



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY held on Wednesday, 14 February 2024 at Lecture Theatre - Fire Service Headquarters, Sadler Road, Winsford, Cheshire CW7 2FQ at 10.30 am

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

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, Robert Moreton, Stuart Parker, Peter Walker and Norman Wright.

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 there had been a national request from the Home Office to support the further donation of appliances and equipment to the Ukraine. The Service had donated appliances and equipment on three previous occasions and the Home Office was looking for the Service's continued support. Officers had identified three fire engines which it had offered for donation. The vehicles were not in operational use and therefore their donation would not impact upon service provision, nor compromise the safety of firefighters. The three vehicles were at the end of their serviceable life and were earmarked to be scrapped within the next 12 months. The value of the vehicles was low, and the donation had been approved by officers.

The Chair advised that this would be Paul Vaughan, the Treasurer's, last meeting as he was due to retire at the end of February. The Chair on behalf of Members took the opportunity to thank Paul for his all his work and commitment he had given to the Service over the years and wished him all the best on his retirement.

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 6th December 2023 be approved as a correct record.

G Minutes of Staffing Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Staffing Committee held on 1st December 2023 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 22nd January 2024 be noted.

I Minutes of Audit Committee

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Performance and Overview Committee held on 24th January 2024 be noted.

J Notes of Local Pension Board - Firefighters Pension Scheme

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Local Pension Board – Firefighters Pension Scheme held on 5th December 2023 be noted.

K Notes of the Member Training and Development Group

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Member Training and Development Group held on 12th December 2023 be noted.

2 COMMUNITY RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN 2024-28

The Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive introduced the report which sought Members' approval of the Community Risk Management Plan 2024-28 (CRMP 2024-28).

The Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive and the Engagement and Public Affairs Manager guided Members through the item, including the cover report which contained information about the consultation process, consultation feedback and independent support provided in relation to consultation.

The development of the draft CRMP 2024-28, and the associated fire cover review, were informed by a comprehensive programme of public and staff pre-consultation. Member had been provided with a summary as well as full details of the feedback received through the consultation process. These was attached as appendices to the report.

Members welcomed the work which had taken place during the consultation process and the efforts which had taken place to ensure that both the public and staff understood the proposals.

A Member asked how the comments raised about the on-call duty system from staff would be taken forward to assist in improving recruitment and conditions. In response, the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive advised that the comments raised would be taken forward by the Project Manager. A working group would be formed that would include trade union representatives. The aim was to work together to form a pilot. However, firefighter pay was a national issue.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank all those who had been involved in the formation of the CRMP 2024-28.

RESOLVED: That

- [1] the feedback referred to in the report and appendices be noted;**
- [2] the Community Risk Management Plan 2024-28 be approved; and**
- [3] the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive be authorised to make final drafting amendments to the Community Risk Management Plan 2024-28 prior to publication on 1st April 2024.**

3 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2024-25

The Head of People and Organisational Development presented the report which sought approval to publish the Pay Policy Statement for 2024-25, 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 to 12 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; re-employment being allowed subject to key criteria being met along with compliance with pension and tax rules; the relationship between the remuneration of Chief Officers and other employees.

A Member asked about the timeframe from when a person retiring from the Service can be re-employed in a different position. In response, the Head of People and Organisational Development advised that the timeframe would depend on the specific role and circumstances of the individual. The Service had robust policies and procedures in place that would be following in these circumstances.

RESOLVED: That

- [1] the Pay Policy Statement 2024-25, attached as Appendix 1 to the report, be approved; and**
- [2] the Head of People and Organisational Development, 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.**

4 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2024-25

The Head of Finance presented a report that sought approval of the Treasury Management Strategy 2024-25 (the Strategy). This was a requirement of the Local Government Act 2003, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLHUGC) Investment Guidance, DLHUGC 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.

The Head of Finance provided an update on Treasury Management limits on activity. Table 9 referred to the three debt-related treasury activity limits. Their purpose was to retain borrowing activity within certain limits, to manage risk and reduce the impact of adverse movement of interest rates. Since the last report the upper limits on shorter term debt had been raised to enable the Authority to manage high interest rate risk, through short term borrowing until PWLB long term rates fall.

RESOLVED: That:

- [1] the Treasury Management Strategy 2024-25 be approved; and**
- [2] the Authority's Prudential Indicators including the Authorised Limit (paragraph 5.2.7 of the Strategy) be approved.**

5 2024-25 BUDGET (PRECEPT) CONSULTATION

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

The consultation was carried out online and ran from 5th to 26th January 2024 and was in the form of an online survey and asked to what extent respondents supported the Authority's proposed increase in precept of 2.99% for 2024-25.

A total of 448 respondents took part in the consultation. 65.18% of respondents expressed support for the proposed increase, compared to 23.21% who opposed. A further 11.61% of respondents either stated they neither supported nor opposed the increase or did not know. Consultees were able to provide free text comments and 216 comments were provided.

Members welcomed the generally positive feedback that had been received and felt that this provided reassurance that respondents largely supported the proposed increase in precept for 2024-25.

A Members asked if the responses detailed in the 'Consultation Feedback Report'; attached as at Appendix 1 of the report could be broken down into unitary areas. In response, the Engagement and Public Affairs Manager, advised that the figures provided could be broken down further if required.

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 2024-25.**

6 2024-25 BUDGET; COUNCIL TAX PRECEPT; AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024-29

The Finance Officer presented a report that sought Members' approval for the Authority's budget for 2023-24, the Authority's precept, as required by law, for 2024-25 and its Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2024-29.

The Authority was required to approve its budget and set the council tax precept for the financial year commencing 1st April 2024. 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 12th January 2024 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 Finance Officer indicated that the report followed a similar format to those that had been presented in previous years.

The 2024-25 budget proposals were based on the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement as published on 18th December 2023 and the final Settlement announced on 5th February 2024. The Settlement included the Government's Funding Assessment and grant allocations for 2024-25. An increase in council tax precept of 2.99% at Band D was assumed; this would generate additional funding of £1.420k compared to 2023-24, 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 £4.735k compared to the previous year, including a 2024-25 Service Grant (including the Funding Guarantee) of £946k.

A Member referred to the Modernisation Programme and asked for clarity that the fire station rebuilds at Ellesmere Port and Warrington would be complete by 2028. In response, the Finance Officer confirmed that a provisional 'placeholders' for the fire station rebuilds were included across the years 2026-28. They would be funded through a mix of capital receipts, reserves and further borrowing.

Members made several comments relating to the McCloud Remedy the timescales involved and the risks associated and how these could affect the Service. In response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that all primary and secondary legislation to implement the McCloud Remedy came into force on 1st October 2023. Services had to complete several key tasks in readiness to deliver the Remedy. The next group of key deliverables needed to be completed between October 2023 and April 2024.

The Finance Officer advised that the Home Office had clarified that any costs incurred by Services in relation to additional pension liabilities and compensation would be fully funded by Central Government.

Members were advised that the pensions issue relating to the McCloud Remedy had been considered at last meeting of the Audit Committee and Local Pension Board – Firefighter Pension Scheme.

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 £56.479m as set out in Table 1, paragraph 11 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 precept increase of £2.61 at Band D (2.99%) be approved and a Band D council tax precept of £90.09 be set for 2024-25;**
- [4] the levels of council tax precept as set out in Table 2 paragraph 30 of the report be agreed;**
- [5] the proposed capital programme for 2024-25 set out in Table 2 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 35 of the report be adopted.**

7 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2024-28

The Head of Communications and Engagement presented a report that sought approval of an External Communications and Engagement Strategy for the Service. The draft Strategy set out a series of objectives to strengthen the way in which the Service would communicate and engage with the public and external stakeholders over the next four years.

The draft Strategy aimed to provide a framework for the way in which the Service would talk, listen and respond to the public and its external stakeholders during the lifespan of the Community Risk Management Plan 2024-28.

RESOLVED: That

[1] the External Communications and Engagement Strategy be approved.