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FIRE AUTHORITY

Minutes of the meeting of the Virtual FIRE AUTHORITY held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 23 April 2020.

Present: Councillors Galley (Chairman), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Barnes, Dowling, Ebel, Evans, Hamilton, O'Keeffe, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Powell, Pragnell, Scott, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald and Tutt

Also present:

D Whittaker (Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive), M O'Brien (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), M Andrews (Assistant Chief Fire Officer), L Woodley (Deputy Monitoring Officer), D Savage (Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer), L Ridley (Assistant Director Planning & Improvement), H Scott-Youlton (Assistant Director People Services), M Matthews (Assistant Director Safer Communities), R Fowler (Assistant Director Operational Support & Resilience), E Curtis (Communications & Marketing Manager), S Milner, C Fry, C Porter, M Elder, P Evans, M Lloyd, M Todd, S Higgins, E Simpkin and A Blanshard (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

76 Declarations of Interest

Cllr O'Keeffe declared an interest in Agenda Item 61 Fort Road, Newhaven Disposal Report as a Cabinet Member on Lewes District Council.

77 Apologies for Absence

There were none.

78 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 Members, the press and public to the first virtual meeting of the Fire Authority and gave all those in attendance a brief explanation of how the meeting would be conducted.

The Chairman informed the Authority that he had received the resignation of Cllr Scott from his post as Labour Party Group Leader. Cllr Scott was thanked for his service to the Authority in that role over the past years. The Chairman then welcomed Cllr Evans as the new Labour Party Group Leader.

The Chairman took questions on matters that Members wished to follow up after the last meeting of the Authority. A query was raised regarding the additional grant of £136,000 which had been promised to the Service in order to be spent on its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) confirmed that all Covid 19 related spend was being tracked and reported via NFCC to the Home Office. Members were informed that the Service was using contracts put in place via NFCC in order to purchase PPE.

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The ADR/T explained that the Service had received the first tranche of Covid-19 grant money of £136,000, a second tranche had been announced by the government totalling £1.6bn but as yet it was not known how this would be allocated. The sector was working collectively via NFCC to bid for additional funding.

As well as spending on PPE for frontline staff there had been some additional expenditure made on cleaning both additional services from our contractor and consumables, some staffing costs and on IT equipment in order to facilitate and support mobile working.

The longer term financial impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic were clearly not yet known. The Service was less exposed both to increases in costs through service delivery and also to loss of income from fees and charges than other local authorities. The biggest impact was expected to be on Council Tax and Business Rates through the Collection Fund, which would impact on the 2021/22 budget, as collection rates reduced and claims for council tax support increased. There would also be an impact on the taxbase in 2021/22. Members were informed that there had been changes made to the way in which payment was made to suppliers, payment was now being made immediately and not with the usual 10 or 30 days delay before payment. The Service had a healthy cash flow in the immediate short term and government was currently acting quickly and paying grants due promptly.

Members requested an update on the impact on staff well-being as a result of Covid-19. Members were informed that the Coronavirus Working Group (CWG) was working very hard to look after all aspects of the health & safety of the entire workforce and was paying great attention to well-being. The Assistant Director People Services (ADPS) informed the Authority that there had been a spike in March 2020 of staff sickness with absences at 8.6% but, at the time of the meeting, the sickness level had stabilised. There had been no tested or confirmed cases of Covid-19 but some staff were now undergoing testing. Staff who were symptomatic, or had household members who were symptomatic, were self-isolating in accordance with government guidance. There were a handful of staff who were on the government list of those who were extremely vulnerable, this equated to 1.4% of the workforce. The ADPS added that there was a focus on the well-being of all staff. Many were now working from home, and some of those were reporting that they felt isolated others were having to juggle working and home schooling. There was a lot of work being undertaken, by both HR and line managers, to try to ensure that those working from home were being supported and a range of ways of staying in touch were being used, phoning, Webex meetings, buddies and a workplace group for more social and fun contact. The CWG was working to create a wellbeing cell to address all these matters.

Members suggested that due to the changes in the work being undertaken consideration be given to revising the targets that are reported to the Scrutiny & Audit Panel, including adjusting or suspending the performance data.

79 To consider any public questions

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There were none.

80 To receive any petitions

There were none.

81 Non-confidential Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2020 be approved and signed by the Chairman. *(Copy in Minute Book)*

82 Callover

Members reserved the following items for debate:

59 Integrated Risk Management Plan 2020-2025

60 Integrated Risk Management Plan – Consultation and Communication Plan

RESOLVED – That all other reports be approved according to the recommendations set out.

83 Integrated Risk Management Plan 2020-2025

The Fire Authority considered the Report of the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) seeking approval for the draft 2020/2025 Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) to be published for the purpose of public and stakeholder consultation.

The draft IRMP, detailing the strategic direction for the Fire Authority for the next five years (2020–2025), was ready for the Authority to consider and publish for the purpose of public and stakeholder consultation. The Fire Authority were reminded by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) that no decisions were to be taken at this meeting on the proposals. The Authority were reminded that they had been involved in the drafting process and that there had been 12 months of detailed work undertaken to get to this stage. The draft IRMP was the most comprehensive that ESFRS had ever compiled and it was essential, as had been noted in the HMICFRS inspection, to ensure that ESFRS had the right resources in the right place in order to address risk. Further detailed work would be required in relation to the impact assessments, planning assumptions, policy implications, delivery timeline and implementation options. This work would be completed and presented to the Fire Authority at its meeting on 3 September 2020, alongside the public consultation feedback reports, in order to help inform the Fire Authority's final decisions. Following advice sought, there was a strong legal case for proceeding with the consultation as the requirement for the Fire Authority to have an updated and fit for purpose IRMP was not changed due to COVID-19.

Some Members were very clear that whilst they supported the need for a consultation to be conducted on the proposed IRMP, they believed strongly

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that now was not the right time to go out to consultation. There was some anxiety that a consultation at this time would not be well responded to as people were, understandably, otherwise concerned with the impact that COVID-19 was having on their lives.

Cllr Scott proposed the following motion, seconded by Cllr Evans:

“In the midst of this unprecedented crisis, where none of us know what the post COVID world will look like or even when it might arrive, we move that East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service defer the consultation process until the crisis and any Public Inquiry that may follow has passed, to allow both Government and ESFRS to have a better understanding of what resources, people and equipment may be needed in the future to deal with National Incidents such as coronavirus”

Members debated the motion at length with many stating that they had been sent some emotive emails about this consultation, and expressing concerns that there were many people currently in no position mentally to take part in the proposed consultation. Some Members reminded their colleagues that the report following the Inspection of ESFRS had stated that the existing IRMP, which expired this year, was not fit for purpose. They suggested that they may have been supportive of a short delay if it were deemed to be beneficial and there were dramatic changes to the requirements on fire service, but they could not support freezing the consultation for potentially a minimum of a couple of years particularly as Covid-19 did not immediately change the current risks faced by the Service and the need to improve current cover.

Cllr Hamilton left the meeting at 11.15am.

Some stated that they struggled to understand why their fellow Members were requesting a delay as it was them as the Authority, not the Service, who had the responsibility for providing an IRMP which was fundamental to the work of the organisation. There was a strong feeling of sympathy that this was not the ideal time to consult but that the need to do so was unavoidable. Members then took part in a recorded vote on the proposed motion with the results being as follows:

FOR: 5 (Cllrs Ebel, Evans, O’Keeffe, Powell, Scott)
AGAINST: 12 (Cllrs Barnes, Dowling, Galley, Lambert, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Pragnell, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald, Tutt)

The motion was not carried.

Members then voted on the recommendations as set out in the report as follows:

FOR: 12 (Cllrs Barnes, Dowling, Galley, Lambert, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Pragnell, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald, Tutt)

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AGAINST: 5 (Cllrs Ebel, Evans, O’Keeffe, Powell, Scott)

RESOLVED – That the Fire Authority:

- i. approved the draft IRMP (and relevant associated appendices) for public consultation;
- ii. noted the proposed minor wording changes to the Authority’s purpose and commitments and to agree formal adoption subject to public and stakeholder consultation;
- iii. agreed the proposal to recommend an eight-week consultation period, alongside the associated draft consultation, communications and engagement plan; and
- iv. noted the intention to bring back a fully costed project implementation plan, and additional suite of detailed impact assessments, to the Fire Authority meeting in September this year (2020).

Post Meeting Amendment: After the meeting it was found that there were some data errors within Annexe 4; Appendix A to this Report. A corrected version of this Annexe has been included in the papers for the Meeting.

84 **Integrated Risk Management Plan - Consultation and Communication Plan**

The Fire Authority considered the Report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) which presented them with the communication and consultation plan for the Integrated Risk Management Plan. The plan had been revised in light of guidance issued by the Consultation Institute in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Assistant Director Planning & Improvement (ADPI) explained to those present that they had sought external advice on conducting a consultation at this time from the Consultation Institute. These consultation providers had given the Service alternative options to the more traditional face to face approach which was not possible under the current national restrictions. The plan included using various types of media channels to reach the public.

The ADPI informed the Authority that the Service would not be reliant on digital media as some members feared, and had a list of over 500 local groups in the county and city including those that were hard to reach. The consultation would also use telephone interviews and 10,000 postcards were being sent out to those residents that the Service know to be adverse to digital contact to encourage their awareness of the consultation and how to take part. Information on the consultation would also be available in e-bulletins and magazines produced by the local authorities in the area

Members queried whether there were stocks of the plan available in other languages. They were informed that this was not a new communication

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challenge and, in line with other local authorities processes, there would be papers made available in other languages available on request.

The Authority sought reassurance that the sample used for the telephone interviews would be large enough to provide robust data. The ADPI explained that the independent consultancy firm carrying out the interviews would contact enough people to ensure that there were 600 full interviews undertaken.

The Authority were reminded that they would be provided with Member packs, containing all the information that they need to respond to their constituents and make sure that they are giving the right information and directing people to take part in the consultation.

Cllr O’Keeffe left the meeting at 11.55am

The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) added that there would also be videos and short films produced to help get the information out, the Service would contact translating organisations to see if translation straplines may be added to these videos. Members also suggested that consideration be given to sign language or pictorial graphics be used and made suggestions of local charities and organisations who may be able to assist.

Those Members who had already expressed their reluctance to support a consultation at this time, reiterated that, whilst they fully supported a consultation on the plan and were not unsupportive of the process, they were unable to support it happening under the current circumstances.

Members then voted on the recommendations:

FOR: 12 (Cllrs Barnes, Dowling, Galley, Lambert, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Pragnell, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald, Tutt)

AGAINST: 4 (Cllrs Ebel, Evans, Powell, Scott)

RESOLVED – That the Fire Authority:

- i. approved the changes to the consultation plan in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, presented as option B;
- ii. approved the proposed 8 week consultation period;
- iii. did not elect to include a further 12 optional in depth surveys presented as option C; and
- iv. noted that the additional costs would be funded from the corporate contingency.

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The Fire Authority considered the Report of the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer regarding the proposed disposal of the Fort Road, Newhaven site.

Following the completion of Saxon House in Newhaven, the old Fire Station site in Fort Road was now surplus to Service requirements. In January 2013 the Policy & Resources Panel approved the disposal of the site at the best price reasonably obtainable. Lewes District Council (LDC) have offered £525,000.00 for the site, an offer conditional on securing residential planning approval. The LDC offer to purchase the site demonstrates best price for the Fire Authority. In February 2020 SLT considered the disposal option and the offer made by LDC and the Head of Terms together with consideration of the disposal to the Fire Authority. SLT approved the draft Heads of Terms (Subject to Contract) and recommended that the Fire Authority approve the disposal of Fort Road site to LDC on the basis of the Heads of Terms drafted.

RESOLVED – That the Fire Authority:

- i. approved the disposal of the Fort Road site to Lewes District Council at £525,000.00 noting that the disposal is subject to residential planning permission being secured by Lewes District Council;
- ii. approved the draft Heads of Terms (Subject to Contract);and
- iii. delegated authority to the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer in consultation with the Chief Fire Officer and the Deputy Monitoring Officer to take all necessary steps to complete the disposal

86 Exclusion of the Press & Public

There was no reason for the Meeting to be voted into confidential session, all business was conducted in public.

The meeting concluded at 12.07 pm

Signed

Chairman

Dated this

day of

2019

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