

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority
Audit and Performance Management Committee
held at Brigade Headquarters, Shrewsbury
on Thursday, 29 May 2008 at 5.00 pm**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Gibbon (Conservative, Shropshire County Council) to his first Audit and Performance Management Committee meeting. Councillor Gibbon has taken the place of the late Councillor Davies on the Fire Authority.

Present

Councillors Allen, Dr Drummond, Gibbon, Hurst-Knight, Dr Jones (Chair), Mason and Mellings

1 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence had been received.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes

Members received the minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Performance Management Committee, held on 13 March 2008.

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Performance Management Committee, held on 13 March 2008, be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record

4 Public Questions

No public questions, statements or petitions had been received.

5 Draft Audit and Inspection Plan 2008/09

Ms Hughes, Audit Commission, presented the draft Audit and Inspection Plan for the 2008/09 audit of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority to the Committee.

Ms Hughes pointed out to members that audit fees had increased by 11%. This is in line with Government guidance and is due to the inclusion of data quality in the 2008/09 audit. It should be noted that it had been proposed to increase fees by 40% but it was decided not to charge for the new Use of Resources assessment. It should also be noted that the Authority's previous audit performance is taken into account when fees are set.

Within the report it was noted that the refurbishment of Shrewsbury Headquarters and the court case regarding Retained Duty System firefighters and their pension entitlement have both been identified as key risks for Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority. The Audit Commission have no real concerns about either of these risks and consider the Fire Authority to be well prepared for coping with them.

Ms Hughes advised the Committee that the Comprehensive Area Assessment Lead (CAAL) role referred to in the report has been brought about as a result of the move from Comprehensive Performance Assessment to Comprehensive Area Assessment. The CAAL role referred to covers both Shropshire and Staffordshire.

Councillor Hurst-Knight asked if there was an increased risk of fraud due to possible economic recession. Ms Hughes explained that the Audit Commission do assess financial systems and controls and would flag up any potential risk areas with the Authority.

The Chief Fire Officer asked about the data quality audit which is still late in the financial year. This is scheduled to take place in February / March but Ms Hughes advised that it could be done even later than this. It is intended to refine this process in the 2008/09 audit.

Councillor Jones asked if the increase in fees discussed earlier was in line with inflation. Ms Hughes responded that there was an inflationary element in the increase but it should again be remembered that the intention was to increase fees by 40%. The Treasurer assured the Committee that this increase had been budgeted for and that the reduced increase had been reported to the Fire Authority meeting in April 2008.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer asked when the Key Lines of Enquiries (KLOEs) for the data quality audit would be published. Ms Hughes said that the intention was to link these to the new Use of Resources assessment for fire services. Ms Hughes undertook to look into when these would be available.

Councillor Allen asked why the figure for Relationship Management (page 21 of the report) had doubled for 2008/09. Ms Hughes explained that this was a set fee and that it took account of the new CAAL role. The Chief Fire Officer further clarified that this part of the fee was funded by Communities and Local Government (CLG) and therefore the Authority did not have to pay for it.

Resolved that the Committee note the contents of the draft Audit and Inspection Plan 2008/09

Councillor Jones proposed and the Committee agreed that item 16 on the agenda be brought forward to this point in the meeting for consideration.

16 Equality and Diversity Steering Group Action Plan Progress

This report provided Members with an update on progress towards the achievement of Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG).

The Equality and Diversity Officer reported that the informal assessment by the external consultant had been completed on 22 May 2008 and that the identified actions arising from this had been implemented.

Councillor Jones asked if there were any specific recommendations that had arisen from the informal assessment. The Equality and Diversity Officer explained that the recommendations from the assessment, none of which were major, had been taken to the Service's Equality and Diversity Steering Group earlier today for discussion and were being implemented.

Resolved that the Committee note the progress against the plan of action contained within this report.

6 2007/08 Summary Audit Report

The Annual Summary Audit Report for 2007/08 from the Internal Auditors was presented to the Committee. The report covers all of the work carried out in the year.

Internal Audit were unable to attend the meeting, therefore the Treasurer presented this report to the Committee. There are some outstanding issues from the 2006/07 audits which have not yet been addressed. Some of these are lapses i.e. systems are in place but are not being followed 100% of the time.

Councillor Mellings asked about the timeline for the issues that still need to be addressed. The Treasurer replied that although no timeline had yet been fixed to deal with these issues the Risk Management Group would be considering issues in detail. The issues that do not need input will be filtered out and the outstanding issues will then be brought to the attention of the Audit and Performance Management Committee.

Resolved that the Committee note the contents of the Summary Audit Report 2007/08

7 Terms of Reference for Audit Matters and Training

This report sought to confirm clear terms of reference (ToRs) for audit matters, and then sought guidance from Members on priority areas for training.

With regard to bringing the Statement of Accounts to the Audit and Performance Management Committee as happens at Shropshire County Council, the Treasurer reminded the Committee that there are very tight timescales that need to be adhered to for the publication of the Accounts. It may be possible for meetings to be scheduled differently to accommodate this but as there is no delegation of spending powers to Committees this may be impracticable.

Councillor Hurst-Knight queried the capability of the Committee to assess the final accounts. The Treasurer thought that the Accounts had been complicated by various legal obligations and the Committee had an important role to scrutinise and draw out the key issues from them.

Councillor Mellings felt that the idea of developing a Competency framework should be investigated further and that a review of the wider role of the Committee should be carried out after any training has been undertaken.

Councillor Mason requested that the training be split into several smaller sessions rather than trying to cram everything into one large session.

Members were asked to inform the Treasurer of any specific training needs that they may have.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) is happy with its current Terms of Reference and does not wish to recommend any variations to them at this time; and
- b) ask the Treasurer to devise and bring to the next meeting of the Committee, an appropriate programme of training.

8 Performance Indicators – Direction of Travel

This report informed members of performance against Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) since 2004/05.

The Chief Fire Officer talked through each of the indicators detailed in the table in the appendix to the report. A brief summary of the more significant points raised is given below.

- 11a Performance has decreased solely due to an increase in the overall establishment figures

- 17a The Information Officer reported that the figure for 2007/08 is now 7 rather than 6 as a result of the information audit undertaken yesterday
- 209 There is still a struggle to improve performance for the three parts of this indicator. Councillor Mason asked about the impact of the smoke alarms and if the severity of fires is measured. It was confirmed that this is measured and reported under BVPI 144
- 143 The first part of the indicator shows that there has been a downward trend in the number of deaths. The number of injuries (part two of the indicator) is still in single figures, which makes Shropshire the best performing Service in the country for this indicator.
- 144 The data for this indicator has recently been audited and the number for 2007/08 has gone up to 219 which means that there is an improvement in the figure but there is still a decline against previous years.

Councillor Allen asked how it was possible to improve on those indicators for which percentage performance is currently very high, for example 98%. The Committee recognised that it might require a disproportionate amount of effort to improve such indicators which may not be justifiable. It should also be remembered that performance for some indicators may plateau and may even go down on occasion.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the report contents in respect of improvement or deterioration against Best Value Performance Indicators since 2004/05; and
- b) Discussed the implications of performance against the Best Value Performance Indicators for this year's Direction of Travel audit.

9 Performance Assessment – Key Performance Indicators

This report informed Members of predicted performance assessment scores based on the current performance of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

The Information Officer reported that a bigger improvement could be reported for Operational Assurance indicator F5 – Percentage of accidental dwelling fires confined to room of origin. This was due to the recent information audit that had been undertaken.

Although CLG and the Audit Commission no longer require KPI performance reporting, this report will still be produced and submitted to both Policy Group and the Audit and Performance Management Committee for monitoring purposes.

The Chief Fire Officer informed the Committee that the score prediction of 'performing strongly' can virtually be guaranteed which will mean that Shropshire achieves the top mark for the third year running.

Resolved that the Committee:

- a) Note the report content; and
- b) Agree to monitor action plans necessary on failing or high risk indicators.

10 Fire Related Deaths in Shropshire 2000/01 – 2007/08

This report provided analysis of fire deaths for the period 2000/01 – 2007/08, identifying any trends, and made recommendations as to what further actions need to be taken to safeguard all communities in Shropshire.

The Head of Community Fire Safety (CFS) presented the main points of the report to the meeting as a PowerPoint presentation (copy of slides attached to signed minutes). A summary of the discussion generated by this presentation is given below.

Councillor Allen asked if fire deaths occurred mainly in rural areas. The Head of CFS explained that there is a 50/50 split between rural and urban areas. There is however an issue with providing fire safety education in rural areas.

Councillor Mason noted that the Service works with both Severnside and Wrekin Housing Trust and asked if it works with any other housing agencies or estate agents. The Head of CFS explained that the Service is trying to establish working protocols with all housing agencies / providers in the Shropshire area but this is proving to be difficult. The Service is trying to highlight the economic benefits of having fire safety equipment in properties.

Councillor Allen asked how many fire deaths had disabilities as a contributory factor. The Head of CFS explained that this was not known as the Fire Damage Report 1 form completed after the incident has been dealt with does not record this information. Currently the Service is reliant on links with other agencies to identify those people who are vulnerable because of disabilities. The Chief Fire Officer explained that the new 10 year Equality and Diversity Strategy focuses on this issue as 30% of all fire deaths happen to people with mobility problems.

Councillor Dr Drummond asked if learning disabilities were a large contributory factor in fire deaths. The Head of CFS reported that there are very few cases where this is a contributory factor but this may be because there is little housing provision for people with learning disabilities. The Vulnerable Persons Officer is currently working to establish links with the appropriate agencies and there is long term programme involving the education of agencies. One of the main stumbling blocks to developing partnerships is the issue of data protection and the sharing of information.

The Head of CFS explained that the reduction of fire deaths, when viewed over a seven year period, is a gradual process. Numbers now are very low and whilst zero fire deaths would be the ultimate aim, the best that can be achieved is to maintain an 'acceptable' level that continues the downward trend.

Councillor Mellings asked if there was any pattern to the time of year at which deaths occur. The Head of CFS explained that the deaths predominately occur between November and February. This may be linked to the issue of heating problems etc during the winter months.

Several members said that they were involved in agencies dealing with vulnerable groups that may be able to help with fire safety education. The Head of CFS asked that members inform Community Fire Safety of any possible opportunities for partnership working that they are aware of.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the contents of this report and recognise the success of the Service's Community Safety Strategy;
- b) Continue to support and expand the work of rural advocates ensuring that rural communities receive an equal service to their neighbours in the urban areas; and
- c) Agree that at all levels, from political, executive, middle and junior management, we must work to establish effective partnerships, developing protocols that ensure partner agency commitment to eliminating fire deaths in our communities.

Councillor Mellings left the meeting at this point (6.30 pm)

11 Performance against Best Value Performance Indicators April 2007 to March 2008

This report informed Members of the Brigade's performance against nationally prescribed Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008.

The Information Officer talked Members through each of the indicators detailed in the summary table in Appendix A of the report and highlighted the following significant issues.

- 144 The outturn figure for this indicator has increased to 94.76% following the recent information audit. This means that the indicator is failing by less than one fire.
- 146 Both parts of this indicator are only just failing and the ongoing call challenging of malicious calls is beginning to show an improvement to part ii of the indicator.

Councillor Allen asked if it was possible to change the report so that performance was reported in terms of numbers rather than percentages. The Information Officer responded that this change is due to be discussed over the next year.

The Information Officer reported that some of the corporate health indicators are now failing. This is because there has been an increase in the overall establishment of the Service which means that the number of top 5% of earners against which several of the indicators are measured has also increased. However no additional women or ethnic minority communities have been captured in this increase which means that the outturn for the indicators has decreased.

Appendix D to the report includes data relating to road traffic collisions (RTCs) as requested by the Committee. This data shows that the main proportion of RTCs attended by the Service are non-life risk incidents. It also shows that there is a higher risk of 'G' code incidents i.e. RTCs where people are trapped and where extrication takes place in the Shrewsbury and Telford areas as well as in the Bridgnorth and Church Stretton areas. Councillor Hurst-Knight suggested that these figures be used at community safety days to highlight risk levels.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the report content in respect of performance; and
- b) Having considered the information provided, make no amendments to future reports to aid the regular assessment of performance

12 Retained Duty System Performance Monitoring

This report provided information regarding the ongoing performance of the Retained Duty System (RDS) in Shropshire.

Councillor Allen asked for clarity of meaning in relation to the reporting of station establishment i.e. what do the numbers represent. The Assistant Divisional Officer (ADO) suggested that these numbers could be reported in units in future reports.

Councillor Allen asked why retention of RDS staff was improving. The ADO explained that this was due to the closer management of stations and also to 'recruiting the right people'. Councillor Mason asked about any impact on staff that are unable to get out on the appliance i.e. if they could not get to the station in time to go out with the appliance when there was a callout. The ADO said that crew attendance actually spreads out fairly evenly so there does not seem to be any real impact from this.

Councillor Dr Drummond asked if employers were happy to support their staff working as RDS firefighters. The ADO explained that officers will visit employers when recruiting and discuss the impact on and benefits to their businesses from employing RDS firefighters.

Resolved that the Committee note the contents of the report.

Councillor Allen left the meeting at this point (6.50 pm)

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer gave a brief overview of agenda items 13, 14 and 15 before the Committee discussed them. Agenda items 13 and 14 report on the close down of the previous reporting methods. Agenda item 15 outlines the reporting method for future years.

13 Direction of Travel Statements – Progress Update

This report informed Members of progress to date against the Direction of Travel (DoT) Statement contained within the 2007-08 Performance Plan.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Note the contents of this report; and
- b) Endorse the proposals contained within section 4 of this report.

14 Quarterly Summary of Progress within the Improvement Priorities Programme 2007/08

The purpose of this report was to report progress within the Improvement Priorities Programme for quarter 4, January 2008 to March 2008.

Resolved that the Committee:

- a) Note the achievements of each improvement priority and the review of the associated risks and issues; and
- b) Note how each Improvement Priority is dealt with in 2008/09.

15 Improvement Priority Reporting 2008/09

This report outlined the reporting structure for the Improvement Priorities identified within the 2008/09 Corporate Plan.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) Agree the reporting structure for the 2008/09 Improvement Priorities; and
- b) Agree to receive a three-monthly progress report and accompanying presentation at each meeting of the Committee that reports progress against the Authority's Improvement Priorities and Core Values.

17 Summary of Compliments and Complaints 2005/06 to 2007/08

This report advised Members of summary details regarding the compliments and complaints received during 2007/08, with comparisons to 2005/06 and 2006/07.

Resolved that the Committee

- a) noted the contents of the report; and
- b) agreed that more detailed analysis in respect of compliments was not required.

The meeting closed at 7.05 pm

Chair.....

Date.....