

**West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority**

**19 February 2024 at 1100 hours**

**Conducted as a public meeting at Headquarters  
and digitally via Microsoft Teams**

Present: Councillor Brackenridge (Chair)

Councillor Miks (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Atwal, Councillor Barrie, Councillor Cheema,  
Councillor Dehar, Councillor Hogarth, Councillor Jalil,  
Councillor Kaur, Councillor Kettle, Councillor Little, Councillor  
Lloyd, Councillor Mahmood, Professor Brake (Co-Opted  
Member)

DCFO Jo Bowcock, ACFO Simon Barry, ACFO Richard  
Stanton, Karen Gowreesunker (Clerk), Sofia Mahmood  
(Section 151), Satinder Sahota (MO), Sasha Hitchens (Fire  
Brigades' Union), Tom Embury (Democratic Services).

Online: Councillor Waters, Wasim Ali (APCC), Dave Brown (Co-  
Opted Member)

Darran Gough (Fire Officers' Association)

**01/24 To receive apologies for absence (if any)**

Apologies received from Councillor Waters and Councillor  
Spence.

**02/24 Declarations of interests**

Chair and Cllr Little declared non-pecuniary interests as  
members of the Firefighters' Pension Scheme.

**03/24 Chair's announcements**

The Chair began by welcoming Cllr Cheema to the Fire  
Authority.

The Chair then began his announcements with a minute's  
silence in memory of Chief Fire Officer Wayne Brown.

The Chair confirmed it had been a difficult period for the service,  
and thanked all those partners and colleagues who had offered  
condolences and support to the service and to CFO Brown's

family. He also thanked officers who stepped in to ensure the wheels keep turning and emphasised that the public haven't seen any change to the important frontline service delivery.

The Chair delivered a personal tribute, emphasising that thoughts remain with CFO Brown's family, friends and loved ones. He highlighted CFO Brown's status as a role model and trailblazer, championing diversity and cultural change across the fire and rescue sector. CFO Brown put people at the heart of his leadership style and always sought to support others to be the best they could be. The Chair then invited Cllr Hogarth to speak on behalf of the Conservative Group.

Cllr Hogarth reflected on the shock of CFO Brown's passing and highlighted how impressed he had been when interviewing him for both roles. Cllr Hogarth praised CFO Brown as a gentleman and fantastic ambassador for the fire service.

The Chair thanked Cllr Hogarth for his thoughts and advised the authority that there had been thousands of messages of condolence which reflected CFO Brown's impact.

The Chair advised members that CFO Brown's funeral will take place on 1 March in London, and that there will also be a local venue which will live screen the event, as well as live streams to stations.

The Chair also confirmed that the process to appoint an interim CFO for a period of up to 12 months had begun. The Authority was being supported by an expert recruitment agency for this process, with the advert closing 24 February. The Appointments, Standards and Appeals Committee will meet in mid-to-late March to make an appointment.

#### **04/24 Deputy Chief Fire Officer Announcements**

DCFO Bowcock thanked members for their kind words, and reflected on the long-term impact that CFO Brown's passing would have on staff within the service.

DCFO Bowcock informed the Authority that she would be ending her period of secondment and returning to Oxfordshire FRS in due course. This process would only begin once the service

had stability the best possible candidate was in place to take the reins.

DCFO Bowcock reflected that it had not been an easy decision to make and emphasised that it had been an honour to work for the service and with the many excellent people within it.

The Chair was thanked for his support to both the DCFO and SET more widely through this difficult period.

The Authority were advised that steps had been taken by SET to provide support to ensure the wellbeing of our staff. Through the service's Occupational Health Team and Fire Fighters' Charity those impacted by CFO Brown's death have access to extensive health and wellbeing support. Members were reminded that they too had access to this support if they needed it.

DCFO Bowcock advised Authority of the business continuity arrangements that had been in place to ensure the service continues to deliver excellent services to the public and meet statutory duties. ACFO Simon Barry has led on business continuity matters, ACFO Rich Stanton has led on business as usual and DCFO Bowcock has been focused on the police and coroner's inquiries and staff wellbeing.

**05/24 Minutes of the previous Fire and Rescue Authority held on 11 December 2023**

**Resolved:**

1. That the minutes of the Fire Authority meeting held on 12 December 2022 be approved as a correct record.

**06/24 Revenue Budget & Precept 2024-25**

Sofia Mahmood, Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer, introduced the Revenue Budget and Precept Report 2024-25. This report outlines the budget, proposed precept and the medium-term financial plan for the service.

### Funding

Authority were advised that total funding for the service for 2024-25 was £130.6 million, reflecting an increase of 4.7% on 2023-24, but below the September CPI measure of inflation, which stood at 6.7%.

An increase in precept of 2.99% has been proposed, the maximum within referendum limits. A 1% increase generates £540k per annum for the Authority, and precept currently accounts for around half of all service income.

### Revenue

The service's net revenue budget for 2024-25 has been set at £133.3 million, which assumes use a £1.1m use of reserves and an in-year efficiency target of £1.9m.

Members were advised that Paragraph 5.4 of the report indicated how expected additional pressures would be funded, including an anticipated 3% pay award for 2024/25 and a ridership factor of 18.0.

### Efficiencies

Authority was informed that efficiencies of £1.8m had already achieved in 2023/24, mostly as a result of the introduction of Risk Based Crewing.

The 2024-25 efficiency target of £1.9m will be achieved through zero-based budgeting - building budgets from nil, rather than rolling over from previous years - and a review of temporary and over-established posts. This work will start in early summer – with any proposals to go through the relevant governance framework. Members were asked to note that the £1.9m is a recurring efficiency target, so one-off savings identified will have to be found again in future years.

### Capital funding

The Authority was advised that the service's four-year capital programme totals £27.3m. The 2024-25 capital programme will total £13m, which includes £4.8m slippage from 2023-24 – mainly due to the extended trial of BRVs, which delayed their

purchase. There are also three new schemes, described within paragraph 7.7 and Appendix D of the report.

Members were informed that the Authority does not receive specific capital funding, meaning that such funds must come from either the in-year revenue budget, reserves, borrowing or capital receipts. The 2024-25 capital programme will be funded by £5.1m in additional borrowing, £3.1m of the in-year revenue budget and the £4.8m of slippage from earmarked reserves.

Future year budgets do not include any new schemes, instead containing only ongoing vehicle and buildings replacement/maintenance and continuation of the command & control & CDC projects. These are funded through future in-year revenue budgets, capital receipts and additional borrowing.

### Treasury Management

Members were also asked to approve the Treasury Management Strategy 2024-25 contained within in Appendix E. This includes approval of the Minimum Revenue Provision Policy and Prudential & Treasury Indicators.

Borrowing can only be undertaken to fund for capital spending and must be within the limits the Authority sets itself, to ensure any borrowing is sustainable and affordable. Members were reminded that some local authorities had have faced issues with unaffordable borrowing in recent months. Borrowing will only be undertaken if needed. The service will consider market conditions to determine whether long-term or short-term borrowing is most appropriate.

Members were advised of the Service Level Agreement in place with Sandwell Council to support the Authority's investments, which involves using cash balances to invest to create a return. The authority currently has balances of £35m generating an average investment return of 5%, against an average interest rate of 5.11% paid of £30m of borrowing.

### Medium-Term financial plan

Authority were informed of the detail of the three-year medium term financial plan, which in addition to the 24/25 budget assumes a budget gap of £3.6m in 2025/26 and £4.4m in 2026/27.

In creating this plan officers have assumed pay uplifts of 2%, and inflationary pressures of between 0.7-1.5%. Predicting income has been more challenging, as recent funding settlements have typically been single year, and proposals to significant change the approach to local government funding, in particular through changes to business rate retention and the fair funding review, have been delayed.

### Reserves

Forecast earmarked reserves at 31 March 2024 stand at £16.2m, which will reduced to £10.4m by 31 March 2025 due to capital expenditure and slippage. No further use of reserves is expected. £3.9m remains in general reserves, which are used to protect against unpredicted financial pressures.

### Questions

Following queries about the service's intention to purchase cars for Flexi-Duty System officers as part of the capital budget, rather than lease them. Sofia assured members that leasing had been considered but purchasing the vehicles represented the best value for money. It was acknowledged that there was a higher up front capital cost in year one, but over the life of the vehicles this approach would be cheaper when factoring in resale value. Following further queries, it was also confirmed that all vehicles purchased would be the same make and model.

Members queried whether the 2% assumed pay increase in future years was too low and given persistent inflation whether a larger pay settlement should be assumed. The Chair confirmed he had asked that the finance team consider pay deals at 3.5 and 10% and agreed that staff deserved more than 2%. However, he reflected that most authorities had budgeted for a similar amount. Sofia confirmed that the service had to put forward an expected increase that is affordable and allows for the creation of a balanced budget. This recognises that staff

costs make up the vast majority of our budget, and with below inflation funding it is necessary to make these difficult assumptions.

Following queries around the assumed savings from Risk Based Crewing on Lates stations while they remained a “trial”, ACFO Simon Barry confirmed that it had been assumed that the Risk Based Crewing would be rolled out, but they remained in trial while the exact model is determined in consultation with staff and representative bodies.

Members raised queries regarding the “other” items included within earmarked reserves, whether there should be fewer separate earmarked reserves, Sofia confirmed that officers intended to review all existing earmarked reserves and that the preference would be to increase general reserves where possible. Earmarked reserves should be held for specific purposes, but only maintained if they were going to be used for their intended purpose in a timely manner.

**Resolved:**

1. That the Net Revenue Budget Requirement for 2024-25 be set at £133.634 million, which includes an efficiency target of £1.905 million and use of reserves of £1.100 million.
2. That the indicative Revenue Budgets be set at £136.103 million for 2025-26 and £140.617 million for 2026-27.
3. That General Reserves be set at a minimum of £3.862 million.
4. That the capital programme for 2024-25 to 2027-28 be set at £27.333 million, including an in-year borrowing requirement of £5.1 million.
5. That Council Tax precept for 2024-25 be increased by 2.99% to £75.20 for a Band D property.
6. That the Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2024-25 including the Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement and Prudential and Treasury Indicators.

**07/24 Community Risk Management Plan – Content**

DCFO Jo Bowcock introduced Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) report. Members are being asked to approve this latest version of the CRMP for publication in April 2024.

Members were advised that the CRMP is fundamental to the purpose of the service, and that under the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework all services are required to have a CRMP covering a period of at least three years. Officers had also drawn on the CRMP Fire Standard Published in May 2021 when creating the document.

Authority was advised that it is also a requirement that any CRMP reflects effective consultation with the public. Members were reminded of the period of consultation which was undertaken in Summer 2023 which had informed the creation of the CRMP. This also lets us know what needs to be prioritised in terms of risk.

DCFO Bowcock outlined the changes from previous iterations, including the decision to bring the CRMP together into a single document. The report sets out how the service measures risks, responds to them, and aligns resources across prevention, protection, and response.

Members were advised that the version being considered for approval was “pre-design”, and that the final version will be more attractive, interactive, and easier to use. Also, as a result there are some missing links and infographics which are still being developed.

**Resolved:**

7. That the content of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) be approved.

**08/24 WMFS Strategy 2024-2027 Our Plan**

DCFO Jo Bowcock introduced the WMFS Strategy 2024-2027 which is also for approval ahead of publication in April 2024.

Authority was advised that as the CRMP had been renewed, officers had taken the opportunity to refresh the approach to our



Strategy, previously known as “Our Plan”. The new document is more forward looking and will cover a discreet three-year period, rather than being a rolling three-year strategy which is renewed annually. The new document sets out the service’s vision, purpose and future direction.

In each of four areas the strategy sets out clear strategic goals, and then a range of new measures and performance indicators (PIs) to show whether these goals are being achieved.

Members were informed that some of the measures are carried over from existing PIs which have previously been reported on a six-monthly basis to the Authority. However, there are also new PIs and brought in others which are reported elsewhere (such as the budget) to create a “balanced scorecard” which more properly reflects the full range of what the service does.

Members were informed that targets for each goal will be brought to the Authority in April subject to approval.

The final document would also include links to a number of programme level workplans which will set out how the service intends to achieve its strategic goals.

Members were advised that, as with the CRMP, the document for approval was “pre-design”.

**Resolved:**

8. That the content WMFS Strategy for 2024-2027 be approved.
9. That Members note the new range of Key Performance Indicators included within the Strategy.

**9/24 Statement of Assurance 2022-23**

Karen Gowreesunker, Clerk to the Authority, outlined the content of the Statement of Assurance 2022-23 for approval by Members. Members were informed that the Statement of Assurance is a legal requirement, set out within the Fire Service Framework. The report focuses on finance, governance and other areas, and is also used to highlight areas for continuous improvement.

Members were informed that much of the information contained within the report is also published elsewhere but by creating a single document communities and partners can more effectively scrutinise service performance and governance.

Resolved:

10. That the Statement of Assurance 2022-23 be approved.

## **9/24 WMFRA Code of Corporate Governance**

Karen Gowreesunker, Clerk to the Authority, set out the detail of. This document has been updated to ensure it properly reflects the authority's current structure and processes. The Code is based on the CIPFA and SOLACE Frameworks for good governance.

Members were advised that the new version is an update on the previously agreed version from 2018, and that most changes are largely administrative.

The Chair welcomed the update and stated his ongoing belief in the authority's ongoing commitment to high governance standards.

Resolved:

11. That the refreshed Code of Corporate Governance be noted.

## **10/24 Contract Award Report**

Sofia Mahmood, Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer introduced the report which outlined contracts valued at over £250,000 which had previously been approved by the Authority.

Members were advised that the three contracts were;

- Cycle to work scheme – which will be funded by employee contributions through salary sacrifice at no cost to the Authority.
- Leading Excellence Training Programme – which is funded by Apprenticeship Levy at no cost to the Authority.

- Uniform Contract – has been awarded to Wm Sugdens at a value of around £1m over four years. New uniform is expected to be issued over next six months.

Resolved:

12. That the summary of the contracts in excess of £250,000 awarded since September 2023 be noted.

## **11/24 Proposed Sale of CDC**

ACFO Simon Barry introduced the report which outlined the proposal to sell the Command Development Centre (CDC) situated in Smethwick and relocate its facilities elsewhere within the service estate.

Members were advised that as in recognition of ongoing budgetary pressures and a desire to deliver value for money, it was proposed to sell the under-utilised CDC building and move its facilities elsewhere.

In particular, this would include moving the command training element into HQ to better utilise available space and deliver on the ambition to create a training “centre for excellence” at HQ.

Sale of the site would realise a capital receipt and reduce the currently estimated £130,000 per year of running costs associated with the CDC site.

Members were advised that the expected capital cost of moving command training and transferring equipment storage was estimated at around £600,000.

ACFO Barry outlined the outstanding uncertainty regarding the cost of relocating the secondary fire control function. The secondary control function currently requires specific. However, with a change to the control system to one that is cloud based, these requirements may change in the near future.

Therefore, it is proposed that the move of CDC and storage facilities go ahead as soon as possible, with sale to take place later once the service has clarity over secondary fire control.

Following queries about the upfront cost of moving CDC and storage before the capital receipt can be realised, the Authority were assured that this will deliver on the desire to improve the offer from CDC at a “centre of excellence” but that the long-term impact will be to realise a saving. ACFO Barry explained that a most of the cost of Secondary Fire Control currently is associated with IT infrastructure – approximately £500k when it was last installed. However, a more modern cloud software solution will reduce the bulk of that cost.

Members were advised that secondary fire control could be located either on an existing fire station or elsewhere in headquarters.

Following further queries as to whether the service is working with partner organisations (such as other blue light services) to consider shared resilience facilities. ACFO Barry confirmed this had not yet taken place but would be considered in future.

Members queried why it was expected that the value of the site had reduced when most commercial rents were increasing. Simon Barry confirmed the service will ensure the best market value for the asset.

The Chair confirmed that members would receive further reports on this topic in future.

Resolved:

13. Note the rationale for the proposal to sell the Command Development Centre (CDC) site.
14. Note the anticipated capital receipt and ongoing revenue savings associated with the sale of the CDC.
15. Note the costs associated with movement of the Command Learning element of CDC - incorporated within the capital programme 2024-26
16. Approve the associated steps and future sale of CDC the timing of which will be dependent on the requirements for secondary Fire Control.

**13/24    Exclusion of Public and Press**

Resolved:

17. That it be agreed that the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Paragraph 3 of the Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

Meeting adjourned 12.17.

**Private Agenda**

Meeting reconvened 12.52.

Cllr Kaur gave her apologies from 12.17.

**13/24    Planned Procurement Exercise for 2024-25**

Sofia Mahmood, Head of Finance and Section 151, outlined the range of funded procurement exercises for 2024-25.

Resolved:

18. That the outlined tender exercises for the provision of various works, goods and services to West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority during 2024/25 be approved.

**14/24    Personnel Matters**

The Monitoring Officer introduced an exempt, legally privileged report that dealt with personnel matters concerning the former CFO, Wayne Brown.

Resolved:

19. That the content of the Monitoring Officer's report be noted.

Meeting ended 13:27.

Tom Embury Governance and Performance Tom.embury@wmfs.net
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