

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

15 February 2021 at 1100 hours

held digitally via Microsoft Teams

Present: Councillor Brackenridge (Chair)

Councillor Iqbal (Vice Chair)

Councillors Barrie, Barlow, Cooper, Dehar, Edwards, Gill, Hogarth, Jenkins, Miller, Miks, Spence, Young and Walsh

Mr G Singh Josan (Representative of the Police and Crime Commissioner)

Professor S Brake, co-opted member – health

Maurice Carter (Unison), Steve Price Hunt (Fire Brigade's Union), and Richard Merker (Fire Officers' Association).

1/21 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Mr M Ager, Independent Member and S Middleton, co-opted member – business.

2/21 Declarations of Interest

The Chair and Councillor Edwards declared a personal non-pecuniary interest in Item 8 Monitoring of Finances, due to being members of the Firefighters Pension Scheme(s).

3/21 Chairs Announcements

The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting of the full Fire Authority.

The Chair noted the continuing work supporting the vaccination programme.

The National Joint Council Employers Group would be speaking with the Fire Brigades Union again in due course regarding the undertaking of additional activities. The Chair noted that locally the Service was in a good place.

4/21 **Chief Fire Officer's Announcements**

The Chief Fire Officer welcomed all attendees to the meeting.

There were approximately 300 volunteers undertaking additional activities with the majority carrying out vaccinator and other support roles. It was confirmed that volunteers had been deployed to deliver these activities.

Lateral Flow Tests continued to be provided at a number of sites across the Service. Approximately 30% of staff were taking the tests and an upturn in the number of police employees had been observed.

It was noted that Kevin Rowsell, Fire Officers Association representative, would be retiring shortly and all in attendance wished him a happy retirement.

16 February 2021 marked the first anniversary of the passing of Firefighter Andrew Moore. A virtual gathering was being held on the anniversary and there would be the unveiling of a commemorative plaque at Wolverhampton Fire Station the following week. All in attendance passed on their condolences.

Members noted the high level of partnership working which had been in place since the start of the pandemic. The provision of the Lateral Flow Tests as a joint resource underlined the inter-service support the Service was providing. A Member noted the work of Watch Commander Sacha Quinney and Medical Director Andrew Thurgood to enable the provision of the vaccination roles, a provision that was an invaluable resource to the community.

5/21 **Minutes of the Fire and Rescue Authority 14 December 2020**

Resolved that the minutes of the Fire Authority meeting held on 14 December 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

6/21 **Budget and Precept 2021-2020**

The Treasurer to the Authority provided an overview of the report which required the Authority to consider the Capital Programme for 2021/22 to 2023/2024, the prudential indicators relating to the Authority's capital financing requirements, the Minimum Revenue Provision Statement, the Treasury Management Strategy, the Revenue Budget and to approve the consequent precept level and resultant for each constituent District Council.

It had been recognised since October 2020, following confirmation by the Treasury, that a one-year settlement would apply for next year. Although it was understandable why the Government had opted for a one-year settlement rather than a multi-year settlement given the uncertainty created by the convergence of Covid 19 and Brexit, it did not remove the fundamental principle that multi-year settlements were a more effective way of managing resources aligned to longer term planning. The Government's emergency Covid 19 measures would also eventually need to be accounted for. As a result, these considerations had been reflected at Policy Planning Forums since October, recognising potential funding reductions that could impact the Authority from 2022/23 onwards.

The Government had set a Council Tax referendum threshold of 2% for Fire and Rescue Authorities.

The provisional settlement for 2021/22 was announced in December 2020 at £53.002m, resulting in a core funding increase of £0.106m (0.2%). The Authority's total core funding was confirmed in February 2021.

It was noted that the Members had been provided previously with an indication that there was likely to be a reduction in the Council Tax base and a collection rate deficit in the current year.

As highlighted at recent Policy Planning Forums, it was noted that there were potential funding reductions due in the coming years. The report and Appendix I included a 5% year on year illustrative reduction but with a recognition that funding reductions could be at a higher level. It was acknowledged that if such reductions of the scale indicated within Appendix I were to materialise, there would be a need to make compensating Service savings in order to achieve a balanced budget position, and that there would need to be a need to identify transformation / efficiency savings from service delivery areas.

There were additional ongoing budget uncertainties, particularly Firefighter pension related issues, that had significant funding implications but at this stage remained unclear in terms of ongoing cost and how the funding for these would be met and by whom.

It was noted that the Business Rates Retention Scheme and the Fair Funding Review had both been deferred to at least 2022 and there was some uncertainty as a result.

The capital position was covered on page 23 of the report onwards and highlighted that there had been a lack of any specific capital funding for a number of years now. The Authority's capital programme was predominantly funded by earmarked reserves and it was highlighted there was a funding shortfall currently for year 3 of the programme. It was confirmed that no borrowing was anticipated in the coming year.

The report provided an estimated position reflecting the setting of a balanced budget but one that was dependent upon sufficient service transformation being realised.

In answer to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- The report assumed the Service would be receiving Government funding reductions in the coming years. This allowed circa 12 months to prepare alternative options to ensure the Service had sufficient plans in place ready to be implemented to realise the required efficiency savings in from April 2022 onwards.

- It was confirmed that a grant of just under £2.8m had been allocated over two tranches by the Government in respect of Covid 19. The Service was forecasting spend in the region of £4.3m by the end of the current financial year the highest costs incurred being related to staffing costs associated with Voluntary Additional Shifts due to staff testing positive or having to self-isolate. Other significant costs included personal protective equipment, ICT and premise related issues. In January, the Home Office had advised Fire and Rescue Authorities to put in bids if they had spent more that contained within the previously provided grants. The Service had submitted a bid and would have to wait to see if the bid would be successful or not.
- In developing the Capital Programme, the Service identified the key assets due for replacement and/or investment and set aside funding accordingly, for example, the Vehicle Replacement Programme. This established the Capital Programme requirement but in year three (2023/24) funding did not currently match anticipated expenditure requirements.

The Chair noted that he always pressed the case that the Authority as per all within the sector did not receive any capital grants and this represented a major hole in funding. Many within the sector were having to either borrow or use reserves saved previously. There was a need for the Government to address this pressing issue. However, a letter received from the Home Office and the Fire Minister regarding reserves held by Fire and Rescue Authorities lead to an impression that the current arrangements were unlikely to change.

Resolved

Members approved:

- The Authority's Net Revenue Budget for 2021/2022 of £101.749 million which includes a Council Tax requirement of £45.038 million, set out in Appendix A, together with the associated precept levels, set out in Appendix B, resulting in

a Band D Precept increase of 1.99%.

- The Authority's capital programme for 2021/2022 to 2023/2024 as set out in Appendix E.
- The Authority's Treasury Management Strategy which includes the Minimum Revenue Provision Statement set out in Appendix F and the Prudential Indicators in Appendix G.

7/21 **Three Year-Rolling Strategy 2021-24 and Annual Plan**

The Chief Fire Officer provided an overview of the report which provided the detail of the Strategic Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) proposals which would be delivered through the Services three-year rolling Strategy, the proposed re-affirmation of the Authority's Strategic Vision, and the proposed three-year rolling Strategy objectives and Annual Plan priorities for delivery during 2021-22.

One-year priorities form the Annual Plan within the three-year rolling Strategy, providing more detail of the outcomes the Service aimed to achieve in that year to:

- Reduce vulnerability
- Increase public safety through removing, reducing, controlling; and / or mitigating risk in the community through prevention, protection and response priorities

In line with requirements under the National Framework, the CRMP had been reviewed for 2021-24, incorporating the identification, review and assessment of existing and potential future risks to the community within the West Midlands. This identified 'foreseeable risks' that exist or were emerging across the county which fell within the scope of the Fire and Rescue Services Act, the Regulatory Reform Order, the Civil Contingencies Act and other relevant legislation, as well as the objective of a Fire and Rescue Service which were to reduce, mitigate or manage death and injury, damage to property, the economy and / or environment.

To support the review of the CRMP and meet the requirements set out in the National Framework, the Authority had engaged in a ten-week consultation exercise from 7 October to 16 December 2020. A detailed breakdown of the consultation outcomes was set out in Appendix 5 of the report.

The CRMP proposals were set out within the report. The proposals were high level 'evidence based', taken from the consideration of the broad outcomes of the CRMP review and outcomes, the WMFS Strategic Analysis for 2016-2019 and 2017-2020, assessments of individual risks through the CRMP process, 2020 CRMP consultation outcomes, as well as the application of professional knowledge and judgement. The proposals were underpinned by the survivability study which had been undertaken in 2015/16 and provided the Service with a sound evidence base to the overall timeline for the survival of a victim of in the home (and other emergency incidents) and the impact that a five minute response time could have on risk to life.

The CRMP proposals were:

- CRMP proposal 1:

The Strategic Enabling Team will commission the review of those key factors that contribute to the survivability timeline and research through the Technical CRMP group. The outcomes of this review will form the evidence base for future CRMP proposals.

- CRMP proposal 2:

The current approach to responding to Road Traffic Collisions, Automatic Fire Alarms and Secondary Fires will be reviewed to determine the opportunities these changing risks provide in considering alternative approaches to responding.

- CRMP proposal 3:

The future impact of these emerging risks on the CRMP will be incorporated in the three-year rolling strategy. This will include how Prevention, Protection and Response Services may need to change to enable flexibility in the delivery of our services.

- CRMP proposal 4:

The most appropriate interventions to reduce vulnerability to fire and other risks will be determined through the CRMP, using the principle of an integrated approach to intervention, protection and response activity enhancing the 'up stream' approach to fire fighting.

- CRMP proposal 5:

The Service will continue to research, understand, implement a range of opportunities to digitally enable its workforce and communities to transform the delivery of services to our communities.

In line with proposals 5, the proposals would be underpinned by digital transformation. In addition to the digital transformation of internal mechanisms, some of the Services provided by the Service would be delivered digitally.

It was proposed that the Authority's vision statement, 'Making the West Midlands safer, stronger and healthier', continued and it was recommended that it be reaffirmed in recognition of the risk that continues to exist and increase across the West Midlands and the ability of the Authority as a Fire and Rescue Authority to seek to prevent and mitigate these risks through its statutory functions of prevention, protection and response.

As part of the development of the three-year rolling strategy, the Strategic Enabling Team had considered the outcomes of the CRMP, the STEEPLE and strategic planning considerations and had refreshed the one year priorities in the annual plan, as well as setting broad Strategic Objectives for the three-year strategy. The proposed objectives were:

- Response – dealing excellently with incidents
- Prevention – delivering interventions which support safer and healthier communities
- Protection – protecting life and property to make businesses stronger and communities safer

The proposed one-year Strategic Priorities (paragraph 5.38 of the report) set out in more detail how the three-year objectives would be worked towards and achieved during 2021-22.

In response to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- The Service undertook an invest to save approach, although this was effectively considered currently via the use of the ear marked reserves. The option to borrow to save going forward would be a consideration but it was not something anticipated over the next 12 months.
- There could be the possibility that the three-year rolling strategy and Annual Plan could be reviewed if funding reductions of more than 5% were to come into effect as part of ways to resolve such a funding deficiency.

The Chair noted the early engagement with staff to deliver the Plan and outcomes.

A Member noted that the change of name from IRMP to CRMP would help emphasise the focus on the community.

The Chair noted that Members were grateful for all of the work that had gone into the development of the CRMP.

Resolved:

That Members noted the outcomes of the evidence based CRMP review.

That Members approved the CRMP proposals that would be developed for implementation over the period of the three-year rolling Strategy 2021-24.

That Members re-affirmed the Authority's Vision Statement for the Authority's Strategy.

That Members noted the context of planning for the three-year Strategy and Annual Plan.

That Members approved the three-year Strategic Objectives 2021-24 and refresh of the Annual Plan priorities for delivery in 2021-22.

8/21 **Monitoring of Finances**

The Treasurer to the Authority provided an overview of the report which dealt with the monitoring of the finances of the Authority in the current financial year and covered the revenue expenditure and the Capital Programme.

Appendix A of the report compared the revenue budgeted to the end of January 2021 with the actuals to date. Actual spend to January 2021 including commitments was £81.359 million compared to a projected budget of £81.408 million, resulting in an overall variance of £0.049 million.

The most significant variance related to Command Delivery, Fire Control and Workforce Planning, mainly due to an underspend on the Operational pay budget.

In addition to the budget allocated as part of the 2020/21 revised estimates exercise (as at November 2020) for COVID19 related expenditure above the grant allocation, expenditure remained volatile and so the December 2020 & January 2021 impact of higher than anticipated absence levels was reflected in the monitoring statement (Appendix A). There was an opportunity to claim for additional COVID-19 funding, with submissions required by 14 February 2021. The Treasurer noted that the Authority would be advised of the outcome of the bid for Covid 19 pandemic related grant.

Appendix B provided statistical data relating to the Firefighters' Pension Scheme.

The Authority's approved capital programme for 2020/2021 was £7.496 million. A scheme analysis was shown in Appendix C. Expenditure to the end of January 2021 was shown as £1.789 million.

The main forecast variance within the capital programme related to the Vehicle Replacement Programme due to delays in the

purchase of the Command Support Vehicle, the Detection, Identification and Monitoring Vehicle, Water and Foam Units, Community Safety Trailers, and the slippage of six PRL's to 2021/22. Additionally, the replacement of windows and doors at seven fire stations had been re-phased to 2021/22 due to supplier lockdown during the pandemic.

In answer to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- The Authority's procurement policy enabled the purchasing of goods and supplies such as replacement vehicles from British companies where practical and possible.
- It was noted that there was some flexibility regarding the Localism Act in terms of supporting local companies whilst achieving best value for money. It provided a strong legislative framework to build upon.
- It was noted that Birmingham City Council procurement services ran local purchase schemes which included a variety of purchases including West Midlands Police. The Service would look into the possibility of joining the scheme, or similar.

Resolved

That the Members note the report on the monitoring of finances.

9/21 Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee held on 7 December 2020

The minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee held on 7 December 2020 were received.

The Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee wished to thank members of the committee, the internal and external auditors, and all officers including all members of the Service's finance team for their continued contributions and support.

The meeting ended at 12.12 hours.

Stephen Timmington

Strategic Hub

0121 380 6680

Stephen.Timmington@wmfs.net