



Report on Avon Fire Authority to the meeting of North Somerset Council, 10th November 2020

The Fire Authority met on 30th September 2020. Meetings are now taking place via Zoom.

Budget monitoring

At the meeting, members considered an update to the revenue and capital budgets and other financial information for the current financial year. The key points related to changes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The revenue budget has also been adjusted to reflect the additional income received from central government.

Additional income of £870,000 was received for Covid-19 costs and also £535,000 to fund Technical Fire Safety (TFS) requirements. The Covid-19 funding has been used for PPE, additional cleaning, additional staffing costs, support in relation to Health & Safety welfare and wellbeing. Some of it has also been put aside to bring forward ICT infrastructure required to support more flexible working and more robust systems. The TFS funding is being used towards four underfunded posts in the Technical Fire Safety team. This is dealing with the inspection of high-rise buildings which will be completed by the end of next year.

There has also been an adjustment due to the early repayment of a deferred capital receipt from the sale of the former headquarters in central Bristol.

There have been small underspends in expenditure, principally due to the restrictions. There has been a delay in the apprentice firefighter programme, and an underspend on corporate staff due to several unfilled vacancies, including at senior level (a new clerk and monitoring officer to the authority has now been appointed). There has been an overspend on pension costs due to a higher than average number of ill-health retirements.

We have received confirmation of 2020/21 pay awards. These are decided at a national level. Operational staff will receive a 2% pay award, and corporate staff 2.75%. The corporate staff award is higher than anticipated, so will provide additional budget pressure.

The capital programme will be underspent, mainly due to delays to the Bedminster Fire Station refurbishment, the fleet upgrade and the IT transformation. Some of these costs will therefore be deferred to the next financial year. The redevelopments of Weston-super-Mare, Bath and Avonmouth fire stations are on track for their full capital budget for 2020/21.

IT infrastructure

The authority is bringing forward further major upgrades to the IT infrastructure, which is considered to be significantly out-of-date due to underinvestment over the past 10 years or so. The pandemic has demonstrated the need for a speedy response to the lack of resilience in the IT network, which the authority has now resolved to improve.

Independent Person

In complying with the code of conduct arrangements, the authority should appoint at least one Independent Person, whose views are to be sought, and taken into account, before it makes any decision on any allegation that it needs to investigate. The IP's views may be sought at other stages in the event of a complaint, and can provide other guidance. Since the previous holder of the post stepped down in 2019, the authority has been unable to recruit a replacement and the role has remained vacant. It is thought that one of the reasons for the difficulty in recruitment has been the low level of the allowance offered. The authority therefore resolved to increase this allowance from £250 per year to £1000 per year, which would be in line with that of neighbouring authorities, and to advertise the position more widely.

Covid-19 update

The authority and the fire and rescue service continues to adapt according to the requirements in relation to the pandemic. There have been a small number of operational staff unable to work due to self-isolation, but the service is resilient across the board, and capability and the level of emergency response remain robust. The service is updating policies to ensure Track and Trace procedures are in place, and all workplaces and vehicles are Covid-secure.

The multi-agency approach to the pandemic continues to see frontline assistance provided to the South West Ambulance Service Trust by all the fire services across the south west region. This has been very successful with more than 200 volunteers supporting the ambulance service, 15 ambulances crewed by fire & rescue staff, leading to a 2.5% increase in ambulance capacity. The agreement on supporting ambulance crews continues for the rest of this year.

Cllr Robert Payne