



**DORSET & WILTSHIRE
FIRE AND RESCUE
AUTHORITY**

Minutes of the Finance & Audit Committee held at 10:00 hours on Wednesday 24 July 2024 at the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Salisbury

Members present:

Cllr Cameron Adams	Cllr Matthew Courtliff
Cllr Paul Hilliard	Cllr Paul Oatway
Cllr Byron Quayle	Cllr Kevin Small
Cllr Duncan Sowry-House*	Cllr Clare Weight**

*Cllr Duncan Sowry-House was not present in the meeting for consideration of items up to 24/26 and was present for all subsequent items.

** Cllr Clare Weight was not present in the meeting for consideration of items up to 24/26 and was present for all subsequent items.

Officer attendance:

Chief Fire Officer (CFO), Ben Ansell
Deputy Monitoring Officer, Grace Evans
Deputy Assistant Chief Officer (DACO) Financial Services & Treasurer, Ryan Maslen
Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO), Derek James
Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) - Director of Community Safety, Andy Cole
Assistant Chief Officer (ACO) - Director of Service Support, Jill McCrae
Deputy Assistant Chief Officer (DACO) Corporate Support & Clerk, Vikki Shearing
Corporate Communications & Engagement Manager, Emily Cheeseman
Democratic Services Officer, David Shaw

Guests:

Adam Marshall – Bishop Fleming
Jessica Croman - South West Audit Partnership (SWAP) Internal Audit Services

24/18 Welcome

24/18.1 The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed attendees.

24/19 Apologies

24/19.1 No apologies were received.

24/20 Election of Chair

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24/20.1 Deputy Monitoring Officer, Grace Evans, asked for nominations for the role of Chair of the Committee for 2024-25. Cllr Kevin Small was nominated by Cllr Matthew Courtliff and seconded by Cllr Paul Oatway. Members unanimously agreed this nomination, and Cllr Kevin Small was duly elected as Chair.

24/21 Election of Vice Chair

24/21.1 The Chair asked for nominations for the role of Vice Chair of the Committee. Cllr Paul Hilliard was nominated by Cllr Paul Oatway and seconded by the Chair. Members unanimously agreed this nomination, and Cllr Paul Hilliard was duly elected as Vice Chair.

24/22 Code of Conduct and Declaration of Interests

24/22.1 The Chair asked the meeting for any disclosures of pecuniary interests under the Localism Act. There were no disclosures.

24/23 Public Questions

24/23.1 The meeting noted public questions submitted and read out by Firefighter Liam Jackson, Branch Secretary, Poole - Fire Brigades Union regarding the Resourcing and Savings programme. Grace Evans, also read to the Committee a written question submitted by Watch Manager Steve Taylor, Group 1, Trowbridge Fire Station on the same subject. Details of the questions provided are contained in the appendix attached to the minutes (minute 24/35 post refers).

24/23.2 Grace Evans informed that meeting that the questions were not within the terms of reference for this Committee. They concerned matters within the Chief Fire Officer's delegation who would respond to the question owners outside of the meeting and share his response with the Chair of the Authority.

24/24 Review and approve Minutes of the Finance & Audit Committee meeting on 7 March 2024

24/24.1 The Chair asked Members to review and approve the minutes from the last meeting.

24/24.2 Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Ben Ansell provided an update of the national pay award negotiations for grey and green book staff. For grey book staff the pay award was a 4% increase on all basic pay rates from 1 July 2024. For green book staff national pay negotiations were continuing.

24/24.3 RESOLVED: Members approved the minutes and they were signed by the Chair as a correct record.

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24/25 External Audit Progress Report 2021-22 and 2022-23

24/25.1 Deputy Assistant Chief Officer (DACO) Financial Services & Treasurer, Ryan Maslen, reported that Michelle Hopton, Engagement Lead, Deloitte LLP could not make the meeting.

24/25.2 DACO Maslen reported that delays had been encountered on the 2021-2022 accounts due to the testing of Wiltshire Pension Fund Local Government Pension Scheme membership data through the triennial valuation. An update would be provided at the September meeting.

24/25.3 The Committee expressed its disappointment that a representative of Deloitte LLP was not present at the meeting to present the report.

24/25.4 RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

24/26 External Audit Progress Report 2023-24

24/26.1 Adam Marshall, Bishop Fleming, provided a verbal update.

24/26.2 Adam Marshall reported that the audit work was progressing well and that an update would be provided to the next meeting of the Committee. DACO Maslen confirmed that a positive working relationship with Bishop Fleming was being established. The Chair commented that concerns remained on Wiltshire Pension Fund publishing its accounts by the statutory deadline.

24/26.3 RESOLVED: Members received and noted the External Audit Work completed to date by Bishop Fleming and approved the request for delegated authority to be granted to the Head of Financial Services in consultation with the Chair of Finance & Audit Committee to approve the Statement of Accounts to ensure regulatory deadlines were adhered to, if required.

24/27 Draft Statement of Accounts 2023-24, Annual Governance Statement and Financial Outturn 2023-24

24/27.1 DACO Maslen presented the report.

24/27.2 In reply to a question from the Chair, DACO Maslen explained why the additional funding top up grant of £881k could not be used to support long or medium-term revenue expenditure. The timing of the Government budget settlement in late December had resulted in the settlement being fed into budget setting at a later stage, as it was not certain that the additional settlement received would be included in the base budget for future years.

24/27.3 CFO Ansell added that following the General Election, Government representatives were being canvassed at a national level to provide a multi-year budget settlement to provide added certainty on funding.

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24/27.4 RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Draft Statement of Accounts 2023-24, including the Annual Governance Statement be noted.**
- 2. That the carry forward of £2.9m for capital projects not completed in 2023-24 be approved.**

24/28 Internal Audit Annual report and Opinion 2023-24

24/28.1 Jessica Croman from South West Audit Partnership (SWAP) presented the report.

24/28.2 It was highlighted that following the delivery of the 2023-24 internal audit programme, five substantial assurances and three adequate assurances had been awarded overall, with no significant risks identified and no priority one actions.

24/28.3 RESOLVED: That the findings of the Internal Audit Annual report and Opinion 2023-24 be noted.

24/29 Internal Audit Quarterly report – Quarter 1

24/29.1 Jessica Croman from SWAP presented the report.

24/29.2 Jessica Croman highlighted the changes made to audit assurance definitions, as set out on page four of the report, which were the result of the Service becoming a SWAP partner. DACO Maslen stated that an explanation of the new definitions would be provided to Committee members.

24/29.3 CFO Ansell commented that the substantial assurance for the Medium-Term Financial Plan and Financial Resilience showed that the Service was spending money prudently and with Value for Money in place.

24/29.4 A debate took place on the reasonable assurance opinion for social media arrangements. Particular attention was given to the administration of corporate Facebook accounts and the potential closure of X (formerly Twitter) accounts, and Corporate Communications & Engagement Manager, Emily Cheeseman, replied to Members' questions. CFO Ansell added that social media account administrators would be asked to confirm that they had read the Service's social media Policy to address the priority two action.

24/29.5 RESOLVED: That the findings of the audits be noted and the management responses be approved.

24/30 Internal Audit Progress report

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- 24/30.1 Assistant Chief Officer (ACO) Jill McCrae presented the report stating that all audit recommendations, including those since the meeting of the Committee in March 2024, were now complete.
- 24/30.2 RESOLVED: That the progress made in Audit Improvement Plan Activities be noted.**
- 24/31 Performance Report - Quarter 4**
- 24/31.1 The report set out the key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) that were reported to the Committee. Each of the KLOEs was reported to Members with appropriate officers providing an overview.
- 24/31.2 ACO McCrae reported on KLOE 6 sub diagnostic – *How well do we use resources to manage risk?*
- 24/31.3 In reply from a question from Cllr Hilliard, DACO Maslen explained the wide-ranging changes resulting from the Procurement Regulations 2024, which would come into effect from October 2024. The Regulations would provide greater flexibility, but also increased scrutiny and transparency. ACO McCrae also answered a question from the Chair on the value for money assessment process for new vehicles. It was noted that the most suitable procurement option would be taken to achieve best value.
- 24/31.4 Deputy Assistant Chief Officer (DACO) Corporate Support & Clerk, Vikki Shearing, reported on KLOE 13: *How effective and efficient are we at managing data?*
- 24/31.5 In reply to a question from Cllr Clare Weight, CFO Ansell explained that the 14 compliments received in the quarter would be passed on to the relevant officers. Following a question from the Chair, DACO Shearing clarified that those submitting Freedom of Information requests were always kept informed if their request would not be answered within the required timescale and that requests would always be answered.
- 24/31.6 Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) Derek James reported on KLOE 10 sub diagnostic – *How well do we ensure fairness and diversity?*
- 24/31.7 Cllr Hilliard enquired if the number of disciplinary cases had increased following the Cultural Review. DCFO James responded that improved documentation was required to provide evidence to more fully support a disciplinary case. This was improving and this hopefully was leading to staff being more confident to come forward and report cases. CFO Ansell added that at a national level action was being considered to have a barred list so that, in a similar way to policing, those dismissed could not readily obtain employment with another fire and rescue service. In reply to a further question from Cllr Weight, DCFO James explained that despite people resigning the disciplinary case was now being taken forward to conclusion, and should a disciplinary award be found,

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that this would be put on personal files and disclosed if asked for by a future employer.

24/31.8 RESOLVED: Members reviewed and approved the Quarter 4 2023-24 Performance, as detailed in Appendix A of the report.

24/32 Strategic Risk Register

24/32.1 ACO McCrae introduced the report.

24/32.2 In reply to a question from Cllr Byron Quayle, ACO McCrae stated that in respect of risk 301, cyber threats and attacks, the Authority had been unaffected by the recent CrowdStrike IT outage and that the outcomes of the incident would be studied to see if lessons could be learned.

24/32.3 RESOLVED: Members reviewed and noted the strategic risks and mitigations, as set out in Appendix A of the report.

24/33 Future Training Provision

24/33.1 ACO McCrae introduced the report.

24/33.2 ACO McCrae reported that it was hoped that planning permission would be granted by Dorset Council on the Weymouth site in mid-August, which might facilitate the desired objective of a joint formal procurement process with the Devizes site. An update would be provided at the September meeting.

24/33.3 RESOLVED: That the progress on the future training provision as detailed in appendix A be noted.

24/34 Date of Next Meeting

24/34.1 The Chair confirmed the date of the next Finance & Audit Committee meeting as 11 September 2024.

Meeting ended at 12:05 hours.

Signed: _____

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Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority meeting – 24 July 2024**24/35 Public Question****Watch Manager Steve Taylor, Group 1, Trowbridge Fire Station**

- 24/35.1 Could the following question please be asked on behalf of Trowbridge station at the Fire Authority Finance & Audit Committee meeting on 24 July 2024.
- 24/35.2 The resourcing and savings programme report states that the modelling has assumed 100% appliance availability when producing its outcomes.
- 24/35.3 As we know this is never the case and certainly nowhere near the real percentages in Wiltshire.
- 24/35.4 Trowbridge's surrounding on call stations from April 2023- March 2024 achieved: Westbury below 50%, Bradford on Avon below 50% and Melksham below 5% availability.
- 24/35.5 Trowbridge's on-call appliance (without the wholetime numbers assisting) only averages being able to turnout to 21% of calls between April 2020- March 2024.
- 24/35.6 So how can the resourcing and savings programmes report statistics, data and financial figures / savings be deemed accurate or reliable when the modelling is inaccurate from the outset?
- 24/35.7 Do we not have a duty to ensure that accurate and even realistic data and appliance availability figures are used in the modelling when the outcomes will help to decide the future shape of our service and how the public's finances are spent?
- 24/35.8 On behalf of Trowbridge station, I thank you for your time and allowing these questions to be raised.

24/35.9 Firefighter Liam Jackson, Branch Secretary Poole - Fire Brigades Union

24/35.10 Question 1 REF: Poole07.24.1

“There are serious concerns money is being redirected away from emergency response resources and into non-operational, ‘back office’ support staff. Over the last 5 years, GOV.UK data states DWFRS has lost 36 WDS (8% less) and 48 RDS (9% less) firefighters. In the same time, there have been an additional 56 non-operational support staff (full time equivalent) recruited. This equates to a 24% investment into personnel who do not attend fires, road traffic collisions or respond to other emergencies. For every 10 WDS firefighters in DWFRS, there are 7 support staff (full time equivalent). Comparatively, Hampshire & Isle of White FRS have 5 support staff for every 10 WDS firefighters. DWFRS

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therefore have approximately 80 'extra' support staff. If all of these posts were paid £28,000, that's a cost of £2,240,000. In line with the KLOE principle "Making Every Penny Count", what efficiency savings and productivity improvements will be actioned within non-operational staff, prior to any cuts to firefighters or fire engines?"

24/35.11 Question 2 REF: Poole07.24.2

"The Fire Service seeks to rely on the Fire Cover Review document within the "Resource and Savings Program" to justify reductions in fire cover, within some parts of the Service. Data used throughout the analysis is from April 2018 until March 2022. The concept used is named "modelling", which is a theoretical and unachievable utopia of fire engine availability. The Fire Cover Review assumes all fire engines, whether RDS (on-call) or WDS (24/7), are 100% available. DWFRS identifies RDS fire cover as a national notable risk and stated within "DWFRS Strategic Assessment of Risk 2023-25", pages 31/32. It states: *"For a multiple number of reasons, we are seeing a decline in the number of years that the average on-call firefighter is staying with the Service and therefore a higher resignation rate. These factors make it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain the numbers of on-call firefighters needed to meet our availability and response targets"*. Page 31 continues: *"Maintaining appliance availability at these stations, particularly at weekends, remains a key challenge and focus of work across the service"*. Can the Service state what specific fire engines in the service have provided 100% of availability each month for at least 6 months consecutively, over the last 3 years? Please state if they are RDS or WDS, and if this was daytime (0700-1900hrs) or nighttime (1900-0700hrs) availability".

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