

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority Minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting

Date: 20 December 2022

Time: 2.00pm – 3.20pm

Place: Fire HQ, Huntingdon

Present: Councillors: M Atkins, S Bywater, B Goodliffe (Chair), M Jamil (Vice Chair), E Murphy, D Over, K Reynolds, P Slatter and M Smith

Officers: Dawn Cave, Shahin Ismail, Stuart Smith, Chris Strickland, Deb Thompson and Matthew Warren

18. Apologies for absence and declarations of interest

There were no apologies for absence or declarations of interest.

19. Minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee held 28th April 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 April 2022 were approved as a correct record.

20. Policy and Resources Committee Action Log

The Action Log was noted.

21. Draft Medium term Financial Strategy

The Committee considered a late report on the draft Fire Authority medium term financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2023-2028. Members noted that the report had been accepted by the Chair for the following reasons for urgency and lateness:

Reasons for Lateness – the delay was due to the late announcement by government on the changes to the amount Fire Authority Council tax level could be increased, and time was needed to ensure the impact of precept changes on budget could be understood.

Reasons for Urgency – so that the proposed budget and precept can be consulted upon within the relevant timescales

The Fire Authority had considered the significant challenges to the Fire Service's financial position for 2023-24 at their meeting in early November. Whilst the ongoing economic uncertainty continued to be a significant risk across the sector, an uplift in government grant had subsequently been announced, and on 12 December, it had been announced that Fire Authority Council Tax levels could be increased by up to 2.99% or £5 (whichever is higher), without the need to call a referendum. Any such Council Tax increase would be subject to consultation.

Prior to the announcements on the grant and precept uplift, considerable work had been undertaken by the Finance team, robustly challenging every budget holder. The grant and precept uplift would enable the Service to catch up in inflationary terms, and afford the latest offer made to full-time firefighters was for a 5% pay award, with an estimated further 4% on pay next year. However, a pay award higher than this would be challenging.

Notification of the grant increase had been received on 19th December, and this provided an additional £500,000, which provided a total of £9.5M next financial year; service grant of £240K had also been retained, which was unexpected. There was a 1.8% assumption of increase to the Council Taxbase currently, but Cambridge City figures were still awaited.

Detailed budget preparations were as robust as they could be, and a budget book would be provided to Committee in January. The budget book and MTFS would also be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January, before being presented to the Fire Authority meeting in February for approval. Officers confirmed that the final MTFS document would be more clearer and user friendly, with graphs and images.

In terms of unknowns, with regard to Section 31 Grant, the government had indicated that they were effectively freezing business rates for small businesses, and providing Fire Authorities with a grant to offset this loss.

The Deputy Chief Executive stressed that there was still uncertainty, and the pay awards for both the current year and 2023/24 were major uncertainties from a budgetary perspective. Additionally, the increased Precept was for one year only. The uplifts had been very late, following considerable lobbying of government from both professional and political sources. If all Fire Authorities maximised the Precept, this would not change CFRS's quartile ranking.

It was further noted that the precept £5 was conditional on the Fire Authority providing an efficiency statement plan to the Minister to justify its position. Given the preparatory work already undertaken to scrutinise the Service's

finances, he had no concerns about providing that information, and saw it as a good opportunity to demonstrate that the Fire Authority was starting from a low base and was very efficient.

In response to a question on potential efficiencies that had been considered as part of the budgetary process, officers confirmed that the uplifts enabled them to review these in a controlled manner rather than introducing knee jerk changes. There had already been significant reductions, and scope for further efficiencies would be considered.

A Member asked how the Service was placed in terms of the natural hazards it faced, e.g. field fires, flooding, etc. Officers advised that much was weather dependent, and whilst there was a lot of water in the county, it did not have moorland, so was less susceptible to wildfires in hot dry weather. As climate change resulted in hotter summers and wetter winters, the Service needed to be more flexible in how it delivered services, to ensure it was prepared. Originally all fire stations were effectively autonomous, but a more flexible approach was now taken, with firefighters moving around to provide cover.

Noting that there were currently 28 appliances available out of 38, compared to 14-15 available usually, it was noted that this was probably due to there being more retained firefighters available at home due to the Christmas holidays, in the same way there was greater availability in the evenings and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In response to a question about utility costs, officers confirmed that these were above inflation, and this would be made clearer in the final version.

A Member asked if the expected increases in cross border charges would be reciprocated? Officers confirmed that they usually balanced out: e.g. Hertfordshire and Suffolk usually attend more incidents in Cambridgeshire, but Norfolk fewer (i.e. Cambridgeshire attends more incidents in Norfolk). This was calculated using an average rate over three years. There was an issue with one neighbouring Service on charges, and CFRS was paying them what was believed to be a fair rate on a per hour or per incident basis.

A Member spoke favourably on the MTFS and the current situation, and applauded the lobbying undertaken by the Fire Authority Chair and senior managers. However, he commented that the devil may be in the detail, and pressure needed to be maintained, suggesting that the key issues would be inflation, salaries and energy. Officers confirmed that inflationary figures had been assumed on premises and running costs, and it was expected that energy bills would go up by 100%. Salaries remained a concern, particularly for next year.

A Member asked what the approach would be to the consultation on tax precepts, and also whether all Fire and Rescue Services would take the full £5, noting that £5 represented an increase of 6.6% on a Band D Council Tax. It was noted that historically, despite considerable communications, there was little engagement in the consultation. The consultation needed to be carefully worded so that options presented were all deliverable. Whilst the uplifts and changes nationally were welcome, it only meant that the Service could “catch up” for the year.

Councillor Murphy, Chair of the Fire Authority thanked officers for the huge amount of valuable work undertaken in preparing the MTFS, which would be very useful going forward, and would also enable officers to provide the efficiency statement to government to justify the £4.95 increase. She applauded this exemplary approach to financial planning. The Chief Fire Officer commented that this had been a team effort, and thanked Members for their lobbying. He commented that there had been some intense contingency planning this year, and none of that work had been lost: business continuity plans would continue to be presented to Members annually, in addition to the Operational Risk Review project which was still going forward.

Councillor Goodliffe, Committee Chair, thanked officers for all their hard work which meant the Service was in a good position going forward.

It was resolved unanimously to:

1. review and approve the attached draft MTFS;
2. review the associated financial plan at Appendix 1 within it;
3. agree the forecast budget for 2023/24 to include public consultation on a £4.95 council tax increase.

22. Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report 2022-23

Members considered an update on revenue and capital spending as of 30 November 2022.

Members noted that the current position was relatively positive, partly due to wholetime firefighters’ pay awards having not yet been applied. Pay awards had been applied for professional support staff.

Cambridgeshire was one of the founding members of the Fire and Rescue Indemnity Company, and insurance premiums for next year would increase by only 2.9%. This was low compared to other members of the consortium, and other blue light services.

A Member observed that Reserves appeared low, and queried capital receipts. It was noted that the former Papworth fire station had recently sold

at auction for £312,000. A decision was expected on the former Huntingdon Fire Station, where there had been pre-application discussions with the District Council, and a determination was expected early in the new year. The site was in a Conservation Area and there were also some flood risk issues, but these were not insurmountable issues. The Planning Authority had indicated that a higher density was desirable, in keeping with the local area. Officers confirmed that they were still keeping an open mind as to whether the site would be sold as one or two lots, in order to maximise the value of that site.

With regard to the new Training Centre, it was agreed that both Policy & Resources and Overview & Scrutiny Committees would be held at the new Training Centre in January, if possible. Officers paid special tribute to those staff involved in the training centre project, including Jodie Housego, Simon Thompson and Stocker Standen.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the position on revenue and capital spending.

23. CFRS Potential Industrial Action Update

The Committee considered a verbal update on potential industrial action, and the current planning assumptions and work to date to ensure the Service was as prepared as possible should periods of industrial action take place.

Following the rejection of a 5% pay rise offer, the FBU had announced that they would ballot their members for strike action. This ballot would end on 30 January 2023. If the outcome was a mandate for strike action, the earliest date industrial action could commence was 13 February.

The Industrial Action Business Continuity Plan was activated in June 2022. The Industrial Action Business Continuity Planning Cell (IABCP) was meeting frequently to ensure that all relevant actions, including training, were in place, should industrial action go ahead. Currently there were 19 individuals who had signed resilience agreements. Additionally, there were six senior leaders and a number of operational personnel, both wholetime and on call, who would be willing to provide cover during periods of industrial action. All resilience colleagues had undertaken 2.5 training days on fire appliance, equipment and operational procedures, and tribute was paid to the training team for arranging this training. The proposed arrangements for serious incident cover up to Gold level were noted. In terms of fire cover, the plan was to have at least the minimum requirement of ten fire appliances available, and this could be higher. In addition, a number of professional

support staff had been trained to help support Combined Fire Control (CFC) staff during periods of industrial action.

In terms of risks, the risk to the public was greater during periods of industrial action, and appropriate positive communications would be undertaken, especially around prevention.

It was noted that specialist skill sets such as water response, rope rescue and large animal rescue could not be guaranteed during periods of industrial action.

Arising from the report:

- a Member asked what would happen if there was an incident such as the recent tragedy where four young boys tragically died after falling through an icy lake in Solihull. Officers outlined the resources available, including the support offered from partners such as the Police, and the actions that could be taken, even if specialist skills sets were unavailable;
- in response to a query about the 19 resilience colleagues, it was confirmed that this was about half the usual number;
- the Chief Fire Officer outlined the positive approach and professionalism of staff generally, and paid particular tribute to the training centre staff for their support;
- a Member asked if there will be real time data shared with striking colleagues during periods of industrial action, so they were aware of incidents involving risk to human life. Officers confirmed that any staff picketing fire stations would have access to those fire stations, including use of welfare facilities and the teleprinter detailing incidents. An agreement for major incidents had been in place during the last industrial action, and that was currently being reviewed nationally. It was unclear whether Service Headquarters would be picketed if industrial action went ahead;
- it was noted that historically, Retained Firefighters had not participated in industrial action, but the FRSA's position had not yet been confirmed;
- it was noted that the legislation around industrial action had changed since 2014, and guidance would be issued to all staff to ensure that

everyone was fully briefed. It was made clear to staff, both striking and non striking, that the Service's Behaviours would continue to be applied to everyone;

- in response to a question raised on lessons learned from industrial action in 2014, it was confirmed that the biggest learning was around culture, and having face to face conversations with those taking industrial action pre- and post-strike, making the experience as amicable as possible. The other lesson was to start preparing as early as possible;
- it was noted that the Service would not be taking up the offer of military support in periods of industrial action, given the level of resilience established through planning. The likely high cost and issues with the military support were noted. However, resilience could be an issue if there were coordinated days of action e.g. both firefighters and teachers.

It was resolved unanimously to note the update.

24. Work Programme

Members noted the forward Work Programme