

**Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Standards, Audit and Performance Committee
Held in the Oak Room, Headquarters
On Tuesday, 25 February at 2.00 pm**

Present:

Councillors Burchett, Davis, Evans and Overton.

Officers

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| Simon Hardiman | Chief Fire Officer | CFO |
| Jason Kiby | Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Delivery) | ACFO (SD) |
| Joanne Coadey | Head of Finance | HoF |
| Richard Anderson | External Audit | RA |
| Neil Preece | External Auditor | NP |
| Aleksandra Zydek | Executive Support Officer | ESO |

1 Apologies for Absence

Councillors Blundell, Hignett, Lea and Pardy, Sam Burton (Deputy Chief Fire Officer) and Karen Gowreesunker (Assistant Chief Fire Officer)

Councillor Burchett questioned appointment of Councillor Evans as Chair of the Committee. It was explained that at the Committee meeting on 11 December 2024, both Councillor Pardy who was the Chair and Councillor Burchett who is Vice-Chair sent their apologies. As Councillor Pardy is expected to be absent for the foreseeable future it was agreed that a new Chair would be elected and to hold office until immediately after the appointment of Chair at the next Annual Fire Authority Meeting. Councillor Burchett expressed his disappointment with this decision citing concerns about the selection process. It was noted that the minutes of the December 2024 Committee meeting were brought to Fire Authority meeting on 11 February 2025 and no concerns were raised at that time.

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None

3 Public Questions

None

4 Auditor's Annual Report on Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority 2024/25

This report brought together a summary of all the work undertaken by the appointed external auditor for Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority during 2023/24. The Auditor introduced the report and noted responsibilities of the appointed auditor listed on page 3 of the report. He informed the Members that the extraordinary committee meeting was convened so the report is published by the deadline 28 February 2025.

The Auditor reported that Local Auditors have a duty to consider whether there are any issues arising during their work that require use of range of auditors' powers. He informed the Members that none of these powers have been used during this audit period.

The Auditor raised that in April 2024, several allegations were made against the Fire Authority and some members of its leadership team. This was regarding inappropriate WhatsApp messages being sent by senior officers. He confirmed that the Fire Authority has followed its own process and appropriately investigated these matters. However, as part of information reviewed as part of Value for Money (VfM) audit work, the Auditor was not satisfied that some of the Fire Authority's Leadership demonstrated appropriate behaviours during 2023/24. He noted that this represents a significant weakness in the Fire Authority's arrangements to ensure appropriate standards and behaviours.

The Auditor reported that 4 key recommendations related to significant weaknesses and 3 areas for improvement were identified during the audit.

First significant weakness has been identified in relation to the findings of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and the Cause of Concern (CoC) raised in November 2024. The Auditor noted that the Fire Authority presented a "Cause of Concern" action plan to Members in early December 2025. HMICFRS have reported they are disappointed with the slow progress against their previous report. The Fire Authority needs to ensure this is not repeated. The recommendation is that in order to demonstrate progress against HMICFRS November 2024 inspection report the Fire Authority needs to develop a comprehensive action plan to address the CoC and Areas for Improvement (AFI) raised. Progress on delivery should be reported publicly to Members regularly.

Members were disappointed to note the slow progress on 2021/22 HMICFRS inspection report. They questioned the progress update reports presented to them. The CFO noted that previous inspection has identified 16 AFIs which were regularly reported to the Fire Authority. He noted HMICFRS was satisfied that 3 of these were completed. The CFO noted that one of the learnings is that the Service should be in regular contact with HMICFRS team to inform them of the progress but also to get feedback on the actions taken. The CFO noted that a robust action plan is in place around CoC and separate plan around AFIs. Any actions will be tracked using MS Planner and progress on delivery will be reported internally, through SMT and Scrutiny Board, **and publicly as a standing agenda item at the Fire Authority Meetings.**

Members noted that despite receiving regular updates the inspection showed discrepancies in progress against AFIs. Members questioned how the Service

will ensure accuracy of data in the Fire Authority reports. The CFO noted that a meeting took place today which was attended by Councillor Davis around HMICRFS CoC and AFI plans. Councillor Davis noted that the meeting covered not only previous and current AFIs but also how Members would like to/ should be involved in the work around those areas going forward. He added that he was pleased to note the plans are very comprehensive and actions are being compared with NFCC examples of Good Practice in other services. He added that a guidance has been taken by the Service from the HMI Team and the Service has an open dialogue with HMI going forward. Councillor Davis was reassured that the Fire Authority may not be able to scrutinise granular details but will have good overview to monitor progress going forward. Members praised that the Service is looking externally to improve its policies and practices.

The CFO added that it's worth noting the Service commitment to its Culture and Values and looking for examples of best practice in the sector and beyond. He added that the Service is improving the way it reports progress to HMI and building solid working relationships with HMI. The ACFO SD added that the Service is working more closely with HMI Service Liaison who will be able to brief teams conducting next inspection. This was not in place during this inspection.

Members noted that the importance of capturing the work and clear timelines. The CFO assured Members that any progress on the plans will be recorded in MS Planner not just as narrative which will present clear timeline of progress. He added that the Service is looking at other technological solutions to aid record keeping.

The Auditor reported the second key recommendation is that the Fire Authority should develop and implement an action plan to address the "Areas for improvement" identified by HMICFRS November 2024 inspection report under "Promoting the right values and culture". This needs to include ensuring that Senior Officers lead by example and act as role models. The fire Authority should also undertake a review of the Fire authority's leadership and 'tone from the top' and consider whether a wider review is required of the Fire Authority's culture.

Members wanted a bit more context around Staff Survey conducted by HMI. The CFO noted that this refers to Staff Survey conducted by HMI as part of the inspection and not the survey that the Service conducts every 18 months. Members wanted to know when the next Staff Survey is expected to take place. The HoF responded that last survey was carried out in the middle of 2024, and it is expected the next one will take place at the end of 2025 or beginning of 2026. The CFO added that all staff are invited to participate, and the Service use external provider for the survey. He added that Cultural Review was also conducted in 2023/24, and common themes have been identified. He noted that HHRA is working on a plan to bring the HMI recommendations around people, staff survey and cultural review into one action plan.

Members wanted to know percentage of staff who completed the surveys. The CFO noted the last Service Staff Survey was about 63% completion rate. The HMI Staff Survey was completed by 113 people.

Members raised that the news reports the Service leadership was subject of were likely to have influenced staff answers to the surveys. They noted they like to see the next staff survey to be carried out sooner than end of 2025. Members asked about the cost of conduction the Survey. The HoF confirmed the cost is under £20k.

It was proposed by Councillor Davis and seconded by Councillor Evans that the staff survey is brought forward to middle of 2025.

The CFO noted that the Fire Authority governance arrangement is underway with 2 more workshops planned at the beginning of March. He also noted that Members and SMT took part in Risk Management Training in February and SMT has another workshop planned on this subject next week. The CFO added that the cultural element will be added to Members induction and picked up through Members training plan. Senior Managers will confirm with Chair of the Fire Authority if any further reviews, particularly around culture are required.

The Auditor then moved on to key recommendation that the Fire Authority should ensure that key decisions are formally considered by Members of the Fira Authority. This should include documented evidence of VfM considerations in decisions which lead to the Fire Authority incurring significant additional costs. This will promote a culture of transparency throughout the Fire Authority.

The HoF noted that this is in context of management of Telford Fire Station refurbishment and brought to Members attention some changes in how the work was costed. The HoF reported that this feedback was taken on board, and Members will see changes within the reports presented to them going forward.

Members expressed concern that the Service does not always document progress effectively. **Members would like to see any changes to be clearly stated in the report's recommendations going forward rather than just in the body of the report.**

Members questioned if the auditor think that the Fire Authority has enough Committees and meetings to investigate the issues. The Auditor have no comment as to frequency of the Fire Authority meetings but noted that from discussions with Officers, they are satisfied that VfM is considered in key decisions, however these considerations are not always documented and formally considered by Members. The CFO noted that frequency of the Fire Authority meeting forms a part of the ongoing governance review process.

The CFO highlighted to Members that the role of Portfolio Manager had been developed and is currently being recruited for. The service is looking to embed project portfolio methodology to support transparency and documentation of decision-making process.

The Auditor then moved to key recommendation that the Fire Authority should ensure there is a sufficient capacity at Statutory Officer level to lead the Fire Authority and respond to the increased demands on these roles. The Auditor noted that this is a complex and sensitive issue. He brought to Members attention the significant delays in obtaining evidence needed for completion of audit.

The CFO explained that on 5 December 2024 the Fire Authority has received the paper that covered the 3 key areas for the Service; Executive Structure, operational capability and Statutory Officers relations. The CFO is in the process of drafting a paper for the Fire Authority meeting in June that will outline options to strengthen the Statutory Officers relations.

The Auditor highlighted to Members recommended areas for improvement. He noted that the Fire Authority should estimate the financial impact of the claims and potential future claims it is facing. It should consider the likely impact on useable reserves and ensure that this is reflected in the budget and medium-term financial plan.

The CFO reported that monthly legal meetings regarding tribunals are taking place involving Executive Officers, HHRA, Monitoring Officer and HR solicitor. The Service is awaiting invoice from the legal counsel, and this will be factored in future years budgets. The Auditor emphasised the importance of keeping record of meetings and any outcomes to demonstrate the work being completed.

Members wanted to know how those costs are being reported to the Fire Authority. The HoF noted they are being reported through Financial Performance report that goes to Strategy and Resources Committee and subsequently to the Fire Authority meetings.

The Auditor reported that to ensure that staff are aware of how to use social media appropriately the Fire Authority needs to have an up-to-date policy that is communicated to staff and to provide training on the policy.

The CFO noted that the Service has Social Media Bridge Order is available to staff through SFRS portal. He reported that the policy has not been reviewed since 2021 due to the Service seeking clarification around the use of WhatsApp for recall to duty for Officers. The Service is reviewing and consulting with staff on this matter as well as awaiting response from the legal team. The CFO assured Members that WhatsApp is not currently recognised as form of communication within the Service.

Members asked if the Service could approach NFCC to obtain a model policy. They also questioned how the Service will ensure that all staff are trained and aware of the policy. The CFO noted that the Communications Officer is working on training package that can be included as part of mandatory induction.

Members wanted to know if the Service has a Handbook that can be issued to all Staff and if this can be done as a book rather than online only. It was stated that each staff member goes through an induction process that has

mandatory elements and Social Media Policy can be added to as part of the induction.

Members questioned if the Social Media policy applies to work phones or private phones as well. The ACFO SD noted that both work phones and private phones come under that policy. Members would like the policy to be clear that any device is covered by the policy.

The Auditor reported the last improvement recommendation was that the Fire Authority should ensure that policies and procedures in relation to the investigation of complaints and disciplinary matters are updated in line with best practice.

The CFO assured Members that this forms a part of governance review. He added that at June 2024 Fire Authority Meeting all Senior Officers were brought under one Disciplinary Process. The CFO added that the Service Management Team has provided written responses to the Auditors recommendations.

Members questioned if the Strategic Risk has been covered in the Auditor Recommendations. The Auditor noted that as Strategic Risk was covered in HMICFRS recommendations from inspection which is covered under Key Recommendation 1.

Members wanted to know how the areas assessed as red can be addressed. The Auditor explained that those areas are linked to significant weaknesses identified and this part of the report gives additional narrative and details. The Auditor added that they recognise that work has been ongoing by the Service, and they recognise that progress have been made to address issues.

Members questioned who audits the auditors. The Auditor explained that they abide the Code of Audit Practice that is set out by National Audit Office (NAO). NAO is the independent public spending watchdog.

Members questioned why this report was so late this year. The CFO noted that due to situation the Service was in the information was not provided on time due lack of Statutory Officers Capacity. He assured Members that this year no delays are expected.

Members wanted to know if proposing a firm deadline for the Auditors report would be possible. The HoF noted that although auditors report was later than expected officers aimed to complete the accounts by end of May. The delay in auditors report was caused by some work related to VfM. She added that nationally there are delays in audits. Members noted that audit require a lot of focus and a lot of people to complete, and delay is not surprising given the events of last year. The Auditor noted that the more evidence there are and the easier they are available to auditors the better.

Members expressed their formal thanks to the Auditors.

Resolved that the Committee noted the Auditors Annual Report 2023/24 and Members `made the following recommendations:

- **progress HMI CoC and AFI will be reported publicly as a standing agenda item at the Fire Authority Meetings**
- **the staff survey is brought forward to middle of 2025**
- **any items for decision to be clearly stated in the report's recommendations going forward rather than just in the body of the report.**
- **the Service to approach NFCC to obtain a model Social Media policy.**

The meeting closed at 3.10 pm.

Chair _____

Date _____