

ESSEX FIRE AUTHORITY



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE POLICY AND STRATEGY COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 11 NOVEMBER 2009 AT 10:00 HOURS

Present:

Councillor K Bentley
Councillor R Callender
Councillor I Harrison
Councillor A M Hedley (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs A E Holland (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor R A Pearson
Councillor T C Smith-Hughes
Councillor A Turrell
Councillor E Webster

The following Officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Chief Fire Officer D Johnson
Finance Director & Treasurer M Clayton
Assistant Chief Fire Officer A Eckley
Director of HR & Workforce Planning, R Hopper
Deputy Clerk and Deputy Monitoring Officer, R Curtis
Minute Taker, T Adams

50. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Morris.

51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made by Members in respect of items included on the agenda.

52. MINUTES

The Committee received the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2009.

Resolved:

That the minutes be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

53. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS SEPTEMBER 2009

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/109/09 reported on the management accounts for the six months to 30 September 09 and the outturn position for the year.

Councillor Smith-Hughes said that he fully supported the report's recommendation, in his view the Authority had to be prudent in anticipation that the Government may not honour the

level of funding in the final year of the current spending review period and given that a further funding gap was anticipated in 2011/12.

Councillor Bentley said that it was a very good report, he enquired as to why there was a downward trend in the employment of retained firefighters. The Director of Workforce Development advised that it was a perennial issue faced by the Authority, that the overriding reason was changes in the County's demographics. The Service was exploring the issue and how to address it, with particular regard to the Uttlesford & Braintree command area. The Director of Workforce Development further advised the migration of some retained firefighters to whole-time status. The Chief Fire Officer referred to graphical data in the report, which illustrated that there was not necessarily a correlation between numbers of retained staff and appliance availability, the Committee noted that greater numbers of retained personnel during the summer of 2008 had not shown as an increase in appliance availability on the current year. The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that retained firefighters were required to honour contractual agreements; the Director of Workforce Development advised that the Service would be looking diligently at the availability of retained firefighters. The Chairman highlighted a previous decision of the Policy & Strategy Committee to increase the expenditure for retained firefighter training.

Councillor Turrell referred to the variances in the summary management accounts, that some of the variances were as much as 44%. The Finance Director & Treasurer advised that the variances were brought about by some of the departments' budget profiling, that some departments had an expectation that they would spend more quickly than they did, he suggested that underspends were of less concern. The Finance Director & Treasurer further said that there were tough times ahead, that budgets would not be spent just because they had been allocated. Councillor Turrell said that from her perspective an underspend was as serious as an overspend, that she was concerned in particular regarding the utilities variance. The Finance Director & Treasurer advised that the variance related to the timing of information, it was not accrual but commitment accounting with the associated tendency to lag.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Noted the report and
2. Agreed to transfer £1,000k of the current forecast underspend for the year to an earmarked "Invest to Save" reserve.

54. ASSESSING FINANCIAL PRIORITIES

The purpose of report EFA/110/09 by the Chief Fire Officer was to provide a framework and guidance for identifying expenditure priorities for the Authority. The Chief Fire Officer advised that the report illustrated a prudent model and the process and reasoning behind it. Councillor Smith-Hughes said that cross party it would be sensible to plan ahead, his view that Fire Services were likely to receive greater reductions in government funding. Councillor Smith-Hughes said that decisions needed to be made soon in order that the Authority was not rushed into them.

The Chairman advised the Committee that the guidance provided by the Finance Director & Treasurer to Lead Members and their review of the outcomes from the initial assessment would be communicated to Members as soon as possible, that a collaborative approach was needed, he added that the plan was way ahead of where some other local authorities were.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Agreed the framework for the assessment of expenditure priorities;
2. Noted the guidance provided by the Finance Director & Treasurer;
3. Appointed the Chairman and Lead Members to review the outcomes from the initial assessment; and
4. Agreed the timetable for the provision of further reports.

55. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT BOARD REVIEW

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/111/09 referred to the Deputy Chief Fire Officer's successful promotion to Chief Fire Officer in Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service and a review of the Strategic Management Board structure.

Councillor Bentley said that the report content was sensible. The Chairman offered the Committee's congratulations to the Deputy Chief Fire Officer in his absence.

Resolved:

That:

1. Members agreed to the removal of two Assistant Chief Fire Officer posts from the Service's Principal Officer establishment.
2. The Policy & Strategy Committee delegated to the Chairman and Lead Members authority to discuss and where appropriate approve recommendations brought forward by the Chief Fire Officer in respect of the Strategic Management Board review.
3. A full report be taken to a future full Fire Authority meeting detailing the outcomes of the review of the Strategic Management Board structure.

56. ECFRS SAP HR PROJECT

In accord with the ICT strategy Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/112/09 asked Members to approve the SAP HR Project.

The Chairman thanked ACFO Eckley and his team for their IT project work, he said that Essex' IT Strategy was way ahead of the game. Councillor Smith-Hughes said that approving the SAP HR project was an illustration of invest to save, and the table on page 4 of the report showed rigorous benefits, he requested that Members receive feedback regarding savings realised. The Director Workforce Development advised that the business case was a conservative assessment and he had been keen for the information to be presented robustly. ACFO Eckley confirmed that the governance arrangements ensured full reporting back to the Committee, that Members could be reassured that they would be kept abreast of performance and spending against the budget profiles.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Noted that the SAP project was fully aligned with the ICT Strategy; and
2. Approved the initiation of the capital project for the development of SAP at a cost of £2,29m

57. DISPOSAL OF HADLEIGH AND RAYLEIGH FIRE STATIONS

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/113/09 sought Members approval to dispose of Hadleigh and Rayleigh fire station sites.

Councillor Pearson said that there was no alternative but to approve the disposal of the sites, that the construction of Rayleigh Weir Fire Station had been positive and that authority to dispose of the sites should go to the Chairman and Chief Fire Officer.

Councillor Harrison asked about property law issues related to the Hadleigh site, ACFO Eckley advised that the issues were related to rights of access and previous covenants, that they were minor and to be expected.

Councillor Bentley said that he completely agreed that the sites should be disposed of; however he was interested to hear about the background regarding the possibility that the sites could be acquired by either of the relevant local authorities under Compulsory Purchase Orders. The Hadleigh site was circled by a road and a key site for regeneration. The Chairman said that the Fire Authority should be prepared to work with the local authorities but it was incumbent on a precepting authority to achieve the best market price for the sites. In answer to Councillor Bentley's query the Chairman advised that the buildings did not have protected status, he confirmed to Councillor Pearson that they were brownfield sites.

Councillor Bentley suggested that the Fire Authority had a social responsibility to ensure that the sites were not sold to a buyer who may capitalise on previous use and perhaps bring the Service into disrepute. The Deputy Clerk and Monitoring Officer advised that the Authority was bound by legal parameters regarding how the property was tendered, and further such acquisitions were usually via a third party. The Chairman added that any change of use was a matter for the local authority. Councillor Bentley said that it would be a boon if the sites were to be sold with outline planning consent. ACFO Eckley confirmed that different approaches would be explored to enhance sale price. Councillor Webster stated that Members must not forget that the Authority must achieve the best benefit from the sale. The Chairman said that the reputation of the Fire Service was important, that the closure of the Hadleigh and Rayleigh stations and the opening of the new Rayleigh Weir Community Fire Station had been handled very well.

The Chairman encouraged Members to attend the opening of the Rayleigh Weir Community Fire Station on 1 December 2009.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Agreed that Hadleigh fire station was surplus to requirements.
2. Approved the disposal of the Hadleigh fire station site.
3. Agreed that Rayleigh fire station was surplus to requirements.
4. Approved the disposal of the Rayleigh fire station site.
5. Approved that authority was delegated to the Chief Fire Officer, in consultation with the Chairman of Essex Fire Authority, to exercise the most economically advantageous option following consideration of disposal options.

58. MONITORING IT- PROGRESS REPORT

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/114/09 provided Members with an update on the progress of the Information Technology Transformation Programme. Councillor Bentley and Councillor Smith-Hughes welcomed the report as a good news story.

Resolved:

That Members noted the contents of the report.

59. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

That the public (including the Press) be excluded from the meeting during consideration of minute no. 60 on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as specified in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

60. KELVEDON PARK DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/115/09 recommended that Members reconsider existing plans for the further development of Kelvedon Park in the light of the current uncertain financial environment facing all public sector organisations.

Councillor Smith-Hughes thanked ACFO Eckley for a very good report and presentation, he said that it was disappointing that plans for further development would be placed on hold but it was the right decision. Councillor Smith-Hughes added that he, the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Officers had worked very hard looking at options but with the economic uncertainty had had to take the decision. ACFO Eckley advised that moving additional personnel into Kelvedon Park would not inhibit different ways of working, that flexible working was part of cultural change and moving forward.

The Chief Fire Officer agreed with Councillor Smith-Hughes, he said that it was a disappointing decision. The Chief Fire Officer thanked David Sontag, Kelvedon Park Development Programme Manager, for the large amount of work he had completed; the Chief Fire Officer added that he was confident that the plans would be returned to.

It was agreed that a series of written communications and face to face meetings with personnel would be initiated immediately on the rise of the meeting in order to make public the information contained in this item.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Approved that the plans for the further development of Kelvedon Park be placed on hold whilst clarity was achieved in relation to the future financial position of public sector bodies.
2. Approved that all necessary steps were taken to expedite the vacation of the Hutton site, utilising wherever possible existing property within the current property portfolio.
3. Agreed that, once the Hutton site had been entirely vacated by ECFRS staff, it would be surplus to requirements of Essex Fire Authority.
4. Approved the disposal of the Hutton site.
5. Approved that authority be delegated to the Chief Fire Officer, in consultation with the Chairman of Essex Fire Authority, to exercise the most economically advantageous option following consideration of both short term letting options and the longer term disposal option.

61. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 13 January 2010

Signed
Chairman.....13 January 2010