



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY held on Wednesday, 15 February 2023 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, Brian Gallagher, Phil Harris, Marilyn Houston, Gina Lewis, Nick Mannion, Rob Moreton, Karen Mundry, Nathan Pardoe, Stuart Parker, Jonathan Parry, 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 James Nicholas and Denis Murphy.

C Chair's Announcements

Councillor Les Morgan had sadly passed away aged 80. Councillor Les Morgan was an Elected Member at Warrington Council and served on the Fire Authority from June 2015 to June 2017 and December 2019 to May 2021.

Former Councillor Pam Booher sadly passed away aged 85. Pam Booher was a former Elected Member at Cheshire West and Chester Council and served on the Fire Authority from June 1995 to June 2009 and June 2015 to July 2017

A minute's silence was observed at the meeting.

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.

The Chair reminded each Member to attend at least one of the Prince's Trust Events in April 2023.

D Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of Members' interests.

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 7th December 2022 be approved as a correct record.

G Minutes of the Estates and Property Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Estates and Property Committee held on 9th December 2022 be noted.

H Minutes of Brigade Managers' Pay and Performance Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Brigade Managers' Pay and Performance Committee held on 23rd January 2023 be noted.

I Minutes of Audit Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Audit Committee held on 25th January 2023 be noted.

J Notes of the Local Pension Board - Firefighters Pension Scheme

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Local Pension Board – Firefighters Pension Scheme held on 17th November 2022 be noted.

K Notes of the Member Training and Development Group

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Member Training and Development Group held on 6th December 2022 be noted.

2 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2023-24

The Director of Transformation presented the report which sought approval to publish the Pay Policy Statement for 2023-24, attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

Members were advised that, under the Localism Act 2011, all local authorities were required to publish a pay policy statement on an annual basis. The document set out the Authority's policies for the financial year relating to the remuneration of its Chief Officers, the remuneration of its lowest paid employees, and the relationship between the pay of Chief Officers and that of other employees. The requirement was intended to increase transparency and accountability, and to give local people access to information to allow them to determine whether pay was appropriate.

Paragraphs 9 -14 of the report provided an overview of changes to the Pay Policy Statement since last year. Changes included: the Living Wage being reviewed and adjusted every October; the publication of the fifth Gender Pay Gap Report; and reference to the firefighter pay negotiations which had not yet reached a conclusion (once a conclusion had been reached some of the calculations in the Pay Policy Statement were likely to be revisited in-year to reflect the increases applied).

The Director of Transformation advised that since the preparation of the report on 8th February 2023 the Fire Service employers had agreed to a 7% pay rise backdated to July 2022 and a further 5% pay rise from July 2023. FBU leadership had unanimously recommended that members accept the revised pay offer. The FBU had agreed not to pursue strike dates whilst members were consulted on the offer and had set out a timetable to consult members. A hybrid online postal ballot would open on 20th February and conclude on Monday 6th March 2023.

RESOLVED: That

- [1] the Pay Policy Statement 2023-24, attached as Appendix 1 to the report, be approved; and**
- [2] the Director of Transformation, in conjunction with the Director of Governance, be authorised to make any necessary in-year changes to the Pay Policy Statement as necessitated by new legislation or guidance.**

3 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023-24

The Head of Finance presented a report that sought approval of the Treasury Management Strategy 2023-24 (the Strategy). This was a requirement of the Local Government Act 2003, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLHUC) Investment Guidance, DLHUC Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Guidance, the CIPFA Prudential Code and the CIPFA Treasury Management Code.

The Strategy comprised of four main elements, namely:-

- Capital Expenditure Plans and Prudential Indicators
- Borrowing Strategy and Prudential Limits
- Annual Investment Strategy
- Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Statement

The Head of Finance referred Members to Table 7 of the Strategy, the operational boundary and Table 8, the authorised limit for external debt. These were the two key prudential indicators that set the maximum limit for external debt based on the capital programme and the current borrowing requirements. The authorised limit in Table 8 could not be exceeded without approval.

A Member asked for clarity as to whether the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) offered fixed interest rates. In response, the Head of Finance confirmed that the PWLB offered both fixed and variable interest rate options.

RESOLVED: That:

- [1] the Treasury Management Strategy 2023-24 be approved; and**
- [2] the Authority's Prudential Indicators including the Authorised Limit (paragraph 5.2.7 of the Strategy) be approved.**

4 2023-24 BUDGET (PRECEPT) CONSULTATION

The Engagement and Public Affairs Manager presented a report that provided details about the Budget (Precept) Consultation.

Members were advised that the Government had announced a £5 referendum principle on Band D bills for all fire and rescue authorities in the Local Government Finance Settlement. This happened after the Fire Authority had met in December. However, Members had authorised officers to consult on a £5 increase on a Band D property.

The consultation was carried out online which ran from 22nd December 2022 to 23rd January 2023. A total of 627 respondents completed the online survey, which asked to what extent respondents supported the proposed increase. Overall, 60.5% of respondents stated that they either strongly support or support the proposal, compared to 30.5% that said that they either opposed or strongly opposed the increase of £5.00. A further 9% stated that they neither supported nor opposed the increase or did not know.

A total of 339 free text comments were provided and these were detailed in Appendix 2 of the report.

Members took the opportunity to thank respondents who took the time to complete the online survey.

RESOLVED:

- [1] the responses to the Consultation be considered when determining the Council Tax Precept for 2023-24.**

5 DRAFT 2023-24 BUDGET; COUNCIL TAX PRECEPT; AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2023-28

The Treasurer presented a report that sought Members' approval for the Authority's budget for 2023-24, the Authority's precept, as required by law, for 2023-24 and its Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2023-28.

The Authority was required to approve its budget and set the council tax precept for the financial year commencing 1st April 2023. The Authority was required to take into account Government funding, precept regulations and organisational demands. This requirement was supported by the production of a MTFP with the annual budget forming the first year of the MTFP. The creation and maintenance of the MTFP was fundamental in promoting good financial planning and delivery of value for money. The MTFP was Appendix 1 to the report.

Members had considered the Authority's financial position at their Planning Day on 13th January 2023 where they had the opportunity to challenge the assumptions and proposals being put forward by officers as part of the draft budget and MTFP.

The Treasurer indicated that the report followed a similar format to those that had been presented in previous years.

The 2023-24 budget proposals were based on the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement as published on 19th December 2022. The Settlement included the Government's Funding Assessment and grant allocations for 2023-24 together with the Council Tax Referendum Principles that allowed for an increase in council tax of up to £5 at Band D without triggering a local referendum. An increase in council tax precept of £5 at Band D was assumed; this would generate additional funding of £2.44m compared to 2022-23, based on the tax bases of Band D equivalent properties. When all elements of funding were included, such as revenue support grant and business rate income, the overall net revenue budget would increase by £5.157m compared to the previous year, including a 2023-24 one off Service Grant of £368k.

The Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive and Chair had lobbied the Fire Minister and local MPs about the £5 referendum principle on Band D bills for fire and rescue authorities in the Local Government Finance Settlement. The Government had accepted the principle for 2023-24.

The Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive advised that the Grey Book pay offer, if accepted, would have an impact on the budget position going forward for all fire and rescue services.

A Member asked whether the environmental measures the Authority had included in its current station building and modernisation programme had been reflected in any savings in budgets. In response, the Treasurer advised that he would respond to this question outside the meeting.

Members welcomed the informative report and thanked officers for their time in preparing such a detailed accessible report.

RESOLVED: That

- [1] the Medium Term Financial Plan, as set out in Appendix 1 of the report be approved;
- [2] the Budget Requirement of £51.744m as set out in Table 1, paragraph 10 of the report be agreed, taking into account the adjustments for inflation, growth, one off items and savings as detailed in Appendix 2 of the report;
- [3] the proposed council tax increase of £5 at Band D (6.06%) be approved and Band D council tax precept of £87.48 be set for 2023-24;
- [4] the levels of council tax precept as set out in Table 2 paragraph 28 of the report be agreed;
- [5] the proposed capital programme for 2023-24 set out in Table 3 paragraph 30 of the report together with its associated financing be approved;
- [6] the Capital Strategy set out in Appendix 3 of the report be approved;
- [7] the Reserves Strategy set out in Appendix 4 of the report be approved;
- [8] the Statement of Robustness of Estimates set out in Appendix 5 of the report be noted; and
- [9] the Financial Health Targets as set out in paragraph 33 of the report be adopted.

6 2023-2024 ANNUAL ACTION PLAN

The Director of Communications and Engagement presented a report which detailed feedback received as a result of the consultation activity concerned with the draft 2023-2024 Annual Action Plan and sought approval of the 2023-2024 Annual Action Plan, attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

The draft Plan was developed to serve as a mid-point review of the Authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) that was approved by the Authority in July 2020.

Members referred to the 'Summary of progress and projects to complete', in particular to the number of projects completed that related to prevention and protection.

A Member had welcomed the Authority providing public-use defibrillators at all its locations and on all its fire engines as to date this had saved six lives.

The Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive advised that within the Plan for 2023-24, the Authority had committed to roll out cardiac response and was intent on securing a locally agreed solution. The Authority had made a provisional pay offer to enable a 12-month pilot. Whilst the Fire Brigades Union, to date, had not accepted this offer, the Authority remained committed and would continue to support negotiations with the aim of securing a local agreement.

RESOLVED: That:

- [1] the report be noted;**
- [2] the 2023-24 Annual Action Plan be approved; and**
- [3] the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive be authorised to make any final changes to the 2023-2024 Annual Action Plan prior to publication.**

7 2021-2022 STAFF ENGAGEMENT FORUM

The Engagement and Public Affairs Manager presented a report that provided an overview of the Staff Engagement Forum and update on the subjects considered by the Forum and the outcomes of work undertaken by it during 2021-22.

Katie Wilkinson Vice-Chair of the Forum was in attendance and gave a presentation on the work of the Staff Engagement Forum through its tenure, which included information on the following:-

- Sport and Welfare
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Learning and Development
- Culture and Communications
- Contaminants
- Wider Feedback
- Charity Challenge

Members welcomed the positive work of the Staff Engagement Forum and thanked those involved for their hard work and commitment during the year.

RESOLVED: That:

- [1] the report and presentation be noted.**