

Dorset Fire Authority

Minutes of meeting held at Dorset Fire and Rescue Service
Headquarters, Poundbury, Dorchester on 5 December 2013.

Present:

Mrs Rebecca Knox (Chairman)

Mrs Ann Stribley (Vice-Chairman)

Mr Mike Byatt, Mr Ronald Coatsworth, Mrs Beverley Dunlop, Mr Philip Eades, Mr Barry Goldbart, Mr Colin Jamieson, Mrs Susan Jefferies, Mr Trevor Jones, Miss Sue Levell, Mr Christopher Rochester and Mr John Wilson.

Officers present:

Mr Darran Gunter (Chief Fire Officer), Mr Richard Bates (Treasurer), Mr Jonathan Mair (Clerk), and Mrs Helen Whitby (Committee Officer).

Officers attending for items as appropriate:

Mr Ben Ansell (Assistant Chief Fire Officer), Mr Colin Chapman (Assistant Chief Officer Service Support), Mr Ian Cotter (Head of Financial Services), Mr Derek James (Assistant Chief Officer) and Ms Jenny Long (Director of People Services).

In attendance from Wiltshire Fire Authority:

Mr Simon Routh-Jones (Chief Fire Officer), Mr John Aldridge (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), Mr Phil Chow (Treasurer) and Mr Graham Payne (Chairman).

(Note: These minutes have been prepared by officers as a record of the meeting and of any decisions reached. They are to be considered and confirmed at the next meeting of the Authority to be held on **12 February 2014**.)

Apology for Absence

75. An apology for absence was received from Mr Les Burden.

Code of Conduct

76. No declarations were made by any members of any disclosable pecuniary interests under the Code of Conduct.

Minutes

77. The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2013 were confirmed and signed.

Matters Arising

Minute 52.1 – Matters Arising

78.1 The Chief Fire Officer reported that the Government's response to Sir Ken Knight's report was still awaited. However, the Government's criteria for future efficiency bids for revenue and capital had been received.

Minute 52.2 – Matters Arising

78.2 The Clerk reported that he had received responses from some District and Borough Councils. From these it was evident that Fire Safety Notices were not disclosed on the local research response. However, District and Borough Councils were prepared to make them available if this information was supplied. The Chairman added that to highlight this and protection issues and barriers, she and the Chief Fire Officer were to visit District and Borough Councils.

Audit and Scrutiny Committee

79.1 The Authority received the minutes of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee meetings held on 23 September and 5 November 2013.

79.2 The Chairman of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee drew attention to the Committee's continuing concerns about levels of sickness absence in Fire Control (minute 77.6), which officers were addressing, and to the fact that they had been assured by information provided about the future of the West Moors Training Centre (84.2)

Noted**Quarterly Performance Reports – First Quarter**(a) Second Quarter Financial Performance Report

80.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer which provided an analysis of the financial position as at 31 October 2013 based upon profile projections and actual data to date.

80.2 The Authority noted that at the end of October 2013 there was a predicted underspend of £577k, which was more than previously reported. The majority of this related to the underspend on the retained pay budget where there were more than 60 vacancies currently. The sale of the Weymouth Fire Station site had been completed with a capital receipt of £1.5m which would be used for future capital financing. Currently reserves were being used for capital financing rather than additional borrowing being arranged. The revised total for the capital programme for 2013/14 was £2.2m and the total capital spend estimated to be £1.8m. The financial requirement had been reduced for the current year as it has been mostly financed by capital grants and funding carried forward from the previous year. There was a predicted shortfall of £345k in the current spending forecast for 2014/15 and it was recommended that part of the predicted revenue budget underspend be used to finance this.

80.3 Some members expressed concern about the revenue budget underspend being used for capital purposes, especially as the underspend related to under-staffing. They felt this issue should be addressed before any underspend was used for long term assets. The Chief Fire Officer agreed with this view and explained that steps were being taken to reduce staff vacancies and demand on Fire Stations. He reminded members that they had previously agreed to reduce long term debt and over the last five years this had been reduced by £440k per annum. There was no long term strategy to finance the future capital programme from the revenue budget, it was a one-off situation.

80.4 One member drew attention to current borrowing and interest rates, which meant, in his view, that the use of a surplus balance to offset the need to borrow money was a sensible approach.

Resolved

81.1 That the report be noted.

81.2 That the use of £345k from the projected budget underspend to finance part of the 2013/14 capital programme be approved.

(b) Quarterly Performance Monitoring Report

82.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer on the quarterly monitoring of areas where performance issues had been identified, or good practice had been exhibited for the second quarter from 1 July to 31 September 2013.

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82.2 The Assistant Chief Fire Officer presented the report in detail. The Authority noted that as a result of the Coroner's findings two recent incidents had now been recorded as Fire Deaths; the upward trend of fire related injuries; the continuing downward trend in accidental dwelling fires; the upward trend in deliberate fires; and the increased number of bin fires in Bournemouth and steps taken to reduce this; and the downward trend in non-domestic fires over the last fire years continued although there had been an increase for the last quarter.

82.3 It was noted that the Audit and Scrutiny Committee would be reviewing response times as targets had been missed on some occasions. An amendment to the report was made in relation to there being three common incidents where first and second appliances had missed targets at the same incident rather than the reported five.

82.4 Sickness absence levels remained a concern and steps were being taken to reduce the average 2.6 shifts lost for wholetime uniformed staff (including Fire Control). Although the trend was upward, the second quarter figures were below that of the same quarter for the previous year and figures were likely to meet the year end target. Attention was drawn to key corporate indicators where improvements were required over the remaining two quarters of 2013/14 if targets were to be met.

82.5 One member expressed disappointment that the capital grant submission to the DCLG for funding to progress the Road Safety Centre at Weymouth Community Fire Station had been unsuccessful and asked whether further discussions with Dorset Roadsafe Partnership were planned. The Chief Fire Officer explained that underspend on the Olympic Games had been ringfenced for Weymouth and the Police had agreed to fund £50k to the Road Safety Centre which meant that available funding was currently £200k. A new tender exercise was to be undertaken and any funding shortfall would be met by other means. He was confident that this would progress.

82.6 With regard to common processes and governance arrangements, the Chief Fire Officer reported that he attended a meeting of the Strategic Dorset Roadsafe Partnership on 18 November 2013 to give a presentation about the Road Safety Centre and the funding required. The Centre would be the first of its kind in the country and it received support at the meeting on condition that the education delivered addressed risks and risk groups on Dorset's roads.

82.7 In response to whether adult safeguarding conferences were held with other councils, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer explained that multi-agency conferences were held in the area in which a fatality occurred. The Chief Fire Officer added that this positive initiative was to be adopted by the Police for road deaths and the Chairman informed the Authority that the Children's Safeguarding Board had a similar approach for child deaths and serious injuries. Members noted that the current level of referrals was 4,000 across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. Referrals alerted agencies to possible abuse, neglect etc so that these could be investigated.

82.8 With regard to whether a charge could be made for attendance at repeat false alarms, the Chief Fire Officer explained that a protocol was in place to address repeat offenders and in worst cases offenders would be warned that attendance might be reduced. Details were provided of a recent case in Ferndown.

Resolved

83. That the following issues be referred to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee to address:-

- Sickness improvement plan
- Accidental dwelling fires
- Fires in non-domestic properties

- Dorset Emergency Response Standards

Treasury Management Update

84.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer which provided an update on the current treasury management position.

84.2 The Treasurer reminded members that the Authority aimed to repay loans where possible. £2m had been repaid during the current year and a further repayment of £2m was expected later in the month. He referred to the capital receipt from the sale of the Weymouth Fire Station site and to the additional column shown in Appendix B which indicated premiums paid for early repayment of loans.

84.3 One member, who supported the use of long term debt, thought the Authority should concentrate on finding solutions to the issues it was currently facing and carrying out its normal activities rather than prioritising the early repayment of long term loans.

84.4 Attention was drawn to repayments of deposits in Icelandic Banks, that 94% had been repaid and that more was anticipated, but an indication of lost interest was sought. It was also explained that the more long term debt at higher interest rates, the less the Authority had to pay firefighters and improve services.

84.5 One member thought the Authority showed good financial management as borrowing impacted on the Authority's accounts. He considered it important for operational services to be sustained and stated that steps to mitigate the effects of borrowing should be taken where possible.

84.6 The Treasurer confirmed that 94% of deposits in Icelandic Banks had been repaid with a further repayment expected in the New Year and he agreed to provide information about lost interest. With regard to overall levels of borrowing, the Authority would always have some long term debt. The capital programme would be funded by capital grants and receipts where available, and balances would be used to reduce borrowing needs and minimise the cost of servicing any debt. There were a number of organisations, as well as PWLB, who provided long term loans and the best rates were always sought.

84.7 One member did not approve of public sector borrowing and thought that debt should be paid off as soon as possible to reduce interest payments and that minimal debt should be pursued. She was not averse to lending money and obtaining interest, but on principle debt should be minimised.

Noted

Appliance Availability at Wareham

85.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer on the acute crewing difficulties at Wareham Fire Station which were having a significant impact on the retained duty system staff who continued to provide cover at the station.

85.2 The Chief Fire Officer explained that fire appliances were crewed by retained firefighters. At Wareham Fire Station there were two appliances normally crewed by 20 full time equivalent (FTE) firefighters, twenty four hours a day. The station currently had 9 FTEs and it was difficult to maintain two appliances without staff over-working to do so and the possible effect this might have on their health. Coverage from other nearby fire stations was explained. He recommended that only one appliance be kept available at Wareham as a temporary measure. The Authority noted that the Audit and Scrutiny Committee would consider a report about retained recruitment in January 2014 with a report to the Authority in June 2014.

85.3 A member who supported the recommendation, referred to information he had received that of 13 possible recruits, none had proved suitable and he asked whether the recruitment process was too strict. The Chief Fire Officer explained that the Authority was pragmatic when it was appropriate as it had been in relation to increased response times.

85.4 With regard to the age profile of firefighters in Wareham, the Chief Fire Officer said that this generally represented the normal population. Steps were being taken to achieve the right level of crewing at Wareham

Resolved

86.1 That the difficulty in crewing the second fire appliance at Wareham be noted.

86.2 That on a temporary basis, the requirement for staff at Wareham to crew the second fire appliance be removed and that a further report be brought to the Authority meeting on 27 June 2014 if the crewing position is not improved.

Budget Principles 2014/15 and Medium Term Financial Plan

87.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer which provided a further update on the outcome of Spending Review 2013, the implications for grant funding levels for 2014/15 and 2015/16 and the potential for further funding reductions from 2016/17 onwards.

87.2 The Chief Fire Officer presented the report in detail. Attention was drawn to the fact that austerity measures would continue for some time, the additional 1% reduction in funding for 2014/15 which reduced the grant funding from £11.633m to 10.685m, the predicted revised budget gap of £1.78m for 2017/18, future options for council tax, the grants available and their impacts, and other issues affecting the budget. Members noted that the Authority would be bidding for transformation funding and Fire Efficiency Incentive Funding although it was recognised that this was only likely to be available for one year. The Authority were reminded that they had agreed a set of strategic budget principles in February 2011 and a revised set of principles were considered at a seminar in September 2012. As the economic situation had changed substantially since the principles were agreed, revised principles were suggested. These would be considered by the Budget Working Group at a meeting later that day.

87.3 Members supported the suggested approach and noted that, following consideration by the Budget Working Group, the Authority would reconsider the principles at a later date.

87.4 With regard to whether Council Tax projections took account of increases in population, the Treasurer confirmed that account was taken of the increase in Council Tax base and a prudent view taken.

Resolved

88.1 That the report be noted.

88.2 That a new set of strategic budget principles be approved.

Questions

89. No questions were asked by members under Standing Order 20(2).

Exempt Business

Exclusion of the Public

Resolved

90. That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for minute numbers 91 to 94 because it was likely that if members of the public were present, there would be a disclosure to them of exempt

information as defined in the paragraph indicated of Part 1 of Schedule 12A and the public interest in withholding the information outweighed the public interest in disclosing that information.

Securing Our Future Fire and Rescue Services (Paragraph 2)

91.1 The Authority considered a joint exempt report by the Chief Fire Officers of Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Authorities and received a detailed presentation from Dorset's Chief Fire Officer on the future of the Fire and Rescue Service.

91.2 The presentation set out the current position of the Dorset Fire Authority, ways of addressing the future funding gap, external influences, outcomes to be achieved and options for the way forward.

91.3 The Chairman invited comments from the Wiltshire Chairman and the Wiltshire Chief Fire Officer. The Wiltshire Chief Fire Officer drew attention to the changing environment faced by Fire Authorities and the need for them in the current economic climate to find efficiencies and work more effectively together. The Wiltshire Chairman commented on the clarity of the information provided and thanked Dorset Assistant Chief Officer James for the joint work he had undertaken with Wiltshire to reach this point.

91.4 Members sought clarification on a number of issues and discussed the options fully.

Resolved

92. That the recommendations set out in the Chief Fire Officers' exempt report be agreed.

Fire Control (Paragraph 3)

93.1 The Authority considered an exempt report by the Chief Fire Officer and received a detailed presentation from the Assistant Chief Fire Officer on future options for Fire Control capabilities. Members were provided with an amended map showing Fire and Rescue Partnerships' future control rooms across the country.

93.2 The Assistant Chief Fire Officer explained the current fire control arrangements and options for future provision.

93.3 Members sought clarification on a number of aspects before discussing the available options in detail.

Resolved

94. That the recommendations within the Chief Fire Officer's report be agreed.

Meeting duration: 10.00am – 13.30pm