mellings (Chair), Roberts and Wynn

Officers

Rod Hammerton	Chief Fire Officer	CFO
Simon Hardiman	Assistant Chief Fire Officer	ACFO
Paul Martin	Deputy Monitoring Officer	DMO
Joanne Coadey	Head of Finance	HoF
Ged Edwards	Planning, Performance and Communications Manager	PPCM
Sally Edwards	Head of ICT	HoITC
Andrew Kelcey	Head of Resources	HoR
Germaine Worker	Head of HR and Administration	HHRA
Martin Barclay	Workshops Manager	WM
Lynn Ince	Executive Support Officer	ESO

1 Apologies for Absence

Councillor Pardy
Dave Myers (Deputy Chief Fire Officer)
James Walton (Treasurer)

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None

3 Public Questions

None

4 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the Strategy and Resources Committee meeting, held on 12 March 2020, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record

5 Committee Delegations

The Chair of the Committee gave a verbal update on this item and informed Members that consideration of changes to the delegations for this Committee had commenced before the Covid-19 lockdown. Other priorities have obviously taken precedence for members and officers since then, however this issue will now be picked up again and it is anticipated that a report will be brought to the November meeting of the Committee for consideration.

Resolved that the Committee note the verbal update given.

6 Financial Performance to July 2020

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

The HoF presented the report and highlighted the following issues to the Committee:

- This is the first budget monitoring report for the 2020/21 financial year
- Budget variances are detailed in the table on page 2 of the report
 - Some of the added posts in Prevention and Protection were vacant for part of the year which has led to savings
 - The shared Resources post with Telford & Wrekin Council is currently vacant
 - Fuel savings related to the Covid-19 pandemic have been reported to the Home Office.
 - Performance against investments is dependent on economic recovery and those that have not yet matured will attract higher rates of return.
- Pay and Price contingency - pay awards of 2% for operational staff and 2.75% for non-operational staff have been confirmed since the report was produced. These are within the budget allocation agreed by the Authority.
- The virements, which the Committee is asked to recommend to the Fire Authority are set out on page 3 of the report.
- Covid-19 Grants totalling £446,000 have been received from the Government. The Service had spent a total of £171,000 of this by the end of July 2020. Spending of this grant will be continuously monitored and reported to the Fire Authority.
- The effect of Covid-19 on the Authority's income streams such as council tax and business rates needs to be assessed and options for strategic planning will be included in the budget setting process later in the financial year.

- The Fire Authority is on track to meet its prudential indicators for 2020/21.

The Chair thanked the HoF for a comprehensive report and for the information on the impact of Covid-19. The Chair also thanked the Service's employees for their commitment and work during the pandemic.

Members asked any remaining balance of the Covid-19 Grant from Government would need to be paid back in the future. The HoF explained that this is a one-off grant and there has been no information given about any remaining balance. The Authority has also been asked to submit predictions on lost income to the end of the year. The CFO added that the grant has been given to facilitate Local Resilience Forum work. The Service's involvement in this has, so far, been relatively limited but this will continue to the end of the year, so it is positive that there is grant remaining.

In relation to the Appendix, Members queried the non-pay Executive line under the Executive and Resources Directorate which shows that 96% of this budget has already been spent. The HoF explained that this expenditure relates to professional subscriptions such as to the National Fire Chiefs Council. Work has begun on profiling this expenditure and further detail can be provided on this in the future.

Members also queried the Hydrants line under the Executive and Resources Directorate which shows a negative balance. The HoF explained that this is due to work that has been agreed but not yet paid for so the funds for this have had to be reversed back into the budget which gives a negative figure.

Resolved that the Committee agree to recommend that the Fire Authority

- Note the position of the revenue budget;
- Approve virements to the revenue budget, where requested;
- Note income and expenditure relating to Covid-19; and
- Note performance against prudential indicators to date in 2020/21.

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 PPCM introduced this report and explained that it covers the reporting period from the end of December 2019 to the end of June 2020. The HoR and the HoITC then provided updates on the Buildings and Vehicles Schemes and the ICT Schemes respectively.

Buildings

- Work on Retained Stations is as detailed in the Appendix to the report.
- Planning permission has been given for the refurbishments at Ellesmere and Market Drayton and an application has been submitted for the Whitchurch scheme.

- Growth of Japanese Knotweed has been identified at the Ellesmere site and work will be undertaken to address this issue. The financial cost of treating Japanese Knotweed has reduced in recent years.

ICT

A refresh of the server and storage is being undertaken this week. The new hyper-converged infrastructure which consists of a software layer and Artificial Intelligence capabilities will be easier for ICT staff to manage.

Vehicles

- **Replacement Appliances**

A tender has been issued for up to 10 replacement appliances over the next 3 years. Only 1 tender application was returned, and the costs indicated in this were higher than anticipated. Officers are currently trying to understand the reasons for this which is particularly important if there is to be a multiple year award. Questions around the increase in costs and the viability of re-tendering would be addressed in the exempt session of the meeting.

There is potential for joint procurement in relation to appliances but there are issues with the specifications for vehicles. This Service has unique requirements for its appliances which are not necessarily the same as other Services such as Hereford & Worcester.

- **Light Vehicle Replacement**

Two further electric vehicles have been ordered for use in the Fire Safety fleet and the Service is continuing to look at the availability of such vehicles.

The provision of electric vehicle charging points will be a part of standard station refurbishment schemes going forward. The Service is not yet at the point of exceeding its demand for charging points but if this is identified as a future need, funding can be requested from the Government which has increased its funding package for these works. The main expense related to the installation of vehicle charging points is ensuring a sufficiently powerful electricity supply to the point.

Discussions have been undertaken with potential commercial partners about the provision of rapid charging points, but the Service is limited in its offer of locations for these within the county and also lacks evidence of commercial benefits which are normally necessary for such installations.

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

8 Positive Action

This report gave an overview of Service activity in relation to Positive Action taster days delivered through August and September 2020.

The ACFO presented this report and explained that it had been requested as part of a recent Chair's Briefing.

The ACFO explained that the Service uses positive action, which is different to positive discrimination, to support people who it reasonably believes face disadvantages arising from a protected characteristic. The Service believes that this gives a more holistic approach to its recruitment processes. There is however a lack of understanding by the general public as to what positive action is and why it is required to be used. This can be seen in the communications received in response to the advertising of the positive action sessions, which is detailed in section 6 of the report.

As a result of one such communication to a local MP which was escalated to the Home Office, the Service has had positive communications with the Home Office who have supported the actions taken by the Service.

The Chair stated that positive action is an important area of work and a valuable project for the Service which has provided some very valuable lessons for future events.

Councillor Carter commented that as Chair of the Fire Authority he had been made aware of the issues and was pleased to see how they had been dealt with. He was also very pleased with the response from the Home Office. The CFO added that it was good to know that the Service is doing the right thing and that it had been a positive journey to go on. He also added that it was good to work with Central Government and that the Service has been asked to share its story of a rural fire and rescue service learning how to react to such a situation.

Members asked if the positive action sessions were only run for whole-time recruitment. The ACFO explained that on this occasion they were for whole-time recruitment. The Service do run 3 positive action sessions per year for On Call recruitment, but these have not been met with the same levels of comment.

Members then questioned how On Call recruits can be encouraged into the Service particularly in relation to Prees Fire Station. The ACFO explained that the Service are looking at Prees where staffing levels have reduced for numerous reasons. There is potentially opportunity for greater recruitment due to the change in working patterns brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. An increase in turn-in times may also lead to a whole host of new recruits being eligible to join.

The CFO added that officers have been looking at the situation with Prees, which is an important strategic location, for some time now and a good level of fire cover is being maintained. The CFO also commented that the Service appreciates councillors being involved in awareness raising of On Call recruitment as public engagement is needed to keep On Call stations open with, and for, them.

Members agreed with the ACFO's earlier comments that now was probably a good time to recruit because of the current situation. CFO acknowledged that the Service are aware of this and it is in the recruitment strategy.

The Chair thanked officers for the report which he stated had been important to share with the Committee. Further updates on this issue will be given to the Committee in due course.

Resolved that the Committee note the report.

9 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 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

10 Capital Update on Activity and Finance (Paragraph 3)

The Committee received Appendix B to report 7 – Capital Update on Activity and Finance, which was considered in closed session, as it contained exempt information.

Resolved that the Committee note exempt Appendix B to report 78

The meeting closed at 3.15 pm

Chair.....

Date.....