



Hereford & Worcester Fire Authority

Audit and Standards Committee

Wednesday, 17 April 2024, 10:30

**Chairman: Mr M Hart**

**Vice-Chairman: Mr A Amos**

## **Minutes**

**Members Present:** Mr A Amos, Mr D Boatright-Greene, Mr B Brookes, Mr Al Hardman, Mr M Hart, Ms N McVey, Mr R J Morris, Ms D Toynbee

### **0301 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Cllr B Clayton, Cllr I Hardiman and Cllr E Marshall.

### **0302 Named Substitutes**

There were no named substitutes.

### **0303 Declarations of Interest (if any)**

There were no interests declared.

### **0304 Confirmation of Minutes**

***RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.***

### **0305 External Audit Plan (2023/24 Accounts)**

The Treasurer introduced Alex Walling from Bishop Fleming as the new External Auditor. Members were reminded that the Authority had agreed to tender via the LGA Local Public Sector Audit Appointments arrangement as part of the nationally managed contract and it had been awarded to Bishop Fleming.

The External Auditor then presented the External Audit Plan (2023/24 Accounts) which set out the work to be undertaken in 2024/25 in respect

of the 2023/24 Audit.

*[Cllr A Hardman entered the meeting at 10.33am].*

Members noted that the Authority is required to prepare the accounting statements for 2023/24 by 31 July 2024 and is required to publish the accounts along with the Auditor's Opinion by 30 November 2024.

Members were also reminded of the delays to the audit of the 2021/22 accounts, which had led to delays to the production of the 2022/23 Statements, and consequentially the delayed audit of those Accounts. Members were assured that Officers were working with Grant Thornton (as auditors of the 2022/23 accounts) and Bishop Fleming (as auditors for the 2023/24 accounts) to minimise the impact on production and audit of the 2023/24 Statements.

***RESOLVED that the External Audit Plan 2024/25 (2023/24 Accounts) including proposed Audit Fee be noted.***

#### **0306 Internal Audit Progress Report**

The Head of Internal Audit Shared Service presented Members with an update in regards to the delivery of the Internal Audit Plan 2023/24.

Members noted that the Internal Audit Plan for 2023/24 continued to see progress. For the 2023/24 finalised reports issued to date there were no high priority recommendations to report, and robust management action plans had been agreed and were in place to address the findings from the reviews. All finalised reviews would be reported to Members on completion.

The Head of Internal Audit informed Members that he was confident that the Annual Internal Audit Report and Opinion would be provided on time at the next Committee meeting. At this stage, there were no emerging risks or issues which would indicate that a less than Reasonable level of assurance would be provided for 2023/24.

***RESOLVED that the report be noted.***

#### **0307 Draft Annual Governance Statement 2023/24**

The Head of Legal Services presented the draft Annual Governance Statement 2023/24 for approval. Members were informed that the Authority has to review its governance arrangements once a year via self assessment. Members were pleased to note that the Authority had provided evidence of compliance with all the core and supporting principles of the CIPFA/Solace framework 'Delivering Good Governance

in Local Government (2016 Edition).

Members noted that there were no areas where the direction of travel had decreased during 2023/24 or where the status was less than satisfactory.

The Treasurer had suggested an amendment to paragraph 5.1 of the Annual Governance Statement to include reference to the 2021/22 audit delays and this was approved by the Committee. The amendment was as follows:

Due to the delays to the 2021/22 Audit (which ultimately made no change to the Accounts) and consequential and sequential impacts, the 2022/23 Accounts were produced late and are not yet audited. This did not give rise to any underlying governance risks as the core Accounts were produced and out-turn duly reported. However, there will be a consequential impact on the production of the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts due to capacity, but this is expected to be minimal and back on track by 2024/25. Again, there are no underlying governance issues.

***RESOLVED that the Draft Annual Governance Statement 2023/24 be approved subject to the amendment to paragraph 5.1 as detailed above.***

**0308 Annual Compliments, Complaints, Concerns and Requests for Information 2023/24**

The Head of Legal Services presented a report on compliments, complaints, concerns and requests for information made by the public to the Service over the past 12 months.

Members were informed that there was an increase in the number of complaints received over the past 12 months compared to last year and were assured there were no recurring themes or trends in the concerns and complaints to give any cause for concern.

Members were assured that all complaints are investigated by duty officers, draft responses are sent to Legal Services to be reviewed and all complainants can ask for a further review by the Assistant Chief Fire Officer or make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Members noted that there had been an increase in the number of requests for information and SARs during this period. No requests were passed to the Information Commissioners Office for review.

The Assistant Chief Officer then updated Members on the new confidential reporting tool 'Say So'. Members noted that since the introduction of 'Say So' in March 2023 (as recommended by the

HMICFRS Spotlight Report in October 2023), there had been 28 concerns raised via members of staff. Since the introduction of 'Say So PLUS' in September 2023 there had been one concern raised by a member of the public.

Members raised concerns about the current confidential reporting scheme that allowed anonymous concerns to be raised. Members asked for an urgent review of the current scheme so as to allow confidential reporting but stop concerns being raised anonymously to avoid potentially vexatious claims.

***RESOLVED that:***

***the Committee noted that during the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024:***

***i) a total of 117 requests for information containing 433 queries about the Service were received. This number had reduced compared to last year's figure because requests for incident information were now categorised separately as Miscellaneous Information Requests (MIRs). There were 174 MIRs during this period. No requests were passed to the Information Commissioners Office for review.***

***ii) a total of 53 compliments were received from the public;***

***iii) 43 complaints or concerns about Service activities were made;***

***iv) 39 other complaints or concerns were received about activities carried out by other organisations or individuals;***

***v) 3 of the complainants appealed the response provided but none were passed to the Local Government Ombudsman for further investigation;***

***vi) 28 concerns were received via the internal 'Say So' confidential and an anonymous reporting tool, from staff; and***

***vii) 1 concern was received via 'Say So PLUS' the confidential and anonymous reporting tool for members of the public.***

***Members asked the Chief Fire Officer and relevant officers for an urgent review of the current Say So scheme so as to allow confidential reporting but stop concerns being raised anonymously to avoid potentially vexatious claims.***

**(Quarter 3)**

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer presented the Committee with a Health and Safety update on activities and items of significance.

Members noted that the number of safety events recorded in Quarter 3 had increased by 3 compared to the previous quarter. The most significant increases were in the Vehicle Collisions and Near Hit categories. Members were reassured that all incidents were investigated at an appropriate level, with no significant findings identified.

The Internal Auditor suggested that health and safety audits get fed back to him to be referenced into the audit plan.

***RESOLVED that the following, in particular, be noted:***

- i) The involvement of the Service in Health and Safety initiatives;***
- ii) Health and Safety performance information recorded during October to December 2023 (Quarter 3); and***
- iii) Workforce Health & Wellbeing performance (Quarter 3).***

The Meeting ended at: 11:55

Signed:.....

Date:.....

Chairman