

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, 7 September 2023.

Present: Councillors Galley (Chairman), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Asaduzzaman, Azad, Denis, Evans, Geary, Goddard, Howell, Kirby-Green, Marlow-Eastwood, Muten, Redstone, Scott, Theobald, Tutt, Ungar and West

Also present: D Whittaker (Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive), D Norris (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), M Matthews (Assistant Chief Fire Officer), A Ghebre-Ghiorghis (Monitoring Officer), D Savage (Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer), L Ridley (Assistant Director Planning & Improvement), H Scott-Youldon (Assistant Director Operational Support & Resilience), M Lloyd (Assistant Director Safer Communities), L Woodley (Deputy Monitoring Officer), S Milner (Planning & Intelligence Manager), E Curtis (Communications & Engagement Manager) F Le Duc (Press) and A Blanshard (Democratic Services Manager)

157 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

158 Apologies for Absence

Apologies had been received from Councillors Dowling, Maples and Osborne and a vacancy remained on the Fire Authority. Councillors Denis, Howell, Kirby-Green and Tutt had been appointed to attend as substitutes for this meeting.

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

The Chairman reminded Fire Authority Members that there was a Members Seminar being held on the 18 September and encouraged them all to attend if they were able to.

Members were reminded that the East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service Awards ceremony would be taking place on the 29 September and he hoped that Members had responded and were able to support this important event.

The Chairman informed those present that the Chief Fire Officer would be receiving her King's Fire Service Medal at Windsor Castle on 3 October.

160 To consider any public questions

There were none.

161 To receive any petitions

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

There were none.

162 Non-confidential Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2023 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

163 Callover

Members reserved the following items for debate:

- 227 Revenue & Capital Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28 Monitoring at Month 4
- 228 2024/25 to 2028/29 Strategic Service Planning and Medium Term Financial Plan
- 230 2022/23 Annual Performance Outcome Report

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority agreed that all other reports on this Agenda be approved in full.

164 Revenue and Capital Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28 Monitoring at Month 4

The Fire Authority received the report of the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) presenting the findings of the Month 4 monitoring undertaken on the Revenue and Capital Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28. A net revenue overspend of £193,000 had been identified due to a number of pressures as listed in the report. The Safer Communities directorate was forecasting an overspend of £1.093m and the Service was maintaining a significant focus on the plan to reduce this pressure to ensure it did not impact the 2024/25 revenue budget. Further work was required to review the forecast, and management action was required in reviewing the staffing and overtime forecasts. There was significant long-term absence amongst operational staff which was also having an impact. The Senior Leadership Team had considered a report detailing the pressures and overspends and setting out those which were one-offs and those which were ongoing. The Authority had benefitted from the rise in interest rates which was resulting in a significant increase in investment income through its Treasury Management activity, which was expected to generate additional income of £0.5m.

The ADR/T, following a review of the capital plans for 2023/24, reported slippage on the delivery of projects to the value of £2,387,000 this particularly related to Estates projects. There had been significant increases in project costs over the last six months, the forecast costs of the Preston Circus project had risen from £3.5m to approximately £4.5m in that period. The enabling works at the station were being done and the Estates team were working with the operational crews to work out how best to undertake the works. The development of the second floor had been paused to focus on the operationally essential areas of the Station. With regards to the wider capital

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

programme, SLT had commissioned an affordability review as part of budget setting for 2024/25.

Members were grateful for the report and the update and that it was reassuring, however acknowledged there would be bigger financial challenges to come. Members asked whether the costs of the Royal Albion Fire were known, there was no figure yet, but most of the costs would be pay, including on-call staff and officer recall, this would start to come through from payroll figures soon.

Members queried why there were IT underspends and what the impact to the Service might be. The ADR/T reminded the meeting that the IT Strategy included a significant investment programme of projects, set out at appendix 7, some of the underspends were because of contract negotiations, timing of the investment programme, new software not yet being switched on and some projects taking longer than anticipated to deliver. In terms of project delivery more broadly IT is a key element, but plans change and require reviewing. one example is the pagers/Alerters project where there are now partnership implications that need to be considered as we are part of the Joint Fire Control. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) explained that although the implementation of the CRM software was delayed the project was on track to provide essential support to the Service's Protection, Prevention and Response work and would enable sharing of information regarding home safety visits, risk assessments amongst all staff.

Members sought some more information on the redevelopment of Preston Circus particularly with regards to its importance to the Service, the local historical links and the lack of a potential partnership for the second floor. As there were some new Fire Authority Members present, the ADR/T went back over the significant work that had been undertaken over many years already on Preston Circus. It is the busiest station in the service and we know it is in the right location to work well with Hove and Roedean, but it is not fit for purpose as a modern Fire Station as it is and it does not provide an appropriate working environment for the staff based there. As the meeting had already heard, the estates team have worked closely with staff, representative bodies, and key stakeholders and the enablement works have started, the main contractor is appointed, but it was necessary to review the delivery of the project due to the increasing costs. A significant amount of time had been spent over the past few years in discussions with potential partners for the second floor accommodation, but nothing had been successful to date. SLT must focus on the operational needs of the Service and therefore it was proposed to remove the planned works on the second floor in order to allow the rest of the essential works to continue. Members agreed that the operationally essential works were the priority and were all committed to getting the works done and help wherever possible.

A discussion followed regarding overtime costs, some Members felt that it was inevitable and it was important to address it, paying particular attention to the levels of long-term sickness. Members were interested to know how much of this was due to workplace stress or injury. The Assistant Director Safer Communities (ADSC) explained that the overtime costs linked to a

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

range of issues, including the day-crewed and duty system changes and honouring leave bookings through this process. There were currently 32 individuals who were off long-term due to suspension, light-duties or sickness. Those who were on light-duties were largely musculo-skeletal problems and the Service is working with Occupational Health to reduce time absent. The ADSC was working to the Safer Communities action plan including reviewing the overtime budget to ensure that it was fit for purpose.

Members asked how the decision was taken to move underspend to contingency, the ADR/T explained that, when deemed appropriate, SLT took decisions to move money out of team budgets to the Service's central contingency fund, lately this has largely related to the additional funds that had been issued to Estates to cover the inflated costs of utilities that had not then been required.

Members were unhappy that the funding from government continued to be short term and too little with Fire Services being asked to do more for less. It was essential that lobbying continue and that wherever possible the Government be reminded that the Fire sector needed to be properly funded. The Chairman reminded those present that the Fire Authority met with the local MPs twice a year and continued to press the case for sustainable funding.

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority agreed to note:

- i. the risks to Revenue Budget and the projected overspend;
- ii. the risks to the Capital Programme;
- iii. the ITG strategy position;
- iv. the reduced net forecast drawdown from reserves;
- v. the grants available and spending plans;
- vi. the monitoring of savings taken in 2023/24; and
- vii. the current year investments and borrowing.

165 2024/25 to 2028/29 Strategic Service Planning and Medium Term Financial Plan

The Fire Authority considered the report of the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) which provided an update on the Authority's financial planning position in advance of the start of the Service Planning and Budget Setting process for 2024/25 onwards. Whilst the main purpose of the report was to set the financial context for the service planning process, the fundamental aim of the process was to determine how best to deliver the Authority's Purpose and Commitments, the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) and the targets and priorities that underpin them, within the context of the current estimate of available financial resources for the period 2024/25 to 2028/29.

The ADR/T reminded the Fire Authority that when it set its budget in February 2023 it used significant reserves to balance the budget for 2023/24 on the condition that permanent savings would be found to balance the budget for 2024/25. This report would normally set out a full review of the Authority's

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

existing five-year Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), but due to continued levels of uncertainty regarding both the future of local government funding and inflationary pressures on costs (pay and non-pay) it set out instead an assessment of the 2024/25 revenue budget only. A full review of the MTFP would be presented to the Authority in February 2024.

The Government's Finance Policy Statement had set out the principles it would adopt for the 2024/25 settlement but could only be regarded as indicative at this stage. The fire sector would make a strong submission to the settlement process, but the timetable was unclear and it was unlikely that the outcome would be known until later in the autumn and the provisional statement was not anticipated until late December. As next year would be the end of the current three-year comprehensive spending review period and a Parliamentary General Election was anticipated, the Service expects to receive a further one-year settlement which did not aid planning for the medium term.

Nationally the fire sector remain reliant on significant one-off funding for investment in protection services and payment of employer's pension contributions, and locally forecasting of future Council Tax and Business Rates remained limited, making planning for the 2024/25 budget and beyond extremely difficult. Although inflation had fallen, it was not expected to return to the Bank of England's 2% target until April-June 2025. The Grey book pay award was settled at 12% over two years (2022/23 and 2023/24), 3% higher than the provision in the MTFP and the Green book pay settlement for 2023/24 had not yet been agreed and there was still a risk of industrial action. There is a significant risk that pay settlements for 2024/25 would be materially above the inflation provided for in the MTFP.

This uncertainty has resulted in several assumptions that underpin the current MTFP being updated where possible, highlighting emerging pressures and potential risks. The ADR/T explained that the potential funding gap had now risen from £0.721m to £2.145m in 2024/25, depending on the level of inflation provided for. This did not include any net pressure resulting from the Star Chamber process, running from September – October, and assumed that pressures on the 2023/24 revenue budget would be managed out. This meant that the Fire Authority would need to consider the original savings proposals and a new set of additional options, some one-off some ongoing and this would certainly not be the end point, efficiencies alone would not be sufficient to bridge the funding gap. An update on the development of savings options (Tranches 1-4) was set out in the report.

The Fire Authority and the wider fire sector continued to lobby for additional council tax flexibility of up to £5 which would provide additional income of £0.59m over the 2.99% that was currently modelled. The ADR/T reminded the meeting that they were not making any decisions today, but that they were being asked to provide a steer to officers of the modelling that they would like officers to undertake in order to present them with options when it came to the time to set the budget.

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

Members appreciated the comprehensive report and introduction, it was a difficult and sobering financial environment and economic forecasting was hard. A lengthy discussion followed with some Members expressing their frustration and disappointment with Central Government for both the low levels of funding and the lack of long term provision and how difficult this made decision-making locally. Members agreed on the importance of campaigning and lobbying Government and ensuring that staff and their residents knew that this was happening, as Fire Authority Members they felt a responsibility for maximising the funding available. As a result of their discussions consensus from Members was that, as in previous years, whilst they were not happy about it the Authority would ask officers to model the MTFP based on a £5 Council Tax rise for 2024/25 if that additional flexibility were offered by Government.

Members asked what the National Resilience Assets held by the Service were, the Assistant Director Operational Support & Resilience (ADOS&R) explained that East Sussex held a decontamination unit and a High Volume Pump. As National Resilience Assets these had been provided fully funded, and both remained critical both nationally and locally, however they were reaching end of life and the cost of replacement was estimated at approximately £1m, for which there was no current national funding. Officers advised that there was a national review led by the Home Office and NFCC to review the volume, type, location and funding of National Resilience Assets in the future.

A full and wide-ranging discussion followed including focus on the savings options and the list of risks. Members were informed that whilst the cost of the proposed refurbishment of the Fort Road site as an engineering workshop would be offset in part by a government grant, additional investment would be required which is why it had been flagged as a risk, a more detailed report on this would be presented to the Fire Authority at its meeting in December 2023. Members were concerned about the option to defer Whole-time Firefighter recruitment, it was explained that as there had been fewer retirements than anticipated due to the ongoing national pension issues, in anticipation the Service had recruited 20 Whole-time Firefighters and were therefore running over establishment. The more critical concern was to deal with the 32 cases that were off long-term.

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority:

- i. noted the report and its assessment of the potential funding gap for 2024/25;
- ii. considered and commented, as set out in these minutes, upon the risks set out in section 4.6 and the assumptions set out in the report;
- iii. considered their policy preferences for Council Tax, should the Government set the referendum threshold higher than the 2.99% currently included in the MTFP, requesting that modelling be undertaken for a higher threshold in anticipation of it being an option as in previous years; and

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

- iv. agreed their preference for inflation provision for pay and non-pay in 2024/25 to be 4% and 3% respectively.

166 Financial Regulations Update

The Fire Authority considered the report of the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) setting out to Members updates to the Financial Regulations section of the East Sussex Fire Authority Constitution. The regulation updates had considered legislative changes, post titles and provided greater transparency and clarity on approval values, approval limits system and reporting requirements to support greater financial devolution across the Authority.

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority agreed to:

- i. approve the updated to the Authority's Financial Regulations including the delegated financial management scheme as at Appendix 2 to the report; and
- ii. approve the approach to implementation as set out at section 4 of the report.

167 2022/23 Annual Performance Outcome Report

The Fire Authority considered the report of the Assistant Director Planning & Improvement (ADP&I) which provided details of East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service's performance for the period April 2022 – March 2023. The year end results demonstrated an improvement of performance across a number of areas with twelve indicators showing an improvement against the previous year and nine showing a decline. Members wanted to record their thanks to officers for their work to improve the report presentation.

The ADP&I explained that the report aimed to provide a single view of information allowing Members, auditors and the public to hold the Service's senior managers and staff to account in terms of the provision and performance. The report highlighted an increase in performance against the previous year, particularly against the Service's five priority areas. The report showed the lowest ever number of accidental dwelling fires of which 50% did not require any firefighting, a slight reduction in the levels of sickness, the Service's target of undertaking 10,000 home safety visits (HSV) each year had been exceeded and attendance at false alarms had reduced. The Service's agreed Attendance Standards had been achieved and were improved on previous years.

Members were pleased to see the increase in HSV's, these were very popular amongst the public and provided great reassurance and engagement. There was a request for clarity on indicator 10 regarding injuries from primary fires. The ADP&I explained that although the number of injuries had more than doubled, this related to very small numbers and those injuries were less severe largely relating to smoke and fumes, last year there had been fewer,

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

but they had been more serious injuries including burns. It was established that in the new performance reports, there would be additional narrative and context provided in the narrative.

Members noted that although the number of high-rise inspections was increasing, it was not reflected well in terms of the national picture. The ACFO explained that there was an ongoing national discussion on how to define this, the Service were undertaking 2000 inspections per year, up from 500 and most enforcement was from crews undertaking fire safety checks – an approach that was being adopted nationally. It was important to note that the number of enforcement prosecutions had risen from 3-4 per year in previous years to 17 prosecutions this year. The CFO added that the numbers of High-rise in the Service area was higher than many other Fire Authorities, namely the 5th highest number of high-rise and the 2nd highest number of mid-rise buildings. Officers had met with the Home Office and the NFCC to re-emphasise the position that the Service was in and that the current methodology for Protection Grant allocation was considered unfair and did not reflect numbers and therefore the related risk. The Service had lobbied directly for a change to the funding formula as the cost of Protection would only increase. Members were informed that it was highly likely that the Service would have to take enforcement action against Local Authorities, potentially creating difficult political situations for them, the Service would continue to make appropriate and balanced decisions in respect to all Protection matters through the use of the enforcement management model and action would be taken whenever appropriate in the interests of the public and in line with the spirit of the legislation.

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority considered the performance results and progress towards achieving the Service’s purpose and commitments as contained in Appendix 1 to the report.

168 Amendment to Calendar of Meetings 2023-2024

The Fire Authority received the report of the Democratic Services Manager informing them of a proposed change to the date and venue of the February 2024 meeting of the Fire Authority.

RESOLVED – The Fire Authority noted that the date of the February meeting of the Fire Authority would now be Thursday, 8 February 2024 at Brighton Town Hall, Bartholomew Square, Brighton.

The meeting concluded at 12.29 pm

Signed

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Chairman

Dated this

day of

2023