

Dorset Fire Authority

Minutes of meeting held at Dorset Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Poundbury, Dorchester on 4 November 2014.

Present:

Mrs Rebecca Knox (Chairman)

Mrs Ann Stribley (Vice-Chairman)

Mr Les Burden, Mr Ronald Coatsworth, Mr Spencer Flower, Mr Barry Goldbart, Mr Colin Jamieson, Mrs Susan Jefferies, Mr Trevor Jones, Miss Sue Levell and Mr John Wilson.

Officers present:

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

Also in attendance: Mr Dale Hall, Chairman of Opinion Research Services.

(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 **5 December 2014**)

Award

90. The Chief Fire Officer was pleased to report that the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service, on behalf of its partners, had received a national award in recognition of the work undertaken to develop a protocol which allowed information to be shared across organisations especially with regard to vulnerable people.

Apologies for Absence

91. Apologies for absence were received from Mr Mike Byatt, Mrs Beverly Dunlop and Mr Phil Eades.

Code of Conduct

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

Minutes

93. The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2014 were confirmed and signed.

Matters Arising

Minute 70.1- Matters Arising

94.1 The Chief Fire Officer updated the Authority on the current position with regard to industrial action. New Pension legislation had been laid before Parliament without agreement having been reached with the Fire Brigade Union. Locally a continuous period of strike action had started from 18.30 pm on Friday, 31 October 2014 for a period of four days. During the time since the strike began, the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service had attended 63 incidents, none of which had resulted in serious injury or loss of life. The Chief Fire Officer hoped the dispute would be resolved quickly so that a full service could be provided for Dorset residents.

Minute 73.7 – Quarterly Performance Monitoring Report

94.2 With regard to whether any information was available about the types of tyres used by cars involved in accidents, the Chairman explained that this was a matter for Dorset Police and could be raised by the Fire Authority's representative at the appropriate meeting.

Consultation in Respect of “Strengthening Our Fire and Rescue Service”

95.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer which set out the results of the recent public consultation on three options for future working arrangements of the Fire Authority.

95.2 The Chief Fire Officer reminded the Authority that at their meeting on 5 December 2013 they had agreed a number of recommendations which had led to the recent public consultation on future working arrangements. Opinion Research Services had undertaken the consultation on behalf of the Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Authorities.

95.3 Mr Dale Hall, Chairman of Opinion Research Services, gave a detailed presentation on the findings of the recent public consultation exercise. This explained the key issues, consultation methods used and the results of the different forms of consultation undertaken. Overall in Dorset, Option 3 (a merger with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority, to create a single Combined Fire Authority, while also collaborating with Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council and the Borough of Poole) received the support of the three local authorities, local MPs, the Police and Crime Commissioner, DCLG, Fire Officers Association and Unison. It was noted that the Fire Brigade Union had not expressed a preference or opposed any of the options consulted upon.

95.4 With regard to the general public, different methods of consultation had been undertaken and those consulted had been a broadly representative sample of Dorset’s population. Every method of consultation undertaken (survey, questionnaire or forum) had resulted in Option 3 being the overwhelming preferred choice.

95.5 When asked whether consultees had been given an appropriate level of information, Mr Hall explained that people attending the forums had been provided with information and had been given the opportunity to ask questions for clarification. They seemed to have a better understanding of the issues and the majority supported Option 3 with the second option being a long way behind. Of those completing the questionnaire, a small number did not fully understand the situation.

95.6 The Chairman thanked Mr Hall for his presentation and the insight this gave into the public’s views of the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service and the future of localism.

Resolved

96.1 That the findings of the report from Opinion Research Services on the Qualitative Forums be noted.

96.2 That the findings contained in a presentation from Opinion Research Services regarding the postal and on-line questionnaires delivered as part of the meeting be noted.

96.3 That the assurance provided by the Consultation Institute that the consultation to date complies with good practice under the Compliance Assessment Scheme be noted.

Strengthening our Fire and Rescue Service – Full Business Case

97.1 The Authority considered a report by the Chief Fire Officer which provided an analysis of the financial and operational benefits and risks associated with the three scenarios for future working arrangements of the Fire Authority.

97.2 The Chief Fire Officer gave a detailed presentation which explained the background to the current and future financial situations facing both Fire Authorities and their need to make savings. This had led to the Fire Authority’s decision in December 2013 to

pursue a combination with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority. This had resulted in the recent public consultation exercise which had been described earlier in the meeting.

97.3 He stated that it was important that a potential combination was not perceived as a cost-cutting exercise, but was about maintaining standards and ensuring that statutory responsibilities were discharged. It would provide the opportunity to redevelop and restructure a new organisation and provide efficiencies of £4M for both Authorities. In pursuing this, external audit opinion had been sought about methodologies used and Department for Communities and Local Government guidance on voluntary combinations had been used as a reference point. Advice from other areas where combinations had taken place had been sought and a comprehensive options appraisal had been undertaken too. All supporting information was available on the Fire Authority's website.

97.4 The Chief Fire Officer then explained the three scenarios individually in detail, their financial implications, likely savings and the risks they posed for the Authority. Having regard to overall ranking of finance, community safety and partnership working, governance and legal considerations, risk, equality and environmental issues, Scenario 3 (Combination with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority) was ranked as the best option and both he and the Treasurer recommended this scenario. The Fire Authority noted that the two Authorities would receive a total of £5.5M in Transformation grant, should the combination proceed.

97.5 The Fire Authority noted that there were some key issues still to be resolved before any combination could proceed; the Combination Order being approved by April 2015 for effect on 1 April 2016; new shadow and governance arrangements being introduced; the name of the new Authority being decided; and work that needed to be carried out to populate the new Authority.

97.6 The Chairman highlighted the amount of work undertaken by officers to reach the conclusions encompassed in the Business Case, the importance of maintaining the Authority's statutory duties, that any combination would be scrutinised by other Authorities and that there was a significant difference between a partnership arrangement and the combination of two authorities. Any Fire and Rescue Service would need to be sustainable in future and she thanked officers for their work which had provided the evidence to inform the Authority's decision.

97.7 The Chairman of the Budget Working Group complimented the officers on the depth of work that had been undertaken in preparation of the Business Case and this was a credit to all involved. He reminded the Authority that the External Auditor had provided assurance of the depth of detail undertaken. He supported Scenario 3 as the preferred option as it provided budget benefits but he thought members needed to be satisfied that not only did it provide savings, but that a good service would be provided too. Scenario 3 had received the public's support too and he hoped that the Government would allow the combination to proceed.

97.8 The Chairman of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee explained that the Committee had scrutinised the bulk of the work undertaken for verification at the highest professional standard. This had provided confidence that everything had been done to ensure the success of the combination. Doing nothing would have catastrophic consequences for the Authority and Scenario 3 provided the best chance of maximising savings and having a successful combination.

97.9 The Vice-Chairman, who was also Chairman of the Community Risk Management Group, stated that doing nothing would be disastrous. The consultation and responses supported the combination which would provide a pragmatic and efficient way

forward. This would maintain front line services and allow for the continuous improvement the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service had strived for.

97.10 With regard to how any merger would affect the Community Safety Team and the number of home safety checks carried out, the Chief Fire Officer explained that an independent validation carried out in 2008 had indicated that a reasonable level of checks would be 5% of domestic households which gave a target of 14-15,000 checks per annum. However, the current annual target was 28,000 checks and he hoped that this level would be maintained in any new Authority.

97.11 Other members of the Fire Authority then spoke in support of Scenario 3. They referred to the evidence within the Business Case and the overwhelming support of the consultation exercise for Scenario 3 which provided the best means of achieving savings without affecting services and with limited risks.

97.12 The Chairman then referred to the matter of Council Tax equalisation. She reported that there had been detailed discussions with the DCLG about this. A possible solution to overcome the primary legislative issues had been found and this was supported by the local MPs and the Minister. This matter needed to be progressed as Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Authorities needed clarity and certainty of equalisation so that the Business Case as presented would not alter.

97.13 The Treasurer added that there were two ways to increase the precept beyond the capping limit, one of which would result in a local referendum. The other was by way of the Secretary of State agreeing an Alternative Notional Amount. In his view Scenario 3 was the best of the three options with regard to reducing the differences between the two Authorities and providing the best opportunity to secure savings. However, failing to get agreement of an Alternative Notional Amount could reduce the annual net savings by £1m and hence reduce the difference between the scenarios.

97.14 With regard to where the views of staff had been reported, the Chief Fire Officer explained that their views had been included in the consultation report. Presentations had been made to staff at an early stage so that they had the opportunity to express a view. The consultation maintained anonymity but staff had been encouraged to respond either as a resident or as a member of staff. He agreed to examine whether more information on staff feedback was available.

97.15 In response to a question about whether any combination would have an adverse effect on the Road Safety Partnership, the Chief Fire Officer explained that the Safe Drive – Stay Alive campaign had originated in Wiltshire and that this was run by both Authorities as one team.

97.16 The Chairman then referred to the membership of any new combined Authority and that discussions between Wiltshire and Dorset members, the Chairmen and Chief Fire Officers had agreed that membership could be equal as a whole and that governance arrangements would be reviewed in 2018.

97.17 In view of the concerns about Council Tax equalisation, the Chairman of the Budget Working Group suggested an amendment to Recommendation 2 of the report. This was seconded and unanimously approved.

Resolved

98.1 That, subject to assurance in writing by 31 December 2014 from DCLG that council tax equalisation to Dorset's level of council tax will take place in 2015/16 or

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2016/17 and to there being no adverse impact on the business case, Dorset Fire Authority should adopt scenario three as its preferred option.

98.2 That the new Fire Authority with equal membership from the two existing Fire Authorities be approved in principle.

98.3 That the Clerk and Chief Fire Officer, after consultation with the Chairman, inform Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority of the decision.

Questions

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

Meeting duration: 10.00am – 12.15pm