



**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY held on Wednesday, 6 December 2023 at Lecture Theatre - Training Centre, Sadler Road, Winsford, Cheshire CW7 2FQ at 10.30 am**

**PRESENT:** Councillors Stef Nelson, Sherin Akhtar, Rachel Bailey, David Brown, John Bird, Kath Buckley, Steve Collings, Peter Coan, Razia Daniels, Brian Gallagher, Phil Harris, Marilyn Houston, Gina Lewis, Rob Moreton, Stuart Parker, Rob Polhill, Margaret Simon, 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 Nick Mannion, Karen Mundry, Laura Smith and Peter Wheeler.

**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.

The Chair advised that Crew Manager Steve Fellows had sadly passed away on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023 at the age of 42. Steve joined Audlem Fire Station as an On-Call Firefighter in June 2003. He was promoted to Crew Manager in July 2012 and received his 20-year Long Service and Good Conduct medal earlier this month. He leaves his wife Vick and seven children Jack, Jonny, Billy, Esme, Milly, Freddy and Phoebe.

The Chair advised that Councillor Gina Lewis (Deputy Chair) was currently the Lead Member for Cheshire West and Chester Council. She had recently been given significant additional responsibilities by the Council. Therefore, the Labour Group believed that Councillor Gina Lewis should no longer have the Lead Member responsibility. Whilst the appointment of Lead Member is determined by the respective Members of the constituent authority, the Labour Group had agreed that Councillor Steve Collings become the Lead Member for Cheshire West and Chester Council with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024. Members of the Authority were content that Councillor Collings fulfil this role.

## **D Declaration of Members' Interests**

The Director of Governance advised that Members would have a disclosable pecuniary interest in the decisions concerning the Members' Allowance Scheme: the uplift to be applied to the Scheme for 2023-24; and approval of the Scheme for 2024-25. All Members indicated that they did. A dispensation had been granted to the majority of Members to allow them to take part in the debate and vote. It had been recommended that the dispensation was extended to Councillor John Bird. (minute 1H refers)

The Director of Governance referred to the two reports on the agenda concerned with North West Fire Control. Both the Chair and Deputy Chair sit on the Board of Directors of the company NW Fire Control Limited, (the body that provides the service to the Fire Authority). They were appointed on behalf of the Fire Authority. As a result, they would both need to confirm that they have an Other Registrable Interest according to the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillor Stef Nelson and Councillor Gina Lewis both did so.

Given that the reports concerned with North West Fire Control clearly related to the financial interest or wellbeing associated with the Other Registrable Interest that they disclosed, the Members' Code of Conduct required them both to leave the meeting room during the items concerned with North West Fire Control.

Prior to the meeting Councillor Rob Polhill had been asked to Chair the meeting when the Chair and Deputy Chair leave the room.

## **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 27<sup>th</sup> September 2023 be approved as a correct record.**

## **G Minutes of the Audit Committee**

### **RESOLVED:**

**That the minutes of the Audit Committee held on 26<sup>th</sup> September and 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2023 be noted.**

## **H Minutes of Governance and Constitution Committee**

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

Minute 2 – Dispensation.

Minute 4 – Members’ Allowances Scheme: Uplift 2023-24; 2024-25 and Review.

**RESOLVED: That**

- [1] the minutes of the Governance and Constitution Committee held on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2023 be noted;**
- [2] the benefit of the dispensation be extended to Councillor John Bird;**
- [3] an uplift of 5% be applied to the Members’ Allowances Scheme 2023-24; and**
- [4] the Members’ Allowances Scheme for 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 be based on the 2023-24 Scheme once the uplift had been applied.**

Note: Members’ Allowances Scheme for 2024-25 was contained in the Agenda Pack at pages 33 to 36.

**I Minutes of Performance and Overview Committee**

**RESOLVED:**

**That the minutes of the Performance and Overview Committee held on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2023 be noted.**

**J Minutes of Brigade Managers' Pay and Performance Committee**

**RESOLVED:**

**That the minutes of the Brigade Manager’s Pay and Performance Committee held on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2023 be noted.**

**K Minutes of Staffing Committee**

**RESOLVED:**

**That the minutes of the Staffing Committee held on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2023 be noted.**

**L Programme of Member Meetings 2024-25**

**RESOLVED: That**

- [1] the Programme of Member Meetings for 2024-25 be noted.**

## **2 EXTERNAL AUDITOR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23**

The Treasurer introduced a report which presented the draft External Auditor's Annual Report 2022-23 that covered the Authority's arrangements for value for money during the year and confirmed the auditor's opinion on the Authority's 2022-23 Statement of Accounts.

The draft External Auditor's Annual Report 2022-23 was attached at Appendix 1 to the report. It remained in draft at this point and it had been considered in detail at the Audit Committee on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2023. After appropriate scrutiny the Committee agreed that the draft report should be presented to the Authority.

The draft External Auditor's Annual Report did not identify any concerns, but it does include three recommendations. These would be monitored by Audit Committee on the Authority's behalf. Audit Committee did not identify any issues to bring to the attention of the Authority.

The External Auditors, through no fault of their own, had been unable to conclude their audit. This meant that it had not been possible to approve the 2022-23 Statement of Accounts or conclude the External Auditor's Annual Report. The issues that have held up completion of the audit were referenced in the draft External Auditor's Annual Report.

It was reported that the Authority's statement of accounts was due to be approved and signed by 30th September each year. The draft of the 2022-23 Statement of Accounts was presented to the Audit Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> September, but at the time there were unresolved technical issues. As a result, the 2022-23 Statement of Accounts was not signed at the meeting, but the Committee delegated its signing to the Chair of Audit Committee and the Treasurer, subject to the issues being satisfactorily resolved and upon receipt of the External Auditor's Audit Opinion. Whilst the original issues had been resolved, an additional issue had now emerged, and the 2022-23 Statement of Accounts had still not been signed. Once the accounts had been signed, any changes to the final version of the External Auditor's Annual Report would be provided to Members for information. No further report will be presented to the Authority unless any changes are material.

### **RESOLVED: That**

- [1] the draft External Auditor's Annual Report 2022-23 be noted; and**
- [2] the Authority be informed of any changes to the External Auditor's Annual Report, if such changes are material, as soon as the Authority's 2022-23 Statement of Accounts is signed.**

### 3 **TREASURY MANAGEMENT - MID YEAR REPORT 2022-24**

The Treasurer 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 2023 to December 2026. The latest forecast set out a view that short, medium and long-dated interest rates would be elevated for little while, as the Bank of England sought to squeeze inflation out of the economy.

The table at paragraph 16 of the report provided a forecast of the capital expenditure, the resulting amount of annual borrowing required and the associated revenue financing costs over the current and next 2 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 Public Works Loan Board 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%).

The table also showed the amount of planned capital expenditure still to be financed by an additional borrowing requirement (around £5m), which was in addition to the additional borrowing requirement of £6.4m already incurred in 2022-23. The overall new borrowing requirement over the current financial planning period was therefore around £11.4m, which is in line with approved plans to finance the now completed major estates project in Wilmslow, progress new Crewe Fire Station and the continuing modernisation of Service houses. Additional new borrowing would be required.

Members were reminded that there was currently no financial provision included in any plans relating to either Ellesmere Port or Warrington Fire Stations. If significant additional capital expenditure was approved in respect of these sites, it would be necessary to increase the future borrowing requirement and to recognise the impact of associated financing costs in the Medium Term Financial Plan.

A Member asked the Treasurer whether borrowing arrangements involved organisations with ethical policies. In response, the Treasurer confirmed that for any banking organisation the Authority utilised, security was the first and major concern, i.e the ability to get all funds back when required. However, the Authority currently invested in UK based organisations only and all major banks in the UK had some form of ethical, social and environmental policy.

A Member asked the Treasurer for further information on the ratio of financing costs to net revenue stream which the Treasurer explained in detail.

#### **RESOLVED: That**

**[1] the report be noted; and**

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

**4 DRAFT 2024-25 BUDGET, COUNCIL TAX AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024-29**

The Treasurer presented the Authority's draft 2024-25 budget and the current Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and asked Members' to consider whether officers should arrange a consultation in relation to the council tax precept for 2024-25.

The Treasurer advised that since the preparation of the report the referendum limit for Council Tax (not including adult social care precept) for local authorities had been confirmed at 2.99%, for fire authorities. A 2.99% increase to the Authority's Band D Council Tax would take it to £90.09 per annum, an increase of £2.61 on 2023-24. Given the latest taxbase forecast this would yield around an estimated additional £1.4m, compared to 2023-24. The Treasurer advised that this had now been assumed in the MTFP.

In order for the Authority to make a decision about the council tax precept in February 2024 it would normally consult.

Members were reminded about the separate report later on the agenda concerned with North West Fire Control (NWFC). This included some proposals with financial implications which will affect the MTFP, but as they were not agreed their impact had not yet been included. The proposal to revise the percentages which each of the authorities who contribute to the costs of NWFC make would lead to an increase in the Authority's base budget of approximately £112k. The proposal to replace the mobilising system, based on the latest NWFC estimate of the capital costs would cost the Authority around £1.2m as a one-off, but it is proposed that this would be met from the Authority's reserves. There would be a further approximately £40k to be included in the Authority's base budget. Further proposals to increase capacity and meet enhanced requirements in standards, personal development and to revise the operating model, would cost the Authority £92k as a one-off and add £34k to the base budget.

Members were also reminded that officers were considering how best to fund the proposed new fire stations at Ellesmere Port and Warrington in the lifetime of the new CRMP, which would significantly impact on the Authority's MTFP.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank the Treasurer and his team for all their hard work in preparing the report.

**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%.**

## **5 DRAFT 2024-28 COMMUNITY RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN - CONSULTATION UPDATE**

The Head of Communications and Engagement presented the report which provided an update on progress with the programme of consultation on the draft 2024-28 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).

Members were reminded that at the meeting of the Authority in September 2023 Members approved the launch of a 13-week programme of consultation, which began on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2023 and was due to conclude on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2024. The programme covered three main strands of public, staff and partner consultation. The report provided initial feedback on the proposals in the CRMP. The Head went on to highlight the partner consultation activity. Partner consultation had focused on briefings for key stakeholders such as unitary and town/parish councils, and MPs; as well as direct emails/letters.

A briefing had been provided to three of the four unitary authorities in Cheshire (with Warrington Council booked), as well as several town and parish councils and five Members of Parliament. Direct emails have been sent to all councillors and town and parish councils in Cheshire, as well as statutory and sub-regional partners, neighbouring fire and rescue services and partner agencies within the Cheshire Resilience Forum.

The Consultation Institute, a recognised independent provider of consultation assurance, training and guidance, had been contracted to provide advice and quality assurance of the consultation programme. An interim review with the Institute was held on 14<sup>th</sup> November and following this, confirmation was received that the consultation programme, to-date, had passed the mid-point review. Work was continuing to ensure that the programme adhered to recognised standards of practice and a final review was scheduled for late December 2023 before the Institute made a formal decision on the certification of quality assurance.

**RESOLVED: That**

**[1] the report be noted.**

## **6 COLLABORATION STRATEGY**

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer introduced a report which sought approval of the Collaboration Strategy.

The Fire Authority approved the initial Collaboration Strategy, in February 2020. It was agreed that the document would be reviewed by the Fire Authority every two years. The Strategy had been reviewed by officers, considering best practice from other fire and rescue services. It contained minor amendments to reflect the current position of collaboration activity within the Services.

**Resolved: That**

**[1] the Collaboration Strategy be approved and reviewed in 2025.**

**7 MEMBER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2024-26**

The Director of Governance introduced a report which sought approval of the Member Development Strategy for 2024-26.

The Member Development Strategy set out how the Fire Authority intended to develop its elected Members to ensure that they were effective in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. It provided a structured framework for the delivery of the Member Development and Induction Programme, future Member support and training and development and promoted continuous improvement.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank the staff in the Democratic Services team for their commitment to Member training and development.

**RESOLVED: That**

**[1] the Member Development Strategy for 2024-26 be approved.**

**8 NORTH WEST FIRE CONTROL - CONTINUING THE COLLABORATION**

(Note: Councillors Stef Nelson and Gina Lewis left the room for the consideration of this item. Councillor Rob Polhill took the Chair)

The Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive introduced a report which provided an update about the future of North West Fire Control (NWFC). The report summarised the progress since that matter was last considered by the Fire Authority and set out the current position.

The financial implications had previously been considered as part of Minute 4 – Draft 2024-25 Budget, Council Tax and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2024-29.

A Member stated that the considerations detailed in the report demonstrated value for money.

**RESOLVED: That**

**[1] the Fire Authority's continued commitment to the NWFC collaboration be confirmed;**

**[2] the increase to the Fire Authority's contribution to the collaboration be confirmed;**

**[3] the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive (in consultation with the Chair) be authorised to make all necessary decisions associated with the new mobilising system on behalf of the Fire Authority; and**



**[4] the magnitude of funding described in the report (new mobilising system and additional resourcing) be approved.**

**9 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

See Minute 10 below – there was no requirement to exclude the press and public.

**10 NORTH WEST FIRE CONTROL - CONTINUING THE COLLABORATION**

The Appendix was not discussed, however the content was noted when considering Item 8, above.