

CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH FIRE AUTHORITY POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE: MINUTES

Date: 17 December 2020

Time: 2pm – 3.50pm

Place: Virtual Meeting

Present: Councillors: S Bywater, W Hunt, M Jamil, D Over (Vice–Chairman), K Reynolds (Chairman), M Shellens and M Smith

Officers: Jon Anderson, Dawn Cave, Amy Jackson, Maurice Moore, Chris Strickland, Deb Thompson, and Matthew Warren

148. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Ashwood.

149. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

150. POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MINUTES – 23 JULY 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman on the return to the office.

151. ACTION LOG

The Action Log was noted.

152. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES – 16th JULY AND 1ST OCTOBER 2020

It was resolved to note the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 July and 1 October.

A Member queried whether a number of actions had been completed from the July meeting:

Minute 84 – reports relating to the Fleet Management policies and procedures;

Minutes 85 – documents relating to the Governance Internal Audit report to be circulated to the Committee – it was confirmed that these had been circulated;

Minute 86 – documents relating to the Terms of Reference for a Member Led Review of how the Fire Authority had responded to the pandemic, and action relating to maintaining the Fire Authority meeting programme in the event of internet issues.

It was agreed that Democratic Services and Deb Thompson would check to see that all actions had been followed up appropriately. **Action required.**

153. COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW AND DRAFT BUDGET 2021-22

The Committee considered an overview of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) and the proposed draft budget for 2021/22. Introducing the report, officers advised that the ongoing economic uncertainty caused by the global pandemic made it challenging to forecast with any confidence. It had been confirmed that there would be no cut to the government grant for 2021/22, but the collection rate was a major concern, as many families were struggling to pay their Council Tax as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, the budget usually included a modest assumption on housing growth, but it was unlikely that this would transpire.

Set against this background of uncertainty there were additional cost pressures, which were set out in the appendix. These included continued pandemic related expenditure such as the cleaning contract. The cleaning contract had been due for renewal, but the decision had been taken to bring the service back in house, given that there had been issues with the cleaning contract over recent years, and the additional challenges of keeping all workplaces clean and Covid secure.

It was noted that Healthshield was a quasi private medical cover, which gave members the opportunity to escalate treatment for health issues which may otherwise result in prolonged sickness e.g. musculoskeletal problems, by providing early intervention such as physical therapy.

In line with government announcements, no uplift was expected to public sector pay, with the exception of the Armed Forces.

A Member commented that the public were usually very sympathetic when consulted on the need to increase the Fire Service's budget, but asked if an uplift lower than the proposed 2% had been explored, given that many families were struggling financially. Officers acknowledged this point, and commented that the 2% increase per year would only result in an increase of £1.44 per year for the average family, but this could still be difficult for some families when combined with other pressures. However, it was essential to

set a rate that protected the Fire Service, and no increase would result in the Service having to identify savings of approximately £400K, which would inevitably require staffing cuts. Whilst management were conscious that ultimately they may need to review future staffing structures, this was only at the scenario planning stage currently, and it would not feed into the 2021/22 budgets. However, senior officers were cognisant of the risks to the public sector longer term due to the unprecedented impact of the pandemic and Brexit on the national economy. The Service's overall budget had reduced by the equivalent of £8M since Austerity measures had been introduced in 2010/11. Senior officers were keen to maintain good continuity of service going forward.

With regard to Council Tax collection, a Member asked what happened to the additional Council Tax generated from new homes which became occupied during the municipal year e.g. in May 2021. It was confirmed that when budgets and Council Tax were set, part of the equation was an estimate by authorities of their expectations for housing growth. Whilst some housing growth would come through in 2021/22, the total 1% housing growth estimated for 2020/2021 would not be realised, so zero housing growth was factored into the figures for 2021/22. In reality, there would be some housing growth in the coming year, but this would offset the shortfall in the current year. It was confirmed that if there was housing growth at the end of the municipal year above what had been estimated, precepting authorities received additional funds to meet the additional return.

Discussing Reserves, it was noted that the Fire Service currently had very strong Reserves, but significant sums were ringfenced for major projects, notably property. Reserves were also being used to recruit whole-time firefighters in a planned way, in advance of firefighters who were planning to retire, so that the new recruits had time to become established and experienced ahead of their colleagues' retirement. This was because crewing was already 'lean' so this approach ensured there was no detrimental impact on performance. In terms of minimum Reserve holdings, officers suggested that these should be around 5% of the overall budget, which equated to around £1.5M.

In discussion:

- it was confirmed that the Fire Service was benefitting from the current low cost of fuel;
- A Member suggested that recruitment would be easier going forward. Officers agreed, adding that staff turnover had been very low in the current year;
- In terms of the Minimum Wage, it was confirmed that those on low wages would have their salaries inflated, but very few staff were below the £24.5K threshold;

- One Member cautioned against “stand still” Council Tax demands, i.e. not increasing the precept, which would subsequently take many years to recover from.

It was resolved unanimously:

1. endorse the draft budget for 2021/22 including the provisional precept attached at Appendix 1 to the report;
2. endorse the proposed draft 2% increase in council tax for consultation.

154. PROPERTY UPDATE (INCLUDING COLLABORATION WITH CAMBRIDGESHIRE CONSTABULARY)

The Committee received an update on progress against Police and Fire collaborative property schemes.

The Fire Service was in the first year of a four year Capital Programme for land and buildings, which had been agreed by the Fire Authority in February 2020. The programme linked together a buildings condition survey, the wider strategic planning process, the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) and also fed in to the Property and Asset Board. The global pandemic had had a significant impact on the way many facilities were used by staff, and an assessment of the long term impact of those changes needed to be reflected in the Programme going forward.

A number of On-Call stations had been designated “strategic stations”, owing to their location, as roaming appliances used them as bases. The upgrades that these stations had benefitted from were outlined. The importance of the Programme in delivering services and providing the best facilities for staff, whilst recognising budget constraints, was stressed.

One Member commented favourably on the works that had taken place at his local Station, and stressed the importance of delivering a good service and facilities for staff.

It was noted that in addition to the property issues, there was a wider piece of work relating to ICT systems. There were significant differences in the way the Fire Service utilised ICT systems compared to the Police, and to move forward collaboratively with the Police on ICT systems would be challenging both financially and practically.

It was clarified that a reference to high staff turnover related to a wave of operational staff retirements over recent years – few staff voluntarily left the organisation prior to retirement.

There was a discussion about cooperation and collaboration with the Police, and a Member suggested that co-operating with other public sector bodies such as the Police and Ambulance Service should be encouraged, but stressed that this was very different to merging with the Police.

On the issue of broader collaborative projects, officers advised that there had been exploratory work on the appetite for collaboration with the Police, specifically around property group collaboration. However, in discussions with a wide range of stakeholders in both organisations e.g. HR and ICT, it had become apparent that culturally the two organisations were very different in how they use their property functions, particularly with regard to ICT, and examples of these cultural differences were given. Owing to these challenges, both organisations had suggested that an options paper be brought forward in June 2021 to better understand the impact of potential changes.

It was resolved unanimously to

1. note the progress made to date;
2. approve the proposed next steps for collaboration, as set out in paragraph 6.3 of the report.

155. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2020-21

The Deputy Chief Executive presented a report containing an update on revenue and capital spending as at 30th November 2020.

An error was highlighted in paragraph 4.3 of the report, which should reference "... the main variations to the end of November 2020".

Members noted the following:

- The overspend for Whole Time Firefighters and Control Room Staff, and also Fire Allowances. An additional burden this year was included in Fire Allowances related to operational officers providing cover out of hours, as there had been a number of instances where additional staff have been required to cover the rota due to long term officer sickness;
- In terms of senior managers pay, a significant proportion related to former ACFO Rick Hylton, but this was offset by income;
- Increases due to Covid-19 expenditure. There were also a number of reductions due to Covid-19, due to reduced vehicle movements, energy usage, etc. In addition, BP had kindly paid for fuel at start of year;

Arising from the report:

- A Member asked if problems were still being experienced with parking outside Ely Fire Station, by parents whose children attended the nearby school, as he had contacts who could help. It was confirmed that there were no longer problems with inappropriate parking;
- A Member queried a reference to PPE purchased on behalf of partners. It was confirmed that the PPE had been purchased on behalf of the Local Resilience Forum, with a large proportion going to the NHS. Payment was still awaited for this (approximately £180K) but officers were confident that this would be paid. There was also a large quantity of hand sanitiser that had been purchased which was found not to be suitable, and this was being followed up with the supplier and manufacturer. Again, officers were confident that this would be reimbursed;
- Noting that sadly many companies in the hospitality sector were going out of business, a Member queried the likely impact on Business Rates collection? Officers advised that this was a difficult situation for the collecting authorities, but central government had indicated that they would be underwriting 75% of that lost income, although it was unclear at this stage how this would work in practice;
- A Member queried the final column on Appendix 1, "Variance Percentage". It was confirmed that this was variance against what was expected to be spent or received to date. It was noted that the budget to date needed amending as debt charges do not go through until the end of the year, and officers agreed to amend this schedule for future meetings. Action required.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the position on revenue and capital spending.

156. FIRE AUTHORITY PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT - MONITORING REPORT

The Committee received a report that provided an update against the Fire Authority Projects for 2020-21.

Members noted the following points relating to the major change programme in the Appendix:

- Major ICT infrastructure: the system was being upgraded to Office 365 which was Cloud based, including a document based system called Sharepoint. It was anticipated that migration would start early in the new year, but timescales were rated Amber as there was some uncertainty on how to move documents from the old into the new system;

- With regard to the Integrated Communications Control System (ICCS) and Mobilising Solution, the Service was working with Systel to implement a brand new emergency response system. Systel were a French company, providing systems to Fire Services all over Europe including some services in UK. Some delays had inevitably occurred due to the global pandemic and the associated travel restrictions, and currently there were difficulties with the French engineers travelling to the UK. However, the Home Office provided travel exemptions for certain employers. A three month delay was expected, but the project should be complete by July 2021;
- A Member queried the “deviation report” listed against timescales for ICCS. Officers confirmed that this was part of the process to formalise the delay in implementing the system;
- With regard to Project Lead Members it was noted that usually Type 3 projects required a member to participate, and Cllr McGuire had been the lead member for ICCS and Mobilising Solution;
- Noting the statement “revisits required for coverage testing” for P089 ESMCP (Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme), a Member asked if officers were happy they had a suitable system in place in the meantime? Officers confirmed that this was a Home Office project, and the Home Office had recently advised that this project had been delayed for six months. Work was being undertaken with the Police on testing coverage, as they were using the same communications system, and coverage was the critical part of the project. It was confirmed that the main risks of the delay sat with the Home Office, although the cost of Airwave was the Fire Service’s main risk, as the cost was higher than the new system;
- With regard to Project P126 – Huntingdon Station relocation – it was noted that the response on the Planning Application was due on 24/12/20, but since the agenda had been published, it had been confirmed that this would be delayed by around three weeks;
- With regard to P118, Fireground Radios, a Member queried the statement “Unable to Go Live until Breathing Apparatus refresh is complete as the pouches are not compatible with the current Breathing Apparatus sets – awaiting date for this completion to plan deployment of radios”, officers confirmed that they had been aware of this issue, and had taken the decision not to purchase pouches which would become obsolete once the new radios were introduced;

- P122 Training Centre review – options appraisal paper had been due to be completed by 03/12/20 – it was agreed that an update would be circulated. Action required;
- P093 Co-responding – it was confirmed that this related to working with the Ambulance Service in areas where that Service was struggling to meet response times. It was confirmed that this was still a sensitive area in terms of industrial relations, as the national position of the FBU was that firefighters should not be doing this work. However, co-responding continued at two stations, as it could not wait for national negotiations regarding pay to be resolved, and it was judged to be the right thing to do for the communities served;
- P116 Aerial replacement – a Member was pleased to note the good progress being made on this project;
- With regard to project p125 - ICU – it was confirmed that timescales had slipped due to the pandemic. The ACFO agreed to circulate revised dates. Action required;
- P131 - GIS – it was confirmed that the “Social demographic risk modeller” assessed where appliances needed to be located on the basis of demographics.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the Integrated Communications Control System (ICCS) and Mobilising System Replacement Project update at Appendix 1 to the report and the Programme Status Report, as at December 2020, attached at Appendix 2 to the report.

157. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

Members noted that the 2021/22 dates, which had been agreed following the last Fire Authority meeting, would be added to the Work Programme. A reminder would be issued regarding the seminar before the full Fire Authority meeting in February. Action required.

A Member raised concerns regarding the Elections scheduled for May 2021, and the impact this would have as it was likely there would be many new Fire Authority Members. Officers reassured Members that there would be a full induction programme for new Members, prioritising the most critical areas.

It was unanimously resolved:

To note the Work Programme

158. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

In response to a query, officers advised that whilst much of the content of the reports was not private, the legal advice that would be referred to under this item was confidential.

It was resolved that the press and public be excluded from the meeting on the grounds that the agenda contains exempt information under Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and that it would not be in the public interest for this information to be disclosed - information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

159. PENSION UPDATE

Members considered an update on the Firefighters Pension Scheme (FPS) and a recommended position to immediate detriment.

It was resolved unanimously to:

1. note the latest position with regards to immediate detriment,
2. approve the Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRA) Scheme Managers approach to immediate detriment (paragraph 4.6 of the report).