

ESSEX FIRE AUTHORITY



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE POLICY AND STRATEGY COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 13 JANUARY 2010 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 D W Morris
Councillor R A Pearson
Councillor T C Smith-Hughes
Councillor A Turrell

The following Officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

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

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Webster.

2. PROMOTIONS

The Chairman congratulated DCFO Eckley and DCFO Hunter on their recent promotions.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4. MINUTES

The Committee received the minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2009.

Resolved:

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

5. BUDGET 2010-11

Report EFA/001/10 by the Chief Fire Officer and the Finance Director & Treasurer provided an initial review on the revenue and capital budgets, reported the latest information on the formula grant settlement and provided a proposed level of council tax and precept requirements for 2010/11.

Councillor Smith-Hughes said that in his view the balance was correct, over the years the Authority had agreed modest council tax increases and had significantly invested in fire appliances and uniforms.

Councillor Smith-Hughes referred to the table on page 13 of the report, he said that the funding gap scenarios were appropriate in the light of information received from the Audit Commission, he said it should be borne in mind that financially it was likely Fire Authorities faced a tougher future than other local authorities. Councillor Smith-Hughes said that the Authority could face criticism regarding the change in the number of whole-time firefighter posts, he said the move away from the previous establishment was not a reduction in fire cover and would not increase risk, since previously there had been 1.4 firefighters employed for every post. Councillor Smith-Hughes further said that reducing the establishment by 30 posts could potentially save the Authority £1m, had been examined very carefully and would not have been recommended by Officers if it was not a sensible thing to do. Councillor Smith-Hughes said that the Authority did not want to impose a higher council tax than needed and that savings would be routed into other areas. It was agreed that outside the meeting the Finance Director & Treasurer would provide Councillor Smith-Hughes with a breakdown of changes in view of the highest and lowest expectations of Government grant. Councillor Smith-Hughes said it should be borne in mind that there would be a capital receipt when the Hutton site was sold, the Finance Director & Treasurer advised that he had left the projected receipt out of the accounts because it would not impact on the next year's budget. The Chairman referred to regional FiReControl, he advised Members that a new contractor had been employed but he did not expect any further information until after the general election. The Chairman said that the reduction in 30 posts could be portrayed by some as serious cuts but it was vital to make efficient use of resources and not over man posts. The Chief Fire Officer said that the Service was 'Rising to the Challenge' required by the Audit Commission, switch crewing was a far more efficient system and availability had improved, he accepted that it was politically unattractive and very challenging in regard to public perception. The Chief Fire Officer referred to a Members' event to be arranged for the end of March, beginning of April 2010, at the event Members would be asked to examine a range of up to potentially £7m of savings measures. The Chief Fire Officer said that another measure to be taken into account was sickness absence, the Chief Fire Officer advised that since he had joined the Service sickness absence had fallen from 14 to 7 ½ shifts per person per year.

The Vice-Chairman said she was pleased not to have gone lower than the proposed level of council tax, she was of the view that for a reasonable increase a good service would be provided. The Vice-Chairman referred to regional control, she advised Members of a special meeting of the LACC Directors on 21 December 09, LACC Members had been advised that the representative bodies requested the occasion to give presentations, the FBU had not attended due to weather conditions, the Vice-Chairman concurred with the Chairman's view that it was unlikely there would be further information regarding FiReControl until after the general election.

Councillor Bentley thanked the Finance Director & Treasurer for his excellent report. Councillor Bentley said that the proposed council tax increase was exceptionally good value, he speculated whether the public was aware how little they paid for exceptional service.

Councillor Morris was of the view that the new foam pod system, as opposed to foam tankers would make further savings.

Councillor Smith-Hughes said that the Authority was not acting on its own, all authorities whatever party had to make changes, some more radical than others, he said that Essex was being precautionary with an 'Invest to Save' approach.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that Essex had been the only Authority to publicly guarantee the favoured shift system. The Chief Fire Officer referred to a current dispute in South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service; the FBU had rejected proposals to change the 9 hour day shift and 15 hour night shift to equal shifts of 12 hours each. Yorkshire's Deputy Chief Fire Officer had written to the FBU stating that the Service would engage with staff on an individual basis, any personnel who did not agree to the changes would be subject to a formal contractual change process which would involve immediate dismissal followed by an offer of re-engagement on revised terms. The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised Members that it was not abnormal to resort to dismissal and re-engagement laws to impose terms and conditions, he further added that the FBU appeared to be gradually distancing itself from its membership.

Councillor Smith-Hughes said that Essex would continue to try to work with its hardworking workforce. The Chairman concurred, he said that the front-line was doing an excellent job and his ambition was for Essex to be the best performing Service.

Resolved:

That Members approved the revenue and capital budgets for 2010/11 and for submission to the full Authority meeting on 10 February 2010:

	2009/10	2010/11
Net Expenditure	£73,096k	£74,936k
Increase from 2009/10		£1,840k
Precept	£41,285k	£42,565k
Band D Council Tax	£64.62	£66.42
Increase from 2008/09		2.79%

- A net expenditure budget of £74.936m;
- A precept of £42.565m;
- A Band D Council Tax of £66.42 (an increase of £1.80 2.79%)
- The bands of Council Tax are shown in the following table.

Council Tax Band	2009/10	2010/11
A	£43.08	£44.28
B	£50.26	£51.66
C	£57.44	£59.04
D	£64.62	£66.42
E	£78.98	£81.18
F	£93.34	£95.94
G	£107.70	£110.70
H	£129.24	£132.84

- Capital expenditure budget (net) of £14.112m in 2010/11

6. NATIONAL JOINT COUNCIL JOINT PROTOCOL FOR GOOD INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Report EFA/002/10 by the Chief Fire Officer clarified the Service position on the potential application of the national Joint Council Joint Protocol for good Industrial Relations in the Fire & Rescue Service.

Councillor Smith-Hughes said that it was important to keep in mind that the Authority made decisions and management implemented those decisions, the job of an independent arbitrator was to find compromise between parties. The Chairman and Councillor Smith-Hughes were both in agreement that independent arbitrators did not manage the Service and that arbitration was the last resort on matters of negotiation. The Chairman said that the representative bodies should enter into the consultative process positively, that there was far more mileage in working with the Authority than against it.

The Chairman advised the Committee that in his view the report's contents were a tidying up exercise, he assured Members that he always notified his group of any discussions with Lead Members.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Agreed that in situations where matters which are subject to **negotiation** cannot be agreed between the Service and a trade union, the Chairman of EFA, in consultation with lead Members, will consider the Chief Fire Officer's request to refer the matter to National Joint Council.
2. Agreed that in situations where matters which are subject to **consultation** cannot be agreed between the Service and a trade union, the Chairman of EFA, in consultation with lead Members, will support the Chief Fire Officer to fulfil his/her obligation to manage locally.

7. OPERATIONAL AVAILABILITY PERFORMANCE MEASURE

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/003/10 set before the Committee the current and future arrangements for the measurement of operational appliance availability. The report recommended the point of measurement to three hours after the commencement of a shift, or as soon as possible to account for the time taken to redistribute personnel. Councillor Bentley asked how Essex compared with other Services. The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that some other Services forecasted resources in advance of change of shift preventing the need to allocate resources on the day, and that the SAP system currently being implemented would allow the Service to forecast crewing needs at stations in advance.

Councillor Bentley initiated a discussion about how the Service communicated with the media. He suggested that the Chairman and the Chief Fire Officer met with journalists for a regular monthly briefing about Service issues e.g. that positive crewing maximised the available service and was not about cutting posts. DCFO Hunter confirmed the Service provided the media with an abundance of informative data, it was generally acknowledged that negative stories made headlines. The Chairman said that he and the Chief Fire Officer issued joint press releases, he was happy for early draft copies of same to be sent to Fire Authority Members in order that they could tailor them for local press, he suggested that a Member explaining the issues could carry more weight.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Approved the change to the point in time at which the Service measures operational appliance availability from 'At change of shift' to 'Change of shift + 3 Hours, or as soon as possible'.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE REPORT AND REVISED ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

The Committee received Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/004/10 which presented the second annual Environmental Performance Report and the revised Environmental Strategy and Action Plan for the period 2010/11.

Councillor Morris said that notwithstanding the carbon reduction it was to be appreciated that the running cost of energy would be reduced.

The Vice-Chairman enquired whether the old uniforms had been donated to charity. The Finance Director & Treasurer advised that the best option had been to dispose of the uniforms through a Government disposal agency.

Councillor Smith-Hughes noted that a commentary was provided for most of the stations that showed an increase in energy consumption. DCFO Eckley agreed that there were significant areas for investigation, but that overall the data was very positive, that the Authority was in a reasonable position, he added that the Service sought to improve and was moving forward.

Councillor Smith-Hughes referred to appendix 4 of the report which measured the carbon footprint of Service properties, he enquired about Hutton site's spike in 2008. DCFO Eckley advised that during that year additional staff had moved into the site from other areas.

Councillor Bentley asked if the Service encouraged car sharing. DCFO Eckley advised that reducing mileage was a focus point; Councillor Bentley was of the view that individuals should be individually incentivised to look at different ways of travelling. The Finance Director & Treasurer highlighted the Service's support of the Cycle to Work Scheme.

DCFO Eckley highlighted Authority Members' engagement in the Environmental strategy, he said that the action plan had been revised in accordance with the wishes of the Authority. DCFO Eckley advised that funding had paid for meaningful projects.

Councillor Harrison enquired if fluorine free foam would perform as the foam in current use. The Chief Fire Officer, foam lead on firefighting foam for CFOA, advised Councillor Harrison that the fluorine free foam performed exactly the same, except on fires involving alcohol, that it was harder to reseal with this foam, the Chief Fire Officer added that there was no difference in its application.

The Chairman advised Members of a recent visit that he had made to Rayleigh Weir Community Fire Station with a project manager from the US Department of Energy. The Chairman said that DO Dave Bill had rearranged his schedule at short notice to answer with professionalism the project manager's questions.

Resolved:

That Members noted the requirement under the Carbon Reduction Commitment to report on the Authority's carbon footprint at the end of the financial year 2010/2011

9. EQUALITY STANDARD FOR GOVERNMENT (ESLG): DIVERSITY PEER CHALLENGE

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/005/10 summarised the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge carried out by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) together with trained peers on 6 & 7 October 2009. ECFRS had achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard for Government (ESLG) and was also achieving under the new Equality Framework for Local Government, which had replaced the ESLG.

The Chairman said that thanks should go to Jayne Dando, Equality & Diversity Manager and her team, he said that it had been very complimentary for the Service during the assessment.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that on joining the Service he had had doubts about its categorisation as highest performing, he had taken the decision for the Service to be scored independently and the grading had been moved down, since then hard work had led to the recent achievement. The Chief Fire Officer thanked Richard Hopper - Director of Workforce & Development, Jayne Dando and the Fire Authority Members. The Director of Workforce & Development said that although the work was led by the directorate, it was a Service-wide achievement.

Resolved:

That Members noted the contents of the paper.

10. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME- PROGRESS REPORT 8

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/006/10 provided Members with an update on the progress of the Information technology Transformation programme.

Councillor Morris enquired if much of the 'paper-chase' had now ceased. DCFO Eckley advised that the Service had significantly culled the amount of paper based forms. DCFO Eckley advised the Committee that the SAP sickness monitoring system would be implemented to handle sickness management, the Director of Workforce & Development agreed that the SAP HR project would produce much more significant savings, that it was the end of the beginning as regards the paper-chase.

DCFO Eckley said that risk of loss of data had been significantly reduced with a core infrastructure programme and that the Service was in a significantly better place than previously in terms of business continuity.

Resolved:

That Members noted the contents of the paper

11. ANY OTHER PART 1 BUSINESS

FBU Dispute

The Chairman asked the Chief Fire Officer to update the Committee regarding correspondence with the FBU. The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that towards the end of the previous year the FBU had submitted a letter containing 30 points over which they sought reassurance. At a number of meetings reassurances were given and reiterated to the vast majority of the points raised with the exception of the switch-crewing project and associated posts. The Chief Fire Officer said that he had remained hopeful that the dispute

would be ended by the FBU, however despite the assurances the FBU had stated that the 30 points raised were not the issue and had reverted back to the original four points set out as grounds for the dispute.

Haiti Earthquake

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that rescue teams from Manchester and Lancashire Fire & Rescue Services had been deployed to Haiti. The Chief Fire Officer said that two Officers in the UK were qualified in European coordination, DO Terry Povey and DO Gary Jeffery, both Essex Officers.

Snow

Councillor Bentley asked that the minutes record the Committee's thanks to all personnel for their excellent service over the past few weeks.

2010

The Chairman wished everybody a happy new year, he said that he was looking forward to achieving even more over the forthcoming year.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 17 March 2010

Signed
Chairman.....17 March 2010