



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE POLICY AND STRATEGY COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2009 AT 10:00 HOURS

Present:

Councillor K Bentley
Councillor R Callender
Councillor A M Hedley (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs A E Holland (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor D W Morris
Councillor A Turrell

The following Officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Chief Fire Officer D Johnson
Deputy Chief Fire Officer M Jones
Finance Director & Treasurer M Clayton
Assistant Chief Fire Officer G Hunter
Assistant Chief Fire Officer A Eckley
Director of HR & Workforce Planning, R Hopper
Assistant Chief Fire Officer, S Thomson
Audit Commission, P King
Audit Commission, J Wilson
Minute Taker, T Adams

41. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Harrison, Pearson, Smith-Hughes and Webster.

42. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

43. MINUTES

The Committee received the minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2009.

Resolved:

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

44. 2008/2009 ACCOUNTS AND ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

Report EFA/096/09 by the Finance Director & Treasurer presented the Audit Commission's Annual Governance Report and the 2008/09 Statement of Accounts.

At the meeting Mr King circulated a revised Appendix 2 - adjusted amendments to the accounts. The revisions referred to amendments in respect: of additional pensions costs for firefighters; pension costs in respect of ill health amounts and the pension fund liability to remove the top-up grant. Mr King confirmed that subject to the adjustments in appendix 2 the Audit Commission would give an unqualified opinion on the financial statements and that it was satisfied that the Authority had all in place for an unqualified Value for Money conclusion.

The Chief Fire Officer thanked Mr King, the Finance Director & Treasurer and their teams for their very effective working. Mr King said that year 2008-09 had been a much better position to seek things to develop and improve, it had been a smoother process than the preceding year.

The Vice-Chairman advised the Committee that Councillor Smith-Hughes, currently at the Liberal Democrat conference had scrutinised the report and said that he was fine with it.

Resolved:

That Members:

1. Noted the Annual Governance Report from the Audit Commission
2. Agreed the amended annual governance statement
3. Authorised the Chairman to sign the letter of representation for the auditors
4. Agreed that the amended 2008/2009 Statement of Accounts be approved and the Treasurer be authorised to sign the Accounts.

45. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS

The Finance Director & Treasurer's report EFA/097/09 presented the management accounts for the four months to July 2009 and the outturn position for the year. Councillor Turrell enquired about the previous year's underspend. The Finance Director advised that the underspend was as a result of delays in appliance delivery and valuation of works at Rayleigh Weir. He confirmed to Councillor Turrell that the underspend in the previous year had been carried over to be spent in the current year.

The Chairman enquired about the recovery level of monies from the Fire and Rescue Authorities Mutual (FRAML). The Finance Director & Treasurer advised that the whole of the Authority's investment would be returned together with a share of just under £200k profits.

At the meeting the Chief Fire Officer recommended to Members that the budget for firefighter pay was reduced by £570k with £224k vired to increase expenditure for retained firefighter training. In response to a Member's enquiry the Chief Fire Officer advised that historically retained personnel received two hours training per week but that nationally there was a growing view that it should be increased to three hours per week where possible. The Vice-Chairman was of the view that the increased training hours would be welcomed by retained firefighters, it was good to be ahead of the game and if retained firefighters were to go on the run with whole-time firefighters it should fit well with the IRMP plan. The Chairman advised the Committee that Councillor Smith-Hughes' agreed the recommendation prior to the meeting. Councillor Morris asked if training hours for retained firefighters should be increased to more than three hours. The Chief Fire Officer responded that increasing the training by one hour increased employees' commitment, in his view it struck a happy balance. The Chief Fire Officer added that there would be a skills assessment after six months. The remaining balance of the reduction, £346k would be released to increase reserves.

Councillor Bentley referred to the economic situation, he enquired if the Finance Director & Treasurer anticipated any additional costs in long term borrowing. The Finance Director & Treasurer advised that all the Authority's borrowing was with the PwLB, he said that borrowing was for capital expenditure only and not borrowed ahead of time. Councillor Bentley enquired if the Authority had a surety from the PwLB that interest rates would not be subject to a sudden rise. The Finance Director & Treasurer advised that Government gilts set the level for interest rates, he did not expect a significant change since there was no prediction of a significant rate increase. Councillor Bentley was concerned that due to the economic situation the Government may need to put pressure on rates. The Chairman agreed that there were potential challenges but that the Authority was committed to a first class service, with the right equipment, training and motivated staff.

Resolved:

That Members;

1. Noted the report
2. Agreed to reduce the budget for firefighter pay by £570k, agree a virement of £224k to increase expenditure for retained firefighter training and use the £346k funds released to increase reserves.
3. Agreed to increase the Capital Expenditure budget from £11,845k to £13,381k to allow for the carry over of expenditure from 2008/09

46. POTENTIAL RELOCATION OF ESSEX FIRE CONTROL

Due to uncertainties about the date for delivery of the National FiReControl, Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/098/09 presented an options appraisal for a potential relocation of Essex Fire Control. Councillor Morris asked how quickly a control room could be established at Kelvedon Park, ACFO Thomson advised that since development of the new headquarters was at Phase 2 it would be timely to incorporate a new control room into the plans and tendering process. Councillor Morris queried if a new control would have to be temporary, ACFO Thomson suggested that it would be prudent to have a temporary arrangement in anticipation of the cut over to the regional control centre. Councillor Morris felt that it made more sense to build a permanent structure. The Chairman advised the Committee of a recent meeting between the Lead Members, the Strategic Management Board and Shona Dunn, Director of Fire & Resilience at the CLG, he said that there had been a wide-ranging debate which included the subject of regional fire controls, Ms Dunn had a high level of confidence that the new FiReControls would deliver. The Chief Fire Officer advised that Ms Dunn had been made aware of Essex' situation, he had further advised Ms Dunn that in his professional opinion the regional FiReControls would not deliver, Ms Dunn's response had been to say that he would be proved wrong. ACFO Eckley advised Members that at the current stage of development there was capacity to redefine the programmed use of an auditorium/meeting room to a control facility. The Committee acknowledged that in the future there was potential for a change in the national political view which may lead the Authority to consider a permanent arrangement, all options would be considered in the planning application and tendering process. DCFO Jones said that he understood the opposition to the Labour Government was strongly opposed to the regional control, and that there was strong resistance from the LGA. The Vice-Chairman advised that the Fire Service Management Committee had put forward a motion to look at alternative arrangements and was open to anything.

Councillor Bentley said that for pragmatism the Authority should opt for the report's option 5, to look at relocating the existing ECFRS Control to Kelvedon Park. He suggested that the

public receive a firm message that the Authority wanted to retain its Control but had to continue with plans for a regional control at the moment. The Chairman agreed with the proposal for option 5, he said there would be no significant HR issues with personnel moving to Kelvedon Park.

The Chairman asked ACFO Thomson for an update on the procurement of mobilisation technology. ACFO Thomson advised that EADS had subcontracted the provision of the technology to Ericsson, however Ericsson had failed to meet a milestone in the work programme, EADS had subsequently issued a schedule of work. A Member enquired if a new subcontractor were to be employed if they would still be able to meet the level 2 schedule or if it would create a higher risk. ACFO Thomson advised that should there be a potential for legal action that could affect roll out, Ms Dunn had informed him that a tolerance was built in for such a setback. The Chairman asked if any new contractor would be tendering to the same specification, ACFO Thomson advised that the tender specification had been outcome based, a new company may well accomplish the outcome via different process.

Councillor Morris proposed the recommendation to opt for option 5 in the report. Councillor Bentley seconded the proposal, but suggested that preparation work was carried out to allow withdrawal from regional control. In response to an enquiry from the Committee the Chief Fire Officer advised that the Authority was not legally bound to transfer to a regional control, however Avon Fire Service, a known detractor of regionalisation in its own area had had to accept that within the Fire Services Act the Secretary of State had powers to direct Authorities. The Chief Fire Officer added that from a professional perspective he would have to recommend cut over at the appropriate time if the project delivered against expectations, he had little confidence that it would do so and did not consider that he was the only Chief with concerns about the efficacy of regional controls, he said that it was a watching brief, that most of the work was funded by grants. ACFO Thomson advised Members that option 5 was transferable and that it would be just as relevant to the build of a permanent structure. Councillor Bentley reiterated that the public should receive a clear message that Kelvedon Park was where Control needed to be. Councillor Morris was of the view that the public needed to have certainty and that would be obtained by option 5.

The Chairman was of the view that it was better to be involved in regionalisation than not, that agreement was required for a contingency arrangement. The DCFO suggested that it was imperative to move Control.

Resolved:

That Members supported the recommendation of Option 5 as detailed in the paper. The Service would undertake a preliminary, scoping study to establish detailed costs, which would enable a more detailed proposal to be presented to the Fire Authority for final approval as the direction.

47. SWINE FLU UPDATE

Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/099/09 provided Members with a précis of the actions the Service had taken to prepare itself for the recent and continuing swine flu outbreak.

Councillor Bentley enquired if Tamiflu was available for frontline personnel. ACFO Hunter advised that the Essex Resilience Forum had been consulting with the Health Authority.

Resolved:

That Members noted the contents of the report.

48. IT TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME- PROGRESS REPORT 6

Members received Chief Fire Officer's report EFA/100/09, the sixth in a series of progress reports regarding the Information Technology Transformation Programme.

Resolved:

That Members noted the contents of the report.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Review of Fire Authority Terms of Reference and Committee Structure

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members of the commencement of a review of the Fire Authority Terms of Reference and its committee structure, he said it would look at how the Policy & Strategy and Challenge & Innovation committees interacted. The Chief Fire Officer proposed that Fire Authority Members be invited to attend one of two group meetings (dates to be arranged) in order to seek individuals' views. The Chairman was of the view that there was a need to tidy up the structures, that there should be exploration of ways to accommodate Members' unplanned absence from meetings. The Vice-Chairman referred to work currently ongoing by the Grievance, Discipline and Remuneration Panel for Principal Officers, the Chief Fire Officer advised that all the work would be linked in. Councillor Bentley asked if the Authority's quorum was a self-imposed rule, the Chief Fire Officer advised that quorum was set within the Essex Fire Service (Combination Scheme) Order. The Vice Chairman referred to the previous meeting of the Authority, a Thurrock Member had been unavoidably late, and the initial absence led to the potential for the Authority to be unable to ratify decisions, the Vice Chairman acknowledged that it was the first time the situation had arisen since the establishment of the Authority in 1997. The Chairman said that Members should endeavour to arrange substitution if an absence was unavoidable.

Congratulations - New Fire Authority Members Induction Programme

Councillor Callender congratulated Officers for the interesting day of visits arranged within the Members' Induction programme. Councillor Bentley thanked the Officers who had looked after Members on the day.

49. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 11 November 2009

Signed
Chairman.....11 November 2009