

<p>Notes of the Policy Planning Forum</p>
--

24^h March, 2014 at 10.30 am
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: **Members of the Authority**
Councillor Edwards (Chair);
Councillor Idrees (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Aston, Singh Atwal, Auluck, Clinton,
Collingswood, Davis, Delaney, Douglas-Maul,
Eustace, Foster, Hogarth, Mottram JP, O'Reilly,
Quinnen, Sealey, Shackleton, Singh, Spence,
Tranter, Walsh and Yardley;
Mr Ager.

Officers: **West Midlands Fire Service**
Chief Fire Officer (P Loach);
Deputy Chief Fire Officer (P Hales);
Director Operations (G Taylor);
Director Resources (M Griffiths);
Director Human Resources (D Johnson);
J Connor, M Hamilton-Russell.

Clerk and Monitoring Officer
N Sharma
R Jones.

Treasurer
Stuart Kellas.

Apologies: Councillors Chambers, Finnegan, Wright and Young.

6/14

Chair's Announcement

The Chair announced that he and the Chief Fire Officer had met with Neil O'Connor who was the Director for Fire, Resilience and Emergencies at the Department for Communities and Local Government and an adviser to Brandon Lewis.

Policy Planning Forum
24th March, 2014

They would also be meeting Sir Ken Knight and Tobias Ellwood MP, who had written about the interoperability of blue light services.

They had not, however, managed to obtain a further meeting with Brandon Lewis following the 30 minutes which they had had at the end of last year. The Minister continued to express concerns about the WMFS decisions' to maintain a whole-time service and had not yet visited the West Midlands to have a more in-depth discussion about the Service.

7/14 The WMFS and the Retained Duty System

Members received a presentation from the Chief Fire Officer, Phil Loach, on the Service and the continued analysis of the retained duty system. This information highlighted:-

- The Service would have delivered £21million of cuts to the Government Grant between 2010/11 and 2014/15 at the end of this financial year and this had obviously led to reviews of the service provided, including looking at firefighter provision through a retained duty system
- Statistics showed that the West Midlands was second only to Greater London in its density of population but with a much reduced area, this heightened the risks involved
- The Service no longer had any retained firefighters based partially on our commitment to have a five minute response time – areas which had retained firefighters allowed a minimum of five minutes to get to the rescue vehicle
- Analysis of a typical FRS had shown that the costs of retained firefighters was only £900 per 1,000,000 of population cheaper than whole time staff in our service model
- WMFS had continued to innovate, developing new responses for the provision of the Service including the introduction of alternative response vehicles, where appropriate, which offered better value for money whilst at a standard required by the Authority – these were additional to standard vehicles
- The Service's strategic approach to incidents – from reaction to attendance – was still a risk based five minutes. The Service also continued to fulfill its prevention and protection agenda and would always engage and advise before any enforcement action was taken.

Policy Planning Forum
24th March, 2014

The Chief Fire Officer, Phil Loach, reported that at his first LGA Conference last week he had contributed to a debate including a presentation on the WMFS model. Concerning retained firefighter provision, however, another presenter had bemoaned the provision of a retained service in relation to the difficulties of recruiting and retaining firefighters. No one had challenged the Service's model of provision.

Brandon Lewis had commented that decisions on fire service provision were local authorities/areas to make but that this would not stop Government making comments on such provision.

Members commented that:

- It would be difficult within the West Midlands to find people who lived and worked within a five minute journey's distance from a fire station, who had an employer who didn't mind staff walking out of the door any time when summoned.
- The density of the West Midlands did not lend itself to a retained fire service.
- There seemed to be no other benefits from using retained firefighters, apart from perceived reductions in the cost. The Service continued to be flexible around people's working patterns to make provision more cost effective and efficient.
- Member support was re-iterated for the risk based five minute attendance standard.

8/14

Haden Cross Community Fire Station

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Phil Hales, gave a presentation on the progress of the development of the new Haden Cross Community Fire Station.

Members were informed of the time line and cost of the development from the closure of Halesowen Fire Station on 1 April, 2012 to the estimated completion and hand over of Haden Cross on 7 July 2014.

The benefits of the new Fire Station to the community included:-

- An Ambulance Hub
- A Learn Direct Partnership

Policy Planning Forum

24th March, 2014

- Sandwell Leisure Partnership
- Extended community facilities
- New Young Firefighters Association
- Integral firefighter training facilities
- An eco friendly building

The development was being undertaken by a local company and was currently within budget although slightly over schedule, mainly due to the reinforcement of car parking facilities for which the Station would have shared use with the adjacent leisure centre. The Fire Station was a potential model for future building improvements, with a timeless design in keeping with the Authority's other facilities.

With regard to members' questions and comments the following responses were made:-

- no problems were envisaged with that part of the roof was to be flat as this was to be eco friendly and covered with plants
- there would be facilities for community use but no provision for firefighters as there were gym facilities at the leisure centre next door
- no claims had yet been made due to the delay in schedule - the delay had resulted from problems relating to architectural, contractor and weather conditions.

9/14

The Plan 2014/17

Further to the last meeting of the Forum on 20th January, 2014 which considered its refresh, the Chief Fire Officer, Phil Loach, gave a presentation on The Plan 2014/17. The Plan covered the Authority's:-

- Priorities, outcomes and objectives
- Our core values
- Risk based attendance standards
- How we are changing for the future
- How do we know we are delivering outcomes
- Financial summary

Policy Planning Forum
24th March, 2014

The Plan 2014/17, along with Corporate Performance Indicators, would be submitted for the approval of the Executive Committee and would be launched on 31st March, 2014. It would be available on the web and would be a “living” document under continuous review.

The presentation also highlighted three points which included the option to conduct a referendum for an increase in the precept to support the provision of response, prevention and protection services:-

- ‘We are striving to maintain the highest levels of service possible with reduced Government funding’
- ‘We may need to ask you if you are willing to pay a few pence more per week for your fire service’
- ‘We want to tell you about all the things we do to keep you safe’

Members discussed the option of holding a referendum and the various implications. However, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government had stated that where authorities had proposed more than a 2% increase authorities should “ask the people”. If the Authority did decide to have a referendum in 2016/17 it would be conducted at the same time as the local elections in order to reduce costs. The likely costs of a referendum and associated issues would be reported to a future Policy Planning Forum.

(Meeting ended at 11.55 am)

Contact Officer: Rosemary Jones Democratic Services Unit Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council 0121 569 3896
