



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY held on Wednesday, 7 December 2022 at Lecture Theatre - Training Centre, Sadler Road, Winsford, Cheshire CW7 2FQ at 10.30 am

PRESENT: Councillors Bob Rudd (Chair), Stef Nelson, Rachel Bailey, Michael Beanland, David Brown, Kath Buckley, Razia Daniels, Phil Harris, Marilyn Houston, Gina Lewis, Rob Moreton, Karen Mundry, Denis Murphy, Nathan Pardoe, Stuart Parker, Rob Polhill, Peter Walker, Peter Wheeler and Norman Wright

1 PROCEDURAL MATTERS

A Recording of Meeting

Members were reminded that the meeting would be audio-recorded.

B Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brian Gallagher, Nick Mannion, James Nicholas and Jonathan Parry.

C Chair's Announcements

The Chair asked Members to note the content of the Chair's announcements which included details of Authority achievements and events Members had attended since the last meeting of the Fire Authority.

D Declaration of Members' Interests

The Chair stated that he understood that Members were, like him, likely to have a disclosable pecuniary interest in the decisions concerning the Members' Allowance Scheme: the uplift to be applied to the Scheme for 2022-23; and approval of the Scheme for 2023-24. All Members indicated that they did. A dispensation had been granted to Members to allow them to take part in the debate and vote on the item.

E Questions from Members of the Public

There were no questions submitted.

F Minutes of Fire Authority

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Fire Authority meeting held on 28th September 2022 be approved as a correct record.

G Minutes of Brigade Managers' Pay and Performance Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Brigade Manager's Pay and Performance Committee held on 9th November 2022 be noted.

H Minutes of Staffing Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Staffing Committee held on 9th November 2022 be noted.

I Minutes of Governance and Constitution Committee

The Director of Governance advised that there were three minutes where four recommendations to be considered:

Minute 5 – Further Term for Independent Person (Handling of Complaints about Member Conduct).

Minute 6 – Members' Allowances Scheme Uplift 2022-23; Additional to Members' Allowances Scheme for role of Independent Audit Committee Member; and Approval of Members' Allowances Scheme 2023-24.

RESOLVED: That

- [1] the minutes of the Governance and Constitution Committee held on 16th November 2022 be noted;**
- [2] Mr Donald Clark be appointed as Independent Person for a further three year term (ending in February 2026);**
- [3] an uplift of 5% be applied to the Members' Allowances Scheme 2022-23;**
- [4] the allowance payable to the Independent Audit Committee Member be added to the Members' Allowances Scheme; and**
- [5] the Members' Allowances Scheme for 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 be based on the 2022-23 Scheme once the uplift had been applied.**

Note: Members' Allowances Scheme for 2023-24 was contained in the Agenda Pack at pages 55 to 58.

J Minutes of Audit Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Audit Committee held on 16th November 2022 be noted.

K Minutes of Performance and Overview Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Performance and Overview Committee held on 23rd November 2022 be noted.

L Notes of the Member Training and Development Group

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Member Training and Development Group held on 4th October 2022 be noted.

M Notes of the Risk Management Board

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Risk Management Board held on 25th October 2022 be noted.

N Programme of Member Meetings 2022-23

RESOLVED: That

[1] the Programme of Member Meetings for 2023-24 be approved.

2 EXTERNAL AUDITOR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

Michael Green and Liz Luddington from Grant Thornton (the External Auditor) introduced the Annual Report and provided an overview of its content and purpose.

The Annual Report considered 'Financial Sustainability', 'Governance' and 'Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness'. The External Auditor found no significant weaknesses in any of these areas. However, four improvement recommendations were made as detailed at pages 9, 13, 17 and 18 which included associated Management comments.

Members referred to the collaborative arrangements involving the Service and Cheshire Constabulary. One Member asked for a further discussion about the procurement recommendation from last year's report.

RESOLVED: That

[1] the External Auditor's Annual Report be noted.

3 TREASURY MANAGEMENT - MID YEAR REPORT 2022-23

The Head of Finance presented the report which provided an update on performance against the Authority's Treasury Management Strategy (TMS).

The table at paragraph 13 of the report contained a forecast of interest rates from December 2022 to December 2025. This showed small increases over the period. It was reported that in view of the significant ongoing political and economic volatility, interest rate forecasting with any degree of certainty was currently impossible and it may be that interest rates remain higher for longer than currently forecast.

The table at paragraph 20 of the report provided an overview of the capital programme, the resulting amount of annual borrowing required and the associated revenue financing costs over the current and next 3 years. The Authority currently had a loan portfolio of £12.012m which included external borrowing of £11m to finance the Training Centre project, secured from PWLB at favourably low fixed rates in March 2021 (£4m at 1.99%), July 2021 (£4m at 1.65%) and November 2021 (£3m at 1.63%).

Members were reminded that the ongoing requirement to fund an annual capital programme for essential vehicle, equipment and technology replacements beyond the current financial planning period would also require the Authority to increase revenue funding for the programme and/or enter into new external borrowing.

RESOLVED: That:

[1] the report be noted; and

[2] the requirement for borrowing to support the ongoing capital programme be noted.

4 2023-24 DRAFT BUDGET, COUNCIL TAX AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Head of Finance presented the Authority's draft 2023-24 budget and the current Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

The Chancellor issued the Autumn Statement on the 17th November 2022 setting out the Government's update on its plans for the economy based on the latest forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) which came at a time of significant economic challenge for the UK and global economy. Whilst there was no direct mention of fire and rescue services within the Annual Statement, there was assurance that the current spending review would remain in place. For the years beyond the current Spending Review period, planned departmental resource spending is expected to continue to grow, but slower than the economy, at 1% a year in real terms until 2027-28.

The Head of Finance referred to paragraph 9 which advised that as part of the Autumn Statement, the Government was giving Local Authorities in England (including the Fire Authority) additional flexibility in setting council tax by increasing the referendum limit for increases in council tax to 3% per year from April 2023. This could enable the Authority to increase the council tax by 2.99% in 2023-24; 1% more than the previous limit. The 2.99% increase had been included in the MTFP. However there was still a shortfall of £971k that would need to be covered by savings which had yet to be identified. Any savings not achieved would add to the following year's savings target, which would be Year 1 of the 2024-2028 Community Risk Management Plan period.

The National Fire Chief's had been pressing for the ability to increase the council tax precept on a Band D property by £5 with an appropriate adjustment for the other Bandings. Whilst there was a feeling that this might be forthcoming, nothing had been confirmed at the date of the meeting.

RESOLVED: That:

- [1] the information relating to the 2023-24 budget setting together with the Medium Term Financial Plan be noted; and**
- [2] officers be authorised to arrange a consultation concerned with a council tax precept increase of 2.99% or £5 on a Band D property if this option is confirmed by the Government.**