

**Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
held in the
Shrewsbury Town Football Club, The Croud Meadow,
Oteley Road, Shrewsbury, SY2 6ST
on Wednesday, 24 July 2024, at 2.00 pm**

Present

Members

Councillors Aldcroft, Blundell, Cook, Davis, Evans, Hartin, Hignett, Minnery, Offland, Overton and Pardy

Officers

Sam Burton	Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Delivery)	ACFO (SD)
Anthea Lowe	Clerk and Monitoring Officer	Clerk
Richard Phillips	Deputy Clerk and Monitoring Officer	DClerk
Joanne Coadey	Head of Finance	HoF
Jan Jennings	Communications Consultant	JJ
Lynn Ince	Executive Support Supervisor	ESS
Aleksandra Zydek	Executive Support Officer	ESO

The Chair welcomed Councillor Davis from Telford and Wrekin Council to the Fire Authority. He also thanked Councillor Carter for his service to the Fire Authority.

The Chair introduces Sam Burton the acting Deputy Chief Fire Officer and recorded his farewell to ACFO Williams. The Chair thanked ACFO Williams for his service to the Fire Authority.

1 Apologies for Absence

Councillors Burchett, Lea, Price and Wynn.

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None

3 Public Questions

None

4 Disciplinary Processes

The purpose of this report, presented by the Clerk, is to seek approval from the Fire Authority to introduce a disciplinary process for dealing with senior officers with those officers being anyone at Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) rank and above, confirm the Terms of Reference for the Personnel Panel and to ensure that there is clarity as to the process which will be adopted for disciplinary matters in relation to all other staff within the service.

The Clerk highlighted the suggested changes to the recommendations as follows:

- a) The disciplinary process attached at Appendix A to this report to apply to all officers at Assistant Fire chief Officer and above.
- b) Change Terms of Reference of Personnel Panel to include ACFO
- c) No change
- d) Change Terms of Reference of Appeals Panel to include ACFO
- e) Change Terms of Reference of Independent Panel to include ACFO
- f) No changes
- g) Additional recommendation to create a Grievance Panel with the Terms of Reference for the panel to be determined at a later date.

The Clerk reported that the disciplinary process for Chief Fire Officers (CFO) is set out in the National Joint Council (NJC) Terms and Conditions for Chief Executives. However, there is no similar process for DCFOs and ACFOs and, given that the only line manager for a DCFO and ACFO is the CFO, it is considered appropriate to include the role of DCFO and ACFO in the process for Executive officers. This will ensure all Principal Officers will be covered under one disciplinary process.

The Clerk brought members attention to Personnel Panel Terms of Reference attached as appendix B to the report. The Clerk reported that politically balanced Appeals Panel will also be appointed. She also added that Independent Panel will consider proposals for dismissal before them being brought to Fire Authority. The Clerk added that the Fire Authority has appointed 2 independent members to deal with standards matters already. This practice will be in line with other authorities.

It is intended that the existing process, attached at Appendix E, continues to be used for all other officers.

The Members clarified that the Grievance Panel will be dealing with any complaints against the Fire Authority.

The Members questioned if a person needs to inform the panel if they will be accompanied by a representative of trade unions. The Clerk clarified that the Personnel Panel will be informed about who is expected to attend.

The Members queried if the Independent Panel could be extended for every staff member. The Clerk advised it will be too complex to open it to every member of staff. She assured that if Conflict of Interest arises that the Service would bring someone external if this is deemed necessary. The Members were pleased to note that the Service has the ability to deal with any Conflict of Interest Independently if needed.

The Members expressed their concern that previous decision of Fire Authority to exclude it from disciplinary matters may have been too hasty.

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) approves the disciplinary process document attached at Appendix A to this report to apply to all officers at Assistant Chief Fire Officer and above with immediate effect;
- b) approves the Terms of Reference for the Personnel Panel attached at Appendix B, with amendment that Assistant Fire Chief Officer is included;
- c) appoints Members to the Appeals Panel as required under the NJC Conditions of Service and the disciplinary process for senior officers;
- d) approves the Terms of Reference for the Appeals Panel attached at Appendix C, with amendment that Assistant Fire Chief Officer is included;
- e) approves the Terms of Reference for the Independent Panel attached at Appendix D, with amendment that Assistant Fire Chief Officer is included; and
- f) reaffirms the disciplinary process attached at Appendix E to apply to all other staff.
- g) approve formation of a Grievance Panel and for Grievance Panel Terms of Reference to be agreed at a later date.

5 Financial Performance to March 2024

This report, presented by HoF, provides information on the financial performance of the Service in final quarter of 2023/24, and seeks approval for action, where necessary

The HoF highlighted table with summary of various areas on page 2. She reported that budgets that were set by the Authority in February 2023 have been adjusted as variances were reported to Members during the year. These adjustments included significant underspends on debt charges, as no borrowing for the capital programme has yet been undertaken. There were underspends within the on-call system budgets due to reduced operational activity, and additional costs in wholetime overtime, which are being reduced by new training initiatives.

Interest on investments was also higher than anticipated due to rate increases within the year. It is proposed that, unless specified, variances will be transferred to individual contingencies, where they will be managed with future variances.

The Members questioned significant business rates refund. The HoF advised that this was due to a successful appeal process by Head of Resources. She added that this refund will contribute to the reserves.

The Members expressed concern on additional capital scheme of replacing Thermal Imaging Cameras. The HoF advised that the technology used in the cameras has evolved rapidly and this has resulted in the current ones becoming obsolete, and repair components not being available. It is proposed that all cameras be replaced with an upgraded model to ensure commonality and standardisation of training. Suitable cameras are available through existing frameworks.

The Members questioned the number of devices carried on the vehicles and if this number is expected to increase. The HoF advised she does not have the exact numbers of devices at hand but will come back to members after the meeting.

The members were interested if the thermal imaging cameras can be used on the drone. The DCFO agreed to come back to Members with to give them a better overview of the new technology.

The Members asked if the new Thermal imaging Cameras are handheld devices. The DCFO advised that they are, and that the technology is evolving rapidly.

The Members asked when the results of the On Call review can be expected. The HoF advised that the consultation is underway on banded contracts. They are expected to be in place for January 2025.

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) note the position of the revenue budget;
- b) approve virements to the revenue budget, where requested;
- c) approve the amendments to the capital programme, and
- d) note performance against prudential indicators to date in 2023/34.

6 Statement of Accounts 2023/24

This report, presented by HoF, sets out the key revenue issues which have arisen from work on the Statement of Accounts 2023/24 and seeks approval for use of the General Fund balance in 2024/25.

The HoF advised that the accounts were signed by the Treasurer and published in June 2024 and will be audited by Grant Thornton during October. She added that the Service is in a good position considering national audit delays. The HoF added that audited Statement of Accounts will be presented to Standards, Audit and Performance Committee for approval in December.

The HoF reported that in 2023 the Fire Authority approved a revenue budget of £26.5m funding areas presented in chart of page 2 of the report. funded in areas in chart. She highlighted that additional grants were provided by the government. The HoF added that variances identified are listed in the table on page 2 of the report. she highlighted that variance in contingency balance is due to Green Book Staff pay award. The Contingency Balance will be used in the following year. The HoF highlighted that roll out of Protection initiatives in 2024-25. She also added that further income of £148k was received in further grants.

The outturn on the revenue budget is held in the General Fund at the end of the year, and it has been the Authority's policy to allocate funds and reduce the balance to zero. This has been done by transferring part of the balance into current revenue budgets, to continue projects and work streams which are not completed and allocating the remainder into Authority reserves.

In 2014 Strategy and Resource Committee recommended that future balances on the General Fund should be allocated to the Major Projects Reserve, however in previous years members have also transferred some of the balances to other reserves.

The HoF stated that General Fund at the end of 2023/24 is £2.5m which is higher than in previous years. The HoF reported that underspends have been reported in debt charges during the year as the Fire Authority has not yet borrowed for the Capital Programme. It is proposed that these savings are transferred to the Major Projects Reserve, as this will reduce loan charges going forward.

A contribution was made from the General Reserve during 2023/24, to cover back pay relating to newly introduced legislation covering holiday pay on overtime. It is recommended that this reserve is replenished to ensure that the Authority has resilience against further unexpected expenditure.

A number of senior officers have left or resigned from the Service during this financial year, and there are potential further changes likely during 2024/25. It is recommended that the balance of the General Fund is transferred to the Pensions and Other Staff Issues Reserve, to mitigate the impact of any future employment liabilities.

The Members commented that last year the Fire Authority agreed to lobby the government to increase the Revenue Support Grant that would allow not having to increase income from Council Tax. The Members would like to ensure that the Fire Authority lobby the new government to increase the grant. The HoF added that the Service is awaiting the funding review that was delayed due to Brexit and Covid pandemic. The outcome of the review may that larger portion of funding will be allocated in Revenue Support Grant. The Members expressed interest in being able to feed into the review.

The Members questioned if they are asked to sign off unaudited accounts. The HoF explained that the Fire Authority will be asked to approve the accounts in December after audit takes place. This report updates the members on the current position and reserves.

The Members questioned using the General Reserve to cover back pay relating to newly introduced legislation covering holiday pay on overtime and if there is a need to set up a specific resource for this in the future. The HoF advised that the Service did not account for this change in legislation but that such events have been accounted for going forward.

At this point Councillor Evans have joined the meeting.

The Members asked about the number of support staff vacancies. The HoF explained during the Departmental review in particularly in IT support some additional roles were identified. Following the review the Service will be recruiting for the vacant positions.

The Members questioned delegations around finance. The HoF explained that the HoF can only approve transactions to a certain level beyond which the approval from the Treasurer and the DCFO is needed. Delegations are due to be reviewed prior to October Fire Authority Meeting.

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) note the final position of the revenue budget and the General Fund balance in 2023/24, and
- b) approve use of the General Fund balance in 2024/25.

7 Exclusion of Press and Public

Resolved that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

At this point the Officers, except Clerk, Deputy Clerk and ESS were excluded from the meeting for the following items of business.

8 Update on Leadership Arrangements (Paragraphs 1, 2, 3 and 5) For decision

This item was deferred to the next meeting of the Fire Authority.

The meeting closed at 3.00 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....