

<p>Notes of the Policy Planning Forum</p>
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2nd March, 2009, at 10.00 am
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: **Members of the Authority**

Councillors Alden, Ali Khan, Chambers, Clinton, Douglas-Maul, Eustace, G Davies, Gazey, Hinton, Howard, Jones, Mulhall, O'Neill, Robinson, Ryder, S Davis, Singh, Skinner, Spence, Stevenson, Sutton, Tagger, Turner, Tweddle and Ward.
Mr Ager and Mr Topliss.

Officers: **West Midlands Fire Service**

Acting Chief Fire Officer – V Randeniya;
Acting Deputy Chief Fire Officer – M Clark;
Assistant Chief Officers – A Brandon, D Tweddle and T Prosser;
Head of Finance and Procurement – M Griffiths;
Director of Human Resources – D Johnson;
B Deeks.

Clerk to the Authority

N Sharma, S Phelps and G Wythes.

Treasurer to the Authority

L Bateman.

Apologies: Councillors Delaney and Idrees and Mr Denny.

9/09

Acting Chief Fire Officer's Announcements

The Acting Chief Fire Officer made a number of announcements:

- The Authority had achieved Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government.
- The Brigade's Underwater Search and Rescue Team had taken part in a 24 hour national exercise in Lincolnshire.
- The Authority had also been successful in obtaining funding through the West Midlands Road Safety Partnership for work with schools. The funding would allow four members of staff to be dedicated to this area of work. The Vice Chair was the Authority's representative on the partnership.
- The Brigade would be having a large static display at the Fire and

Security Expo to be held at the National Exhibition Centre from 11th to 14th May, 2009.

10/09 **Audit Commission Report ‘Rising to the Challenge’**

Members received a series of presentations with regard to the Audit Commission report entitled ‘Rising to the Challenge’, setting out the main points of the report and setting it in the context of the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority. The presentations highlighted the following issues from the Audit Commission report.

Costs and efficiency

The Audit Commission report included comparative data on costs and efficiency savings for fire authorities. However, there were inconsistencies in the data that did not reflect the Authority’s true performance on cost and efficiency savings. The Audit Commission approach did not take into account relative levels of diversity, deprivation or quality of service provision in making these comparisons.

Major efficiency savings had been made nationally through integrated risk management planning, reductions in the level of ill health retirements and improved procurement. This Authority had made the greatest savings nationally in real terms. It was acknowledged that metropolitan authorities tended to have higher costs because of deprivation levels and the added costs of running a service of full-time firefighters as opposed to the retained system.

The Audit Commission report recognised that Fire Authorities had done well in achieving a high level of cashable efficiencies, but indicated that there was significant scope to improve economy and efficiency, and it was anticipated that the national target for efficiency savings could increase to £200m per annum.

Members made the following comments:

- This Authority had made an excellent contribution to national efficiency savings, but there was no breakdown provided for each individual authority’s savings;
- The Audit Commission report did not take into account relative performance of fire and rescue authorities. This was a good authority that had already achieved a high level of efficiency savings and modernisation. The Authority should do more to publicise its excellent performance and ensure equitable treatment in inspections.
- The cost of responding to major emergencies had not been taken into account and often these were not part of the Authority’s

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statutory duties.

- The Department of Communities and Local Government had missed opportunities to reduce fire service costs by merger of smaller brigades.
- The Audit Commission report focused on reducing cost but did not take into account the value of improving performance such as faster response times.

Performance

The presentation noted that the West Midlands Fire Service faced the second highest levels of deprivation nationally. Even so, the Authority's performance against a wide range of indicators was excellent against comparator metropolitan brigades.

The Audit Commission report stressed the importance of partnership working. This Authority was continuing to promote partnership work. This did not necessarily contribute directly to fire-related performance outcomes but significant resources were allocated for community safety work. It was noted that the Audit Commission was looking for a reduction in the number of firefighters nationally, but this view ignored the resources needed to continue with partnership work.

Members made the following comments:

- There were inconsistencies between brigades in methods of data collection which gave better results for lesser performance.
- The Authority needed to be more positive about its achievements in self and peer assessment, whilst continuing to recognise the potential for improvement.

Regional Collaboration

The presentation highlighted the Audit Commission call for partnership working as a means to improve strategic planning and achieve efficiencies, including work with neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services. There were many examples of successful regional and national collaboration by this Authority with other fire authorities and other agencies, but there were also examples where collaboration had not achieved the anticipated outcomes. The West Midlands Regional Management Board had been established to stimulate regional working but it was suggested that a less formal approach could work equally well.

Members made the following comments:

- The West Midlands Regional Management Board had achieved efficiencies.
- The Chairs of the constituent authorities comprising the West Midlands Regional Management Board were in the process of

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considering the recommendations of the Audit Commission with regard to the future of regional working.

Conclusion

The Acting Chief Fire Officer reminded members that the Audit Commission report set a number of questions for fire services to ask themselves around performance, targeting of risk, efficiency savings, matching cover and risk, public engagement, partnership working, diversity, and managing the workforce. This Authority was already responding to the issues raised in the report and had delivered substantial efficiency savings in accordance with Audit Commission recommendations. The service was continually responding to new challenges with effective leadership. The West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority was the best performing metropolitan brigade across most of the performance indicators and it was anticipated that this would be borne out in a series of forthcoming inspections.

11/09 Official Opening of Fire Service Headquarters

The Chairman reported that HRH the Duke of Kent had agreed to perform the official opening of the new Fire Service Headquarters.

Members' views were sought with regard to the design of a plaque to be commissioned to celebrate the official opening of the new Headquarters building. It was agreed to commission a traditional brass plaque and an engraved glass 3D image to be installed in the reception area.

12/09 Attendance at courses and presentations

The Chairman invited members to attend the following events:

- Presentation on Firebuy at the Fire Service College on 17th March, 2009.
- 2 day course on peer assessor training to be held on 17th March and 23rd April, 2009.

(Meeting ended at 12.53 pm)

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