

Minutes of the Executive Committee

14 December 2015 at 1000 hours
Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: Councillor Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Idrees (Vice Chair)
Councillors Afzal, Atwal Singh, Aston,
Davis, Douglas-Maul, Quinnen,
Sealey and Shackleton

Cllr. Tranter (Chair of Scrutiny Committee)

Observers: Cllrs Spence, Ward, Clinton, P Singh, Barrie
Mottram and Skinner, Mr Agar

13/15 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on
12 October 2015, be approved as a correct record.

14/15 **Scrutiny Committee Review of Partnerships**

The Chair of the Scrutiny Committee stated that under the
Terms of Reference, the Scrutiny Committee identifies a
minimum of two thematic reviews each year.

In March 2015, the Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake
a review of all aspects of partnerships activity. This was
prompted by an increase in Corporate Risk 4 which related
to Partnerships and a full year of underperformance in PI 5
the Percentage of Home Safety Checks referred from
Partners. The review was facilitated by the Strategic Hub
and undertaken by a Member led working group.

The resulting report and proposals were submitted to Scrutiny Committee on 16th November 2015.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Committee thanked Jim Whittingham from the Strategic Hub and Councillors Spence and Hogarth for their support.

Assistant Chief Officer Gary Taylor provided an overview of the findings.

It was stated that Partnerships are a key priority of West Midlands Fire Service, integral to the delivery of the outcomes of 'The Plan', and that they are the gateway through which the Service engages with the most vulnerable members of the community. The Service welcomed the additional scrutiny on this important area.

Overall the review provided evidence of a healthy position and growing appreciation of the partnership landscape. There was a clear strategy at both corporate and local level. However it was recognised that there were areas for improvement relating to role and responsibilities, engagement and governance.

There is a central Community Fire Safety (CFS) Team based at Headquarters which was redesigned two years ago. The review found that this Team had lost its focus on partnership support and would benefit from clarity of roles and responsibilities and increased leadership.

The Headquarters CFS Team was created to support a network of local Command based Partnership Teams. The review highlighted examples of some well managed partnerships, however there was also evidence of inconsistent partnership engagement across the Command areas which had led to missed opportunities and increased risk.

Commissioning had also emerged as an approach to support the wider health agenda whilst delivering the core prevention objectives and generating income. Commissioning requires a change of partnership focus and a need to develop a new skill set in dealing with partners.

The review had identified this area as a current 'gap' across both central local partnership teams that would need addressing.

ACO Taylor highlighted that the Authorities approach to Partnerships is monitored via the corporate risk register. The broad governance of partnerships is controlled by an organisational policy, Standing Order 22/02 and monitored using an electronic database. The review had highlighted mainstream compliance with the current policy, however, a more robust approach would help the organisation respond to the changes in the partnership landscape and increased risk related to new commissioning activity.

Finally, the review identified the links to Data Sharing. There is a direct correlation to functional partnerships leading to effective data sharing arrangements. This issue had previously been chosen by the Scrutiny Committee as their second Thematic Review so it is proposed that the more complex issue of data sharing is considered as a separate thematic review.

The findings of the review and these proposals would be delivered through an action plan with progress monitored by the Scrutiny Committee.

The report had been unanimously approved by the Scrutiny Committee and approval of the proposals arising from the review of the Service's partnership arrangements was sought from the Executive Committee.

One Member felt that this was an important report which had highlighted strengths and weaknesses and was pleased to see that these are going to be addressed and was something that could be built upon in the future. It was also suggested that there should be three or four Scrutiny Reviews, which could then reduce.

The Chief Fire Officer stated that although the Service were expanding the prevention agenda to include partnerships, he added a note of caution that firefighters were not social workers however they continued to work collaboratively with other agencies.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service's work in the community was greatly appreciated by the people of the West Midlands, and although the Service was not unique in its partnership working WMFS aimed to be an exemplar to other Services.

Reference was made to a report from the National Audit Officer regarding the sustainability of Fire Services and the limited understanding of its work by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

The Chief Fire Officer felt it was important that Members understood the way 21st century firefighters now worked, how the Fire Service had transformed and was now at the heart of the devolution changes. Preventative work was being undertaken whilst maintaining the Service Delivery Model.

One Member stated that there was still a lack of understanding of the work of firefighters and referenced a meeting of the Road Safety Partnership in that the Fire Service were good at finding solutions to problems, but then handed credit to other agencies and the Member felt that the Fire Service should receive more recognition for their work.

Another Member gave an example of collaborative working and had recently attended a Boot Camp Awards Ceremony where primary school children had turned their lives around. It was felt that the Fire Service should be receiving funding for this work.

The Chair agreed to speak to one of the Members after the meeting about the Scrutiny Committee activities.

The Chair also stated that partnerships were critical to the health and wellbeing agenda and the changes recommended would put the Service in good shape for future work with partners when Commissioning opportunities arose.

It was agreed that the link to the National Audit Office report would be circulated to Members.

It was suggested that the Public Accounts Committee had not made the most of the report and had focused on salaries rather than the lack of understanding by the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) and opened up some important issues.

In response to a Member's question, the Chair confirmed that both he and the Chief Fire Officer had attended meetings at the Local Government Association (LGA), but recent changes had left CLG out of touch at civil servant level. The Chair stated that the New Fire Minister (Mark Francois MP) had not attended either the LGA Fire Services Management Committee or Fire Commission and there had not been any dialogue between the Minister with the LGA or Chief Fire Officers' Association.

It was noted that the Minister was unwell at moment, but it was felt that the Government had not plugged the gap created by his absence. The National Audit Officer report highlighted the CLG's lack of engagement, limited understanding of the work of the Fire Service, and its associated costs.

Another Member concurred with this stating that Advisers were failing to advise Ministers or provide them with the correct information and he had experienced this in his own Authority.

In response to a Members' question the Chief Fire Officer confirmed that two meetings had been held with Treasury representatives. Invitations had been issued to the Under Secretary of State, Mark Francois, and Clare Cooper, Fire Adviser at CLG. However no response had been received and it remained clear that the CLG were unconvinced of the link between prevention, protection and response.

It was confirmed that Alex Burfitt, NAO would be visiting West Midlands Fire Service in the New Year.

The Chair informed the Committee that the Finance Settlement was expected in two days' time, and that he was concerned that there was a lack of understanding of the

Sector and WMFS had not been able to speak to the Fire Minister for a whole year.

The Chair also stated that the LGA Fire Services Management Committee had also expressed extreme concern about the lack of dialogue with the Fire Minister. CFOA and the FBU had raised the same concerns.

The Members of the Conservative Group agreed to make contact with the Fire Minister and write to him with their concerns. The Chair welcomed this offer of assistance.

The Chair informed the Committee of the excellent work being carried out by Assistant Chief Officer Gary Taylor on the Strategic Fire and Health Project Group and his attendance at Fire and Health Summits where the fear of winter pressures had been raised by the CEO of NHS England (Simon Stevens) and the previous CFOA previous President (Peter Dartford).

The Project Group had a strong commitment to the Fire and Health agenda and was supported by the LGA. The safe and well checks were continuing and it was the intention for Fire to be seen as a Health Asset and as Strategic Stakeholders, however some stakeholders are still not convinced in the Fire Service involvement in the wider health agenda.

Another Health Summit is due to be held in February 2016, where there would be another opportunity to influence and increase understanding of Fires role in health and wellbeing.

The proposals contained within the Scrutiny Committee's Review of Partnerships report were approved and the outcomes would be reported back to the Executive Committee.

(The meeting closed at 1025 hours)

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