

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Panel	Scrutiny & Audit
Date	12 November 2020
Title of Report	Fire Authority Governance – Update Report
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Background Papers Fire Authority Report, Independent Review of Fire Authority Governance – Outcome Report - 6 December 2018

Appendices None

Implications

CORPORATE RISK	✓	LEGAL	✓
ENVIRONMENTAL		POLICY	
FINANCIAL		POLITICAL	✓
HEALTH & SAFETY		OTHER (please specify)	
HUMAN RESOURCES		CORE BRIEF	
EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT			

PURPOSE OF REPORT To update Members of the Authority on the progress and status of the actions arising from the independent review of governance of the Authority

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY In December 2017, East Sussex Fire Authority requested a review be undertaken into the political and organisational governance arrangements in place across the Authority and in relation to East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service.

The Good Governance Institute were awarded the contract and carried out their review in 2018. The process was overseen by a Member Reference Group with support from officers.

The report of the Good Governance Institute was submitted to the Fire Authority for consideration in December 2018. Members discussed and each proposal in turn and agreed to act on some and chose others not to enact.

Members were given a progress update by the Senior Democratic Services Officer at their Seminar on 15 July

2019. This report provides a further update on progress on the actions that the Fire Authority agreed it wished to take.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Authority is asked to:

- i) consider the contents of the report; and
 - iii) direct officers to progress with outstanding recommendations on the basis outlined within.
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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In December 2017, the Authority requested a review be undertaken into the political and organisational governance arrangements in place across the Fire Authority and in relation to East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service.
- 1.2 The Authority recognised that good governance is essential to address the challenges the public sector faces and to ensure public engagement and transparency in public sector service delivery. The oversight of governance systems is the responsibility of the relevant local authority and, given that there is evidence that governance issues are a material risk across the fire sector.
- 1.3 The Fire Authority agreed the review should be conducted by a third party in order to provide capacity, expertise and independence. Following the normal procurement and commercial processes the Good Governance Institute (GGI) were awarded the contract.
- 1.4 A Member Reference Group (MRG) was established, made up of the Chairman of the Fire Authority, the Vice Chair of the Fire Authority, the Chairman of the Scrutiny and Audit Panel and the Group Leaders. The MRG was been supported by the DCFO, and other officers of the Authority.
- 1.5 The MRG, along with officers considered the final report from the GGI presented the full Authority with the final report and their proposed response to the recommendations contained within it. Not all recommendations of the GGI were accepted Fire Authority.
- 1.6 Overall the GGI report showed that the Fire Authority had in place governance arrangements and a satisfactory system of internal control, both of which were fit for purpose and operating effectively. The GGI found there was robust governance documentation and resources, as well as understanding and competence among individuals. It was suggested that there was an opportunity for business practices to more consistently deliver greater effectiveness, and for the Authority to develop to the next stage of governance maturity.
- 1.7 For the purposes of this report each accepted recommendation is detailed and followed by the action taken and current status.

2 GGI RECOMMENDATIONS – ACTIONS TAKEN AND CURRENT STATUS

2.1 Recommendation 4 – *“The Authority should carry out a skills audit, and in light of the results consider options for improving governing body sustainability through considering amending the Authority size, and the potential appointment of associate Panel members”*

2.1.1 **Action:** Since this report we have joined South-East Employers (SEEmp) and will work with them to undertake a “Member’s skills audit”. This will look at each Members’ IT & communications skills and equality & diversity awareness amongst other aspects of being a Fire Authority Member. Once completed it will show us the skills we have as an Authority and where there are gaps. It will allow us to tailor training & development opportunities for you all and will perhaps highlight members who have skills that we are unaware of that they might be willing to share to benefit us all.

2.1.2 The intention is that following the scheduled elections in 2021 a skills audit of all Members will be appropriate. In the event that we find ourselves still in the constraints of COVID-19 and the election is required to be postponed then the skills audit will proceed with current membership as an election would likely be delayed for a year.

Status: Outstanding

2.2 Recommendation 5 – *“The Authority should agree an externally facilitated ‘board development’ programme to enhance both governing body effectiveness and resilience. This should focus specifically on the strategic and operating context of the Fire Authority, and not seek to replicate general development delivered through Constituent County and City Councils, or the LGA.”*

2.2.1 It was agreed that this will be completed using SEEmp to provide a “board development” session at a future Member seminar and that this would be done after the completion of the proposed skills audit. This would ensure that it is an independent facilitated discussion to support open and honest dialogue.

Status: Outstanding

2.3 Recommendation 6 – *“Through the board development programme, the Authority should work through conflict of interest and Code of Conduct issues in relation to the Authority’s reputation as an asset. Enhancement of the Code of Conduct should be considered”*

2.3.1 This recommendation was not agreed in full by the Fire Authority as changes to the Code of Conduct were felt to be unnecessary as it was very closely aligned with those of the Constituent Authorities. Instead, the Fire Authority agreed that the most appropriate action would be to strengthen and enhance the Fire Authority’s “Expectations of Members”.

2.3.2 This has been achieved by updating and adapting the Member Handbook which has been issued to all members. The Handbook now includes details of the expectations that ESFRS has of all its Fire Authority Members and specific expectations of those appointed to key roles.

- 2.3.3 Particularly referenced in the “Expectation of Members” are accountability, role and function, making decisions and overseeing performance, representing the Authority, governance, ethical standards, relationships, personal and role development and rights and duties

Status: Completed

- 2.3.4 *It is worth noting that the Code of Conduct has been selected as an area in need of updating as part of the current review of the Fire Authority’s Constitution being undertaken by Brighton & Hove City Council. This will be discussed by the Members of the Constitution Working Group and any proposed changes will be brought to the Fire Authority in 2021 once the review is completed.*

2.4 Recommendation 10 – “The Authority should clarify expectations from Members in relation to internal and external stakeholder engagement, and this should be managed within an activity plan linked to the strategic objectives”

- 2.4.1 The Fire Authority agreed that this recommendation would be dealt with in the combination with Recommendation 6 by means of the review of the “Expectations of Members” document. It was felt that this was an opportunity to outline how Members were expected to engage with the public on Fire Authority matters through their various roles on multiple authorities, Parish Council meetings, councillor surgeries etc.

- 2.4.2 Members are kept informed of Service updates and information through a weekly Member email and know that if they need assistance in terms of signposting and information they can contact Democratic Services. In relation to public consultation documents related to proposals for service changes, such as the recent IRMP Consultation, the Communications and Marketing team include “key messages” for Members to allow engagement with the public from an informed position.

- 2.4.3 The Members Handbook meets another Fire Authority resolution to include the Service’s expectations of Member attendance at meetings, seminars, open days, events and pass-out parades. Democratic Services, as agreed by the Fire Authority, track and record a member attendance at meetings and engagement with outside events. Member attendance at Fire Authority and Panel meetings are recorded and published on Modern.Gov and reported annually to the Scrutiny & Audit Panel.

- 2.4.4 Members are regularly reminded to inform the Democratic Services team of all the events and additional meetings that they attend.

Status: Completed – ongoing, business as usual

2.5 Recommendation 12 – “The Authority should introduce a refreshed induction programme, and ensure that this includes opportunities for engagement with Member colleagues and service level staff outside of formal settings. This should be supported by a more systematic programme of seminars for Authority member development”

- 2.5.1 It was agreed that a refreshed induction programme would be introduced and this should include a session on “what does being a Fire Authority Member entail?”. The Senior Democratic Services Officer is working on a redesigned

Member Induction, as well as a new Member Development programme ready for implementation after the scheduled elections in May 2021.

- 2.5.2 The Senior Democratic Services Officer is also working with the Constituent Authorities to ensure that there is limited overlap or duplication of induction / Member training. It is the intention, as agreed by the Fire Authority, that the East Sussex Fire Authority induction programme has a clear focus on the necessary fire specific matters.
- 2.5.3 The annual programme of seminars is planned in advance and Members are notified of the dates as early as possible, and reminded of them on a weekly basis. It was agreed that Group Leaders would strongly encourage attendance at Member Seminars and training sessions. The content of Members Seminars is decided by the Assistant Directors and the sessions include, where possible, items which are deemed to be developmental and provide training as well as those which provide information.

Status: In progress – to become business as usual

2.6 Recommendation 2 – “Authority cover papers to be framed better to support focused discussion and clear decision-making, with items positioned in relation to strategic and operational objectives”

- 2.6.1 It has been agreed that the style of reports and their recommendations could be improved. Efforts have already been made to improve the quality of recommendations and to avoid reports being marked “to note”.
- 2.6.2 Democratic Services are working on an updated report template these will have increased focus on the wider implications of each report. They will also allow officers to include which Strategies they relate to, and ensure that, where applicable, collaboration opportunities will be referenced.
- 2.6.3 Democratic Services will seek comment from officers on the updated report templates and, for continuity purposes, it is the intention that these will commence in use in the next municipal year.

Status: In progress – implementation in 2021/22

3 OTHER RELATED MATTERS

- 3.1 The discussion on Authority processes led the MRG to express their support for the introduction of a “Committee Management System” similar to that utilised by both constituent authorities which would encourage paper-free meetings with no hard copy agendas being printed or distributed. The SDSO presented to SLT in December 2018. It was agreed that this should be implemented in the form of Modern.Gov, the same system that is used by all local authorities in the Service area. Throughout 2019/20 Democratic Services officers have been working with ITG and telent to install the system. This is now in regular use for the production of meeting papers, hosting the constitution and recording Member attendance.
- 3.2 This system enables and supports many of the points raised through the GGI report including:

- Clearer, consistent templates
- Adapted agenda papers
- Paper free
- Subscription to papers for Members
- E-calendars

4 CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The implementation of a number of the GGI recommendations have already been completed. Democratic Services will continue to progress those that are outstanding, namely that regarding Member Development, Induction and a skills analysis. Once these have been completed or undertaken as appropriate, they will be factored in to the Democratic Services work programme to ensure that they are either updated or scheduled in to be repeated as necessary.