

POLICY & RESOURCES PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the POLICY & RESOURCES PANEL held at County Hall, East Sussex County Council, St Anne's Crescent, Lewes BN7 1UE at 11.30 am on Thursday, 27 April 2023.

Present: Councillors Redstone (Chairman), Galley, Lambert, Powell and Taylor

Also present: D Whittaker (Chief Fire Officer), 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), H Scott-Youlton (Assistant Director Operational Support & Resilience), A Avery (Finance Manager), A Blanshard (Democratic Services Manager), R Smith (Democratic Services Officer)

66 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Redstone declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest due to his membership of the East Sussex County Council Pensions Committee.

67 Apologies for Absence/Substitutions

There were none.

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

The Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) informed the Panel that the former Director of Financial Services, Richard Charman, had recently passed away. The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) confirmed that a letter had been sent to the family on behalf of the Service.

69 Minutes of the last Policy & Resources meeting held on 19 January 2023

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Policy & Resources Panel held on 19 January 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

70 Callover

Members reserved the following items for debate:

31 Revenue and Capital Budget 2022/23 and Capital Programme 2022/23 to 2026/2 Monitoring at Month 11 (end February)

32 Productivity and Efficiency Plan 2023/24

71 Revenue and Capital Budget 2022/23 and Capital Programme 2022/23 to 2026/27 Monitoring at Month 11 (end February)

Unconfirmed minutes – to be confirmed at the next meeting of the Policy & Resources Panel

The Chairman of the Panel invited the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) to introduce the report on the findings of the Month 11 monitoring undertaken on the Revenue and Capital Budget 2022/23 and Capital Programme 2022/23 to 2026/27.

The ADR/T informed the Panel that a net revenue overspend of £427,000 had been identified, with the largest pressure coming from wholetime, overtime and on-call costs within Safer Communities. The risk around the Grey Book pay rise was also highlighted as a significant pressure of £525,000.

The amount attributed to overtime reflected the continuing issues around long-term absence, and that the pressures on utilities and fuel continued to be influenced by inflationary pressures. The underspend in external training had offset some of the pressure.

With regards to the Capital Programme, the ADR/T informed Members that this was being monitored against the revised Capital Budget which had been agreed by the Fire Authority in February 2023. It was highlighted that there had been additional slippage related to Estates. The Panel were also informed that the refurbishment at Hove was now complete, and that Members would have an opportunity to visit the Station at the Members Seminar to be held in July 2023.

Members discussed the reported overspend of £1.5 million attributed to wholetime pay and overtime, asking how this was being monitored and managed. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) responded, informing the Panel that the Safer Communities budget had been impacted by ongoing issues with NHS waiting times, and over establishment over the year. It was highlighted that this over establishment had decreased to 11, down from 22. The Panel asked how quickly the over establishment figure was likely to be reduced further, and the ACFO advised that this figure was expected to be down by October.

Members were informed that sickness was likely to continue to be an issue. The ACFO advised that there was a monthly report presented to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), as the importance of understanding the actual cost impact of overtime costs on the budget was crucial. In addition, the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) advised Members that there was a need to investigate these costs in greater detail, for example assessing the use of overtime by Station, or by Watch, to ensure that appropriate local control measures were implemented.

The Panel questioned the Capital Programme going forwards and the need to borrow, enquiring as to whether there was capacity to deliver the programme. The CFO informed Members that there was a need to continue to look in detail at the Capital Programme, including assessing the cost of interest charged on loans, and balancing the cost of improving the Service with the cost of maintaining the core service provision. It was emphasised that the

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cost of any investment needed to demonstrate effectiveness in terms of improvements delivered.

The CFO advised the Panel that a review was being undertaken to investigate whether the lifespan of the Fleet is appropriate and continues to reflect the length of time that the vehicles are fit for purpose. Members were informed that the number of UK based suppliers of appliances had fallen and therefore the risk of availability, and ability to maintain them needed to be considered. The Assistant Director Operational Support & Resilience (ADOSR) advised that current good practice was to keep appliances for 15 years, however consideration was being given to whether this should be extended to 18 years, whilst acknowledging that there would be risks involved in doing so. In terms of response cars, the ADOSR emphasised the need to consider the green agenda when looking at how the use of these could be reduced and that this needed to be balanced with the need to mobilise staff between locations. It was highlighted that the response cars had not returned to the levels of mileage that they had been covering pre-covid, so there may be a possibility to investigate extending their lifespan based on mileage, rather than the age of the vehicle.

RESOLVED – That the Panel noted:

- i. the risks to Revenue Budget and the projected overspend;
- ii. the risks to the Capital Programme;
- iii. the reduced net forecast drawdown from reserves;
- iv. the grants available and spending plans;
- v. the monitoring of savings taken in 2022/23; and
- vi. the current years investments and borrowing.

72 Productivity and Efficiency Plan 2023/24

The Chairman informed the Panel that the Home Office had required the Productivity & Efficiency Plan to be published by the 31 March 2023, and invited the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) to provide a brief introduction to the report.

The ADR/T advised that due to the timeline of the circulation of the requirements for the Plan, and the subsequent deadline, there had not been an opportunity to submit the Plan to the Fire Authority for prior approval ahead of submitting it to the Home Office and publishing on the Authority's website. Members were informed that the Plan included details of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), including the funding received from Government Grants and illustrated the drawdown from reserves to ensure that the budget could be balanced for 2023/24. It was also highlighted that the justification of increasing the precept by £5 was included.

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The Panel discussed the language used around ‘efficiencies’ and the relevance of this to the Fire Service. The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) acknowledged the importance of ensuring that there was clear communication to ensure staff were aware of the distinction between cuts and efficiencies and provided an example of a renegotiation of a contract to reduce costs as an efficiency, rather than a cut. It was reported that the Communications team were working to explain the difference between the two, and that this was also being explained during workplace visits, emphasising the importance of transparency.

The Panel asked for clarification on what was meant by productivity from the Minister’s perspective. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) advised that this was not easily defined, as it was understood differently in different Services. The CFO highlighted that as incident numbers had reduced, there was a need to expand the tasks that staff undertake, for example by undertaking safety inspections. The role of Business Safety events in enabling Fire Fighters to identify risks both to themselves and inhabitants of property was discussed and given as an example of a positive efficiency; enabling them to expand their technical knowledge.

Members asked for further details about the implementation of tranche 4, and whether public consultation was going to be required. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) advised that it was understood that tranches 1-3 would leave a shortfall of approximately £500,000. The possibility of completing tranches 1 and 2 earlier than 31 March 2024 was being investigated, and a wider set of options was due to be reported to the Fire Authority in June 2023, however it wasn’t envisaged that public consultation would be required.

RESOLVED – That the Panel:

- a) noted and commented upon the Productivity & Efficiency Plan 2023/24 as published and submitted to the Home Office; and
- b) did not identify any further information that was required from Officers.

The meeting concluded at 12.46 pm

Signed

Chairman

Dated this

day of

2023