

Minutes of the Executive Committee

12 October 2015 at 1000 hours
Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

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

Apology: None

Observers: Councillors Barrie, Clinton, Dehar, Spence,
Skinner, P Singh, T Singh, Ward, Mr Ager

11/15 **Minutes**

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

12/15 **Enabling Closer Working Between the Emergency
Services – Authority Consultation Response**

The Committee received a report on the consultation paper 'Enabling Closer Working between the Emergency Services'. The document outlined proposals for greater collaboration for the three emergency services of Fire and Rescue, Police and Ambulance and shared governance for police and fire under Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). The consultation posed 16 questions designed to gather feedback, however, the Authority response would be broader and structured around the topic areas covered in the proposals.

It was noted that the closing date for responses to the consultation is 23 October 2015.

The topic areas were:

- Greater Collaboration
- Accountability and Governance
- Performance and Scrutiny
- Civil Contingencies
- Other Considerations

Greater Collaboration

In response to Question 1, the draft response outlines the anticipation of the West Midlands Combined Authority and that potential devolved powers would provide wider opportunities for the Fire Service to collaborate across not only emergency services, but other agencies and sectors in the event the West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) falls within this devolved structure.

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA) and its partners already benefits from positive collaborative relationships with a range of emergency and public sector services. The need for wider collaboration was also recognised.

Members felt important to draw out that prevention is a critical operation for the Fire Service and less so for the police. It was also noted that the public reaction to firefighters is often very different to the reaction received by the Police.

There were advantages of collaborating further with the Police and examples would be added to the report.

It was noted that the collaboration between Police and Fire had been discussed at a recent LGA Fire Commission. An informal poll on PCCs taking over management of FRSs was not supported and this should be taken into account.

Accountability and Governance

In respect to Questions 2,3,4,5 and 10

The Clerk highlighted the potential issues around the proposed transfer of governance to a single accountable person, rather than a representative Authority which provides a more risk averse and balanced approach. The Authority provides critical services to the community and is directly accountable to the public through Section 41 Fire Authority Members.

A potential outcome of this approach could be negative impact on the prevention work.

Concern was expressed about the level of responsibility an elected Mayor would have in any West Midlands devolution arrangements, being responsible for Police, WMFS and the Integrated Transport Authority plus a large range of devolved matters.

It was also felt that there should be equal standing between the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Constable.

Performance and Scrutiny

Questions 6, 7, 8 and 9 refer to Independent Assessment of operational performance, scrutiny of decision making, the membership of the Police and Crime Panel and if complaints and conduct matters should be treated in the same way for employees of Fire and Police.

It was noted that the LGA peer assessment process provides a consistent and transparent approach to independent assessment the FRS.

Independent Scrutiny is provided through our External Audit regime and our continued good 'unqualified' financial and value for money conclusions.

The Authority also benefits from a member led Scrutiny Committee which is independent of the Executive.

Non-mandatory scrutiny is also invited through various means, the outcomes of which are accessible externally.

One Member stated that the PCC should not take responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service and should not have its remit extended to scrutinise decision making in relation to fire services.

If the PCC were to take responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service, one Member stated that the PCC should be refreshed to include fire experts on a Police and Fire Panel.

Members were satisfied with the objective nature of the Authority and any change to this, through a PCC, would not be the best way forward particularly with the changes involved with the Combined Authority in the future.

Civil Contingencies

The questions, 13 & 14, under this Section were in respect of the implications for local resilience (preparedness, response and recovery) and the implications for resilience responsibilities in areas where an elected mayor is also the PCC and responsible for the Fire and Rescue Service

The Clerk stated there would be no perceived negative impact with possibly greater accountability through an Elected Mayor.

In response one Member stated that West Midlands Fire Service works well on its own and does not feel the other services would want to carry out all the duties carried out by the Fire Services.

Other Considerations

The final questions asked for any other views or comments that the Authority wished to add in relation to emergency services collaboration that were not covered by the other questions in the consultation, and also if the proposals would have any effect on equality issues.

It was felt that the alignment to a West Midlands Combined Authority model incorporating public health agencies and access to health and wellbeing prevention commissioning, provides the potential for improved outcomes for the community and better value for money.

Members were asked for their general views on the consultation, which were as follows:

It was felt important not to lose expertise in any future amalgamation with the Police. Sharing of sites was thought to be useful and provides value for money, but the different services had their own expertise and specialisms that didn't marry together well and the Authority didn't want to lose its effectiveness and efficiency.

The Members felt that the Fire and Rescue Service had a sound evidence based reputation for efficiency and excellence. The Chair stated that in his view the Home Secretary, had been concerned for some time about the lack of democratic credibility of PCCs and the resistance of the public to engage with the role. That of itself provided insufficient grounds to legislate for potentially hostile bids for managing fire and rescue services in order to 'grow' the role of PCCs.

The Local Government Association's view was there were no demonstrable economic or operational benefits from merging PCCs and FRs, but that the consultation document revealed this as the governments preferred option in non-devolved areas. There are many examples of blue-light services working in partnership to deliver better outcomes and forced, time-consuming management mergers could well impact negatively on this.

The Chair's view was that further economies could be made through broader and deeper collaboration and shared services between WMFRA and the PCC. He would continue to develop the relationship and discussions with the PCC.

The Chief Fire Officer thanked members for their comments and stated that there was a good relationship with WMFRA.

The CFO was working more closely with the seven district councils to expand our health and wellbeing prevention offer.

As an example, a local Telecare falls response pilot in Coventry was running until the end of March 2016. Firefighters were trusted to enter properties to assist members of the public who had fallen. Another trial was being looked into for Wolverhampton City Council.

The CFO stated that the West Midlands Fire Service is unique in the five minute response time to emergency incidents. The weight and speed of attack is a hotly debated topic in respect of survivability but the evidence is unequivocal and the challenge will be to maintain this in the current economic environment.

It was felt that the Fire Service is more responsive to the prevention agenda and is governed by a broad spectrum of Members from the West Midlands that brings a broader accountability.

The Clerk agreed to take the changes into account and would reword and strengthen the response and submit these by the deadline of the 23 October 2015.

(The meeting closed at 1010 hours)

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