

FIRE AUTHORITY

Minutes of the meeting of the FIRE AUTHORITY held at Council Chamber, County Hall, East Sussex County Council, St Anne's Crescent, Lewes at 10.30 am on Thursday, 8 December 2022.

Present: Councillors Galley (Chairman), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Azad, Evans, Geary, Hamilton, Hollidge, Kirby-Green, Maples, Marlow-Eastwood, Nemeth, Osborne, Powell, Redstone, Theobald, Ungar and West

Also present: D Whittaker (Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive), D Norris (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), M Matthews (Assistant Chief Fire Officer), L Woodley (Deputy Monitoring Officer), D Savage (Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer), L Ridley (Assistant Director Planning & Improvement), J King (Assistant Director People Services), M Lloyd (Assistant Director Safer Communities), H Scott-Youlton (Assistant Director Operational Support & Resilience), E Curtis (Communications and Marketing Manager), V Waters, D Marshall, R Smith (Democratic Services Officer) and A Blanshard (Democratic Services Manager)

121 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

122 Apologies for Absence

Apologies had been received from Councillors Dowling, Scott and Taylor. Councillors Hollidge and Kirby-Green had been appointed to attend as substitutes for this meeting.

123 Notification of items which the Chairman considers urgent and proposes to take at the end of the agenda/Chairman's business items

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Robert Nemeth to his first meeting as a full member of the Fire Authority having been newly appointed by Brighton & Hove City Council.

The Fire Authority recorded its condolences following the sad death of Councillor Garry Peltzer Dunn who had given many years of dedicated service to the Fire Authority. The meeting held a minutes silence in his memory.

The Chairman asked the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) to provide the meeting with a brief update on the position regarding the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) ballot for Industrial Action (IA). The CFO confirmed that the ballot was under way, due to close on 23 January, with the possibility of a week's extension. If IA was voted for the FBU were required to submit formal notice of the earliest dates for any possible action. The Fire Authority was reassured that the Service was well prepared, its plans had been scrutinised by Government, but that in the event of IA its ability to respond to incidents would be reduced.

Unconfirmed minutes – to be confirmed at the next meeting of the Fire Authority

The Chairman addressed the recently published London Fire Brigade Cultural report which made for very difficult reading. However, it was important to say that whilst East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service (ESFRS) would never be complacent, this report was specifically about one Fire and Rescue Service. The Fire Authority had already signed up to the National Code of Ethics and undertaken significant work on its Leadership and Behaviour Framework, which had been well received across the service. Whilst in any large workforce there would be a small percentage of poor behaviour, the vast majority of our staff treat the public and each other in a positive way and deliver a professional service, in a caring way and it was very important that we continued to do so as a public service provided to our community.

124 To consider any public questions

There were none.

125 To receive any petitions

There were none.

126 Non-confidential Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2022 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

127 Callover

Members reserved the following items for debate:

191 Medium Term Financial Plan Update – Draft Savings Proposals

193 Medium Term Financial Plan Update – Draft Savings Proposals
Confidential Appendix

128 Medium Term Financial Plan Update - Draft Savings Proposals

The Fire Authority considered the report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) which briefed Members on current draft savings proposals designed to address the funding gap identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan for 2023/24. This was the first report to the Authority and was the result of an urgent review of all budget areas that had been conducted to identify savings opportunities. Members were not being asked to make any decision at this stage, but a refreshed list of draft proposals would be included in the budget papers that would be presented to them for decision at the Fire Authority meeting on 9 February 2023.

The Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) informed Members that, in line with the report to the September Fire Authority meeting, the Service continued to forecast a reasonable worst case scenario of a budget gap of £3million, acknowledging we would not know the actual figure until the local government funding settlement had been announced in late December. The Service had undertaken a thorough review of departmental budgets through

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the Annual Star Chamber process. There had been no mention of Fire at all within the Government's Autumn Statement. It appeared that the general level Council Tax that could be set had been increased to 3%, this equated to approximately £300,000 additional income which was of course helpful but would not be sufficient. The possibility of a £5 increase for all Fire Authorities was still being discussed. The Finance Team were assessing the impact of inflation on the Service, utilities were procured through a Crown Commercial contract and so far, had added £350,000 to costs. The national revaluation of Business Rates burden had added £100,000 to costs. There would be no funding certainty until the Settlement was announced on a provisional basis in late December, however it was expected that this would only be for one year again, Finance Officers had modelled this as cash + 2% but there was some suggestion that this may be higher. Even if the settlement improved and the £5 Council Tax flexibility was approved, there was still the risk of a gap in the finances. The Chairman reminded the meeting that, as requested by the Fire Authority, there had been intensive lobbying of MPs and Ministers with regards to Council Tax flexibility.

A lengthy discussion followed. Members queried whether the salary shortfall noted in the report was based on the 5% offer that had been rejected. The ADR/T explained that a 2% increase had been modelled for each year, the figures in the report considered the £1925 flat rate offer that had been accepted by Green Book staff and the rejected 5% offer, if the increase was greater than the £3million funding gap would also increase. Members also asked whether the in year overspend/underspend had been included. The ADR/T confirmed that it had. The in year overspends were mainly due to the Wholtime firefighter numbers being over establishment and training costs. This was partly due to anticipated retirements not being as high as expected due to the national issues surrounding Firefighter Pensions remedy. There was work underway to manage down the overspends relating to training and on the wider training provision model.

Regarding the impact of the increased cost of utilities, Members asked whether the worst case scenario could in fact be even worse. The ADR/T explained that the Service currently brought services in a "6 month basket" but was looking to move to a "12 month Basket" to provide more security against the price fluctuations, but there were no guarantees.

Members asked what the impact of Industrial Action would be on the Budget. The impact of Industrial Action was unclear, it would depend entirely on the type and length of action that was taken. The spend would potentially be balanced by pay not being made during strikes, following the last strike it took two years to balance out the training costs. There was also a potential impact on pensions costs, those who went out on strike would lose their pension contributions and some may not have the means to buyback their contributions and the decision about employer contributions is at the discretion of each employer.

The Fire Authority agreed that there is a need to model the budget around both a 3% and £5 Council Tax increase option.

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Councillor Maples proposed and Councillor Evans seconded the proposal that the meeting move into confidential session to discuss the Confidential Appendix to this report. The Fire Authority agreed to this proposal.

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority agreed to:

- i. further development of the savings proposals;
- ii. a suite of developed savings options being returned to the Fire Authority at its meeting on 9 February 2023 for approval as part of the final budget proposals for 2023/24; and
- iii. that the proposals in (ii) should identify where formal public consultation was required.

129 Exclusion of the Press & Public

RESOLVED – That agenda item no. 39 be exempt under paragraph 3 of Part 1 Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 and accordingly are not open for public inspection on the following grounds: they contain information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

The meeting concluded at 12.39 pm

Signed

Chairman

Dated this

day of

2023