

WORCESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCILS

MEETING OF THE WORCESTERSHIRE REGULATORY SERVICES BOARD

THURSDAY, 16TH NOVEMBER 2023, AT 4.30 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors H. J. Jones (Vice-Chairman), J. Raine, C. Palmer, L. Harrison, J. Kane (during Minute No's 23/23 to 26/23), M. Allcott, R. Deller, M. Goodge, T. Onslow and P. Harrison

Officers: Mr P. Carpenter (via Microsoft Teams), Mr. S. Wilkes, Ms. K. Lahel, Mr. M. Cox, Mrs. M. Patel and Mrs. P. Ross

Partner Officers: Mr. L. Griffiths, Worcester City Council, Mr. I. Edwards, Malvern Hills and Wychavon District Council and Mr. I. Miller, Wyre Forest District Council (via Microsoft Teams)

20/23

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J. Riaz, Worcester City Council and Councillor K. Taylor, Bromsgrove District Council.

21/23

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

22/23

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Worcestershire Regulatory Services Board held on 5th October were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Worcestershire Regulatory Services Board meeting held on 5th October 2023, be approved as a correct record.

23/23

WRS REVENUE MONITORING APRIL - SEPTEMBER 2023

The Acting Director of Finances, Bromsgrove District Council (BDC) and Redditch Borough Council (RBC), introduced the report and in doing so drew Members' attention to the Recommendations as detailed on pages 15 to 16 of the main agenda report.

The report covered the period April to September 2023.

Members were informed that the detailed revenue monitoring report, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report; showed a projected outturn

2023/24 surplus of £241k. It was appreciated that this was an estimation to the year-end based on the following assumptions: -

- A 2% pay award had been added to the projected outturn figures, as per the original budget. There was a reserved £120k from last year's surplus to accommodate an enhanced pay award in 2023/24.
- Agency staff costs were being incurred due to backfilling of staff working on other contractual work e.g., food recovery programme, contaminated land and work for other local authorities, these costs were covered by vacant posts and income generation.
- If April to September 2023 spend on pest control continued on the same trend for the rest of the year, there would be an overspend on this service of £14k. WRS officers would continue to monitor and analyse this spend and advise of any changes in the projected outturn figure at quarter 3. The projected outturn figure to be funded by partners was: -

Redditch Borough Council £6k
Wychavon District Council £8k

This income was included in the income projected outturn.

- The following were the actual bereavements costs April to September 2023 to be funded by partners. These costs were charged on an as and when basis. Due to the nature of the charge, it was not possible to project a final outturn figure: -

Bromsgrove District Council	£3k
Redditch Borough Council	£14k
Worcester City Council	£5k

- Appendix 2 to the report, detailed the income achieved by WRS for April to September 2023.
- Any grant funded expenditure was shown separate to the core service costs as this was not funded by the participating Councils.

The Head of Worcestershire Regulatory Services responded to a question from Members with regard to any surpluses / deficits, and in doing so explained that the Service Legal Agreement (SLA) required partners to make up any deficit, and that partners would benefit from any surplus. There was currently £137k in General Reserves and this would be the first port of call for any overspends. Following such an occurrence, if the level of overspend was significant, the ability to use the reserve would allow time for The Board to review the operation of WRS services and whether the model of operations needed to be revised ahead of a new budget being set for the following year.

The income brought in during the first half of 2023/24 was £204k, which was slightly below the previous year. This equated to 6.8% for 2023/24 and 7.7% for 2022/23.

Members were reassured that the Technical Services Manager, WRS, continued to source new business.

RESOLVED that the Board notes the final financial position for the period April – September 2023, and that

- 1.1 partner councils be informed of their liabilities for 2023-24 in relation to Bereavements, as follows: -

Council	Apr – Sept 23 Actual for Bereavements £000
Bromsgrove District Council	3
Redditch Borough Council	14
Worcester City Council	5
Total	22

- 1.2 partner councils be informed of their liabilities for 2023-24 in relation to Pest Control, as follows: -

Council	Projected Outturn for Pest Control £000
Redditch Borough Council	6
Wychavon District Council	8
Total	14

- 1.3 partner councils be informed of their liabilities for 2023-24 in relation to three additional Technical Officers, as follows: -

Council	Estimated Projected Outturn 2023/24 Tech Officer Income Generation £000	Estimated Projected Outturn 2023/24 Tech Officer Animal Activity £000	Estimated Projected Outturn 2023/24 Gull Control £000

Redditch Borough Council	6	2	
Malvern Hills District Council	4	7	
Worcester City Council	6	2	65
Bromsgrove District Council	5	9	
Wychavon District Council	8	14	
Wyre Forest District Council	5	8	
Total	34	42	65

24/23

ACTIVITY & PERFORMANCE DATA - QUARTER 2 2023/24

The Head of Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) presented the Activity and Performance Data for Quarter 2 – 2023/2024; and in doing so drew Members' attention to the recommendation, as detailed on page 23 of the main agenda report. The following key points were highlighted:

Activity Data

The second quarter of 2023/4 was a relatively damp affair, which had impacted on at least one or two of the measures. Worcestershire continued to be a draw for activities with a range of events and festivals continuing to feature and now that we were beyond the pandemic, crowds appeared to be returning, but this was not to everyone's liking.

Although there was a rise in the number of complaints and enquiries between Q1 and Q2, the overall number of food safety cases recorded by WRS during the year to date was a reduction of 37% compared to 2021-22, and a reduction of 11% compared to 2022-23. In general terms, a higher proportion of food safety cases were enquiries such as requests for business advice or requests for export health certificates.

Q2 saw the rise in numbers of accidents reported slowing and the number of complaints and enquiries still increasing. Despite this, the number of health and safety at work cases recorded by WRS during the year to date was still 32% lower compared to 2021-22.

Although applications were running more or less on trend, and complaints and enquiries were on the up, the overall number of licensing cases recorded by WRS during the year to date was an increase of 10% compared to 2021-22, but a reduction of 1% compared to 2022-23. This probably reflected the new post-pandemic normal and may be true for a number of our trends. Approximately 68% of cases were applications and registrations; with 29% of these cases relating to private hire or hackney carriage vehicle licences and 27% relating to temporary events.

Numbers of planning enquiries fell during Q2 following an increase in Q1, however, for the year to date the total still represented a reduction of 30% compared to 2021-22, but an increase of 8% compared to 2022-23. Approximately 93% of enquiries had been consultations, whilst 45% related to contaminated land. Around 16% of enquiries were completed, on a contractual basis, on behalf of other local authorities.

Interestingly, the number of information requests, which were often linked to the planning system, grew during Q2, so we may see an increase in planning work to follow this. Having said that, officers continued to report feeling that the number of general FOI requests had been higher than previously experienced.

Although the number of dog control (strays, lost dogs, etc) cases recorded by WRS fell from Q1 to Q2, overall, the figure during the year to date was an increase of 35% compared to 2021-22, but an increase of 9% compared to 2022-23. Approximately 90% of cases were related to stray or lost dogs, with 74% of these cases relating to "contained strays" (meaning dogs were found and held by a member of the public). The increase in the number of stray dogs reported across Worcestershire contrasted with pre-pandemic levels which showed a long-term trend of decreasing numbers of stray dogs being reported to the Councils. The Technical Services Manager worked hard with the kennelling contractors.

The Summer was always a busy time for nuisance work, however the poor weather this year probably led to a reduction in work volumes if not the complexity with the number of pollution cases recorded by WRS during the year to date representing a reduction of 24% compared to 2021-22, and 17% compared to 2022-23. It should be noted, however, that the better than usual Spring had led to an earlier start in the increase in workload.

Approximately 77% of cases had related to noise nuisances, with noise from domestic properties (such as noise from barking dogs or from audio-visual equipment) the most prominent sources.

Although the number of public health cases had increased between Q1 and Q2, the overall number recorded by WRS during the year to date represented a reduction of 31% compared to 2021-22 but was consistent with the figures for 2022-23. Approximately 60% of cases have related to pest control, such as enquiries about domestic treatments, enquires about sewer baiting, or complaints about pest control issues caused by the actions of neighbouring residents or businesses.

Performance

The non-business customer measure had fallen to 64.4% from 69.3% last quarter but remained above last year's out-turn figure of 59.2%. Heavy demands on resourcing in Community Environmental Health over the Summer meant we struggled to keep on top of nuisance complaints despite most officers being taken off proactive work to focus on nuisance complaints. Whilst almost 70% of people were happy with the speed of initial response, just under 60% were happy with the time it took to reach a conclusion. With this in mind there had now been some changes made to 'front of house.'

We also saw an unusual fall in business satisfaction this quarter, with the figure ending at 94.5%, two or three percentage points below where it has traditionally sat. Managers had been asked to look into this.

Compliments again significantly outnumbered complaints.

Performance on processing complete driver license renewals was at 93.9% for all authorities, which was lower than in previous years, although several individual authorities remained at 100%. Licensing was quite pressured during the Summer with staffing capacity (due to staff holidays) so this slight downturn in performance was not unexpected.

The data on defective vehicles related to situations where the vehicle was recorded as having been suspended either by the district garage on inspection or by an officer. This may follow a reported accident taking the vehicle outside the acceptable standards, or even when the vehicle was submitted for its routine 6-monthly check. In recent reporting periods we have seen an increase in the number of defective vehicles reported under this indicator, driven mainly by higher numbers in one of the six fleets. This had continued and, by the end of Q2 this year, 34 vehicles were suspended in the period, with the majority belonging to our one of our larger fleet areas. Even with this number, only 2.19% of the fleet county-wide were recorded as potentially problematic. Members were asked to note that there were approximately 1,500 licensed vehicles around Worcestershire. Officer would continue to re-enforce the

need to ensure vehicles were always fit for use on the road with drivers and operators.

Staff sickness had increased from 0.76 days per FTE to 1.42 days per FTE cumulative for the year. Current sickness levels were lower than the same period in the last 2 years.

The overall rate of noise complaints against population was 0.79. This was slightly lower than the figure at Q2 in the most recent years. It may be influenced by the slightly lower rate of complaint due to the poor summer weather.

The rate of hospitality businesses not upholding the 4 licensing objectives was 5%. This was roughly in line with 3 of the 5 previously recorded figures at this point.

Income brought in during the first half of 2023/24 was £204,718, which was slightly below last year (£232,520,) but still significantly up on the 2-years before this.

The Technical Services Manager, WRS, responded to questions from Members with regards to pest control and in doing so highlighted that traditionally Redditch Borough Council (RBC) and Wychavon District Council (WDC) had a higher demand for the service. Historically, RBC had provided free rat treatments for all. In respect of WDC, officers were unsure of the specific issue / demand on the service, but it was more localised in deprived areas and was also a subsidised service.

The Head of WRS noted the comments made by some of the Board Members, as follows:-

- To ask if it was possible to show figures on the graphs included in the report, where relevant; or amend the scales on the axis; and
- To ask if it was possible to provide some longer-term trend data on some of the measures, extending periods beyond the 3-years currently shown in the Activity Data Report, emailing these out to all Board Members should this be possible.

Members expressed their thanks to officers for the detailed information within the report.

RESOLVED that the Activity and Performance Data Quarter 2 – 2023/2024, be noted and that Members use the contents of the report in their own reporting back to their respective partner authority.

25/23

WRS BUDGETS 2024/25 - 2026/27

The Acting Director, Finances, Bromsgrove District Council (BDC) and Redditch Borough Council (RBC), introduced the report and in doing drew Members' attention to the recommendations, as detailed on pages 63 to 65 of the main agenda report.

Members were informed that, as detailed in the report, that there was a gross expenditure budget of £4,572k and a total income budget of £961k.

The revenue budget and partner percentage allocations for 2024/25 onwards, was detailed in the table at recommendation 1.3, page 63 of the main agenda report.

Members attention was drawn to the WRS Budgets 2024/25 information, as detailed on page 66 of the main agenda report and the following assumptions made in relation to the projections, as follows:-

- The enhanced pay award for 2023/24 was reserved from 2022/23 surplus. WRS were not able to fund this increase year on year, therefore an increase in partner funding would be required.
- 3% pay award across all staff for 2024/25, 2% for 2025/26 & 2026/27.
- Increase in Rent of £4.6k in 2024/25, a further 4% in 2025/2026 and 2026/2027.
- Increase in ICT Hosting of £4.4k, a further 4% in 2025/26 and 2026/27.
- Increase in Support Hosting of £4.9k in 2024-25, a further 3% in 2025/26 and 2026-27.
- Total partner contribution as included in Appendix 2.
- Income projections as included at Appendix 3.
- No inflationary increases in supplies and services or transport.
- Pension back-funding to be paid by all partners.

Members were asked to note that, in addition to the base budget there were three additional technical officers working on income generation, animal activity and gull control. Officers were unable to include these officers into the base budget as the income generation officer was an additional post on the establishment to bring in additional income agreed by partner councils and the animal activity and gull control officer recharge percentage basis was different to the agreed partner recharge allocations

The Acting Director, Finances, (BDC) and (RBC) further highlighted to the Board that, following discussions, Partner Officers of the Board had agreed to support Worcester City Council to achieve its budgetary requirements for 2024/5; and that the starting point for their contribution before the additions for salary pressures, etc, would be £30K less than

the previous year. Officers had identified several areas where work might be varied and the detail of this would be dealt with at officer level in the coming months, ahead of the new financial year.

Following on from this, Councillor T. Onslow, Wyre Forest District Council asked for a further explanation on the reduction of £30k for Worcester City Council; and further highlighted that Wyre Forest District Council had a budget deficit to address and that they would be looking across all service areas for savings.

The Acting Director, Finances, (BDC) and (RBC) explained that Worcester City Council had approached Chief Officers 3 / 4 months previously looking for reductions. Therefore, the Head of WRS had looked at services to see what WRS could deliver without affecting other partner authorities.

The Head of WRS further explained that officers had discussed the service areas that could be reduced. Licensing was required by law to be cost neutral so was not included. Other service areas were reviewed to determine if savings could be made for one partner without impacting on the others. Following these discussions, it had become apparent how heavily integrated and interconnected many of the common service areas like food inspection and nuisance investigation were, making it very difficult to segregate for one partner authority.

Officers had looked at the work carried out on behalf of Worcester City Council and the other partners and had identified a small number of areas where work levels might be adjusted downwards for Worcester, without this impacting on work undertaken for the other partner authorities and outside agencies, as this was key to continued income generation. Members were reassured that there was only a small amount of risk outside of the partnership, and that he was confident that this would not have an impact on any of the other partner authorities.

Councillor T. Onslow, Wyre Forest District Council, further added that Wyre Forest DC could not sign off the WRS Budgets for 2024/25 – 2026/27 at this stage, as their authority was also looking at savings during this 3-year period, so may have to ask for savings similar to those of Worcester City Council.

The Head of WRS stated that neither he nor the Partner Officers had been made aware that Wyre Forest District Council needed to look for savings in coming year, 2024/25.

The Head of WRS further clarified that, as detailed in the Legal Agreement between the partners and the 'Proceedings at Meetings', any recommendations before the Board would be decided by a majority of the Members of the Board present and voting, so if the other authorities were content, their Members could vote in favour and the budgets would pass to their councils for ratification of their relevant contributions.

However, the Head of WRS added that, whilst it was not ideal, the agreement also provided an opportunity for authorities, in this case Wyre Forest, to come back to the Board with an agreed revised budget contribution at the meeting of the Board on 15th February 2024 so that the budget could be signed off ahead of the March date mentioned in the legal agreement.

The Head of WRS further explained that the WRS Budgets 2024/25 – 2026/27 if agreed by a majority vote of the Board at this stage, would mean that the partners voting in favour could then proceed with the figures agreed for their contribution, presenting them during the decision-making process at their individual budget setting meetings.

Councillor T. Onslow, Wyre Forest District Council, thanked the Head of WRS for his explanation but stated that she could not agree with the recommendations as they stood and would go back to the Cabinet Members, with a view to considering what may be affordable in the coming period. Councillor T. Onslow asked if the Head of WRS would meet with her to explain what savings might be made but also what impacts this might have on residents and businesses in their district.

The Head of WRS noted this and suggested that a separate meeting could be arranged at Wyre Forest House with the Wyre Forest representative of the Partner Officers Group, with this being followed up with the wider Partner Officer members of the Board ahead of the February meeting.

On being put to the vote, with Councillors T. Onslow and P. Harrison, Wyre Forest District Council abstaining, it was

RECOMMENDED that partner authorities approve the following for 2024/25 - 2026/27:-

- 1.1 Approve the 2024/25 gross expenditure budget of £4,572k as shown at Appendix 1 to the report,
- 1.2 Approve the 2024/25 income budget of £991k as shown at Appendix 1, to the report;
- 1.3 Approve the revenue budget and partner percentage allocations for 2024/25 as follows: -

Council	£'000	Revised %
Bromsgrove District Council	518	14.45
Malvern Hills District Council	471	13.13
Redditch Borough Council	633	17.68
Worcester City	575	16.07

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Council		
Wychavon District	840	23.43
Wyre Forest District Council	546	15.24
Total	3,583	

1.4 Approve the additional partner liabilities for 2024/25 in relation to unavoidable salary pressure, as follows: -

Council	2023/24 £'000	2024/25 £'000
Bromsgrove District Council	17	16
Malvern Hills District Council	15	15
Redditch Borough Council	20	20
Worcester City Council	18	18
Wychavon District Council	27	27
Wyre Forest District Council	18	17
Total	115	113

1.5 Approve the additional partner liabilities for 2024/25 in relation to increase in hosting costs, as follows: -

Council	Increase in Rent £000	Increase in ICT Hosting £000	Increase in Support Hosting £000
Bromsgrove District Council	0.7	0.6	0.7
Malvern Hills District Council	0.6	0.6	0.6
Redditch Borough Council	0.8	0.8	0.9
Worcester City Council	0.7	0.7	0.8
Wychavon District Council	1.1	1.1	1.1
Wyre Forest District Council	0.7	0.7	0.8
Total	4.6	4.5	4.9

1.6 Approve the additional partner liabilities for 2024/25 in relation to three Technical Officers, as follows: -

Council	Tech Officer Income Generation £000	Tech Officer Animal Activity £000	Tech Officer Gull Control £000
Bromsgrove District Council	5	8	
Malvern Hills District Council	5	14	
Redditch Borough Council	7	2	
Worcester City Council	6	3	35
Wychavon District Council	8	12	
Wyre Forest District Council	6	5	
Total	37	44	35

26/23

AUTOMATION PROJECT UPDATE

The Licensing and Support Services Manager, Worcestershire Regulatory Services, briefly reminded Members that an update had recently been provided at the meeting of the Board on 5th October 2023.

Due to the short time since the last report to the Board, the amount of change that could be reported was limited. Officers continued to quality check additional forms whilst testing on the financial system took place; and planning for the second phase continued.

Now officers had the merchant ID, the team had been liaising with Adelante (the financial payment platform) who were now assessing how to attach the ID to the appropriate items in the online store. This would allow the appropriate monies to be transferred to Bromsgrove District Council (BDC) and then redistributed to the relevant partner authority.

Sample files had already been exchanged to ensure monies received into Tech-One, the BDC finance system, related to the item details that were on the interface file. The final version could then be loaded onto the Tech One system.

Progress

Meetings had been set up with the Communications Team to discuss the soft launch strategy of the plan, so that this could be discussed with stakeholder groups in testing phase two. It was important that all of the

information that customers required to complete the forms was available at this stage. This would include: -

- Website Update
- FAQ's – Frequently asked questions
- Guidance Documents

Some of these may require changing or editing throughout the testing stages.

Sadly, several obstacles had arisen that the team continued to address by working with our external providers. Firstly, the address base gazetteer had required a software update to ensure the most current correct addresses were being used in the system. This would be normal for most address-based systems that, from time to time the associated gazetteer needed to be updated. This should ensure that newer addresses were easy for applicants to put into the system.

Secondly, there had been a delay in implementing the licensing connector from IDOX, our long-standing database supplier, which was required to ensure the correct district was paid once an applicant had selected the district from a drop-down list. Officers had been informed that this would be available as part of a IDOX upgrade in January 2024. Clearly, officers wanted to ensure that the process was seamless and would not consider moving to live until they knew that the right monies would be identifiable and portable to the correct partner authority.

In parallel to the wider automation project, officers continued to assess the roll out of electronic ID Cards in the taxi trade for both safeguarding and enforcement measures and this had progressed. IT colleagues at Wyre Forest continued to work on the dashboard implementation and were now starting to trial this. Once officers understand the timeframes of this in more detail, a plan would be executed for implementation across the County.

The Technical Services Manager. WRS, responded to questions from the Board and in doing so explained that, with regard to the issues around addresses and new addresses, WRS did not own the data, the data was owned by each partner authority, who updated their data set from time to time with the associated gazetteer. Therefore, the associated gazetteer needed to be updated as WRS did not have an up-to-date version. There had also been an issue with the system caused by what WRS officers thought was an IT 'bug'. This meant that officers had been unable to add any current gazetteer updates until this was resolved. Eventually, the IT software provider agreed with WRS

diagnosis of the issue and sought to resolve the situation in their system. Once the patch is applied to the system to fix the 'bug', WRS would be able to update the gazetteer to the most up to date version. Members were reassured that any costs associated with the "bug" resolution would be met by IDOX.

In response to a query on the 'go live' date, the Licensing and Support Services Manager, WRS, stated that she had hoped that the 'go live' date of April 2024 would still be met.

RESOLVED that the Progress Report on the Automation Project be noted.

The meeting closed at 5.17 p.m.

Chairman