

Minutes of the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

20th April 2009, at 11 am
at the Fire Service Headquarters, 99 Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: Councillor Howard (Chairman);
Councillor Ward (Vice-Chairman);
Councillors Alden, Ali Khan, Chambers, Clinton,
Delaney, Eustace, Gazey, S Davis, Idrees, Jones,
Mulhall, O'Neill, Robinson, Ryder, Skinner, Spence,
Stevenson, Sutton, Tagger, Turner and Tweddle.
Mr Bagley, Mr Denny and Mr Topliss.

Apologies: Councillors Douglas-Maul, G Davies and Hinton;
Mr Ager.

31/09 Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman welcomed Members to the meeting and made reference to the following:-

- A further trial microphone system was in place for today's meeting, which had been provided free of charge.
- Arrangements were in place for Members' photographs to be taken for the West Midlands Fire Service website.
- Invitations for the official opening ceremony of Headquarters had been issued to Members.
- The Chairman thanked Members for the manner in which they had conducted the meetings during the course of the year. He expressed his appreciation for the contribution of Members during 2008/09. For those not returning to the Authority he wished them every success in their future work.
- Bob Deeks, the Chief Fire Officer's Communications and Policy Advisor, would soon be retiring from the Fire Service. The Authority thanked Mr Deeks for his many years service and wished him well for the future.

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

20th April, 2009

32/09 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 9th February and 30th March, 2009 be confirmed as a correct record, subject to the amendment of the reference to Councillor Gazey abstaining from voting on Minute No. 21/09 on 9th February, 2009 to indicate that this related to Part (3) of the resolution only.

33/09 **Annual Audit and Inspection Letter**

Mark Stocks of the Audit Commission presented the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for 2007/08.

He reported that a revised page 13 of the Letter had been tabled as an additional paragraph had been inserted, as requested by the Audit Committee, to explain the Internal Control Assessment score. A further minor amendment to paragraph 42 (Financial Standing) was agreed.

The Authority had been rated as 'improving well' and good progress had been recognised in a number of priority areas. Some key successes were:-

- a strong downward trend in the number of primary fires, accidental home fires, deaths and injuries. More than half of home fire safety checks were in high risk and vulnerable households;
- the Authority was making a sound contribution to wider community outcomes particularly with young people;
- progress was being made on Equality and Diversity through improving access and quality of service for vulnerable people;
- there was a clear commitment to reviewing the effectiveness of the organisation and ensuring capacity was maximised. Internal communication and engagement with staff was improving, as well as effective management of partnerships. The service was well positioned to continue improving.

Areas for improvement highlighted by the Audit Commission had been included in Departmental/Command Area action plans (where appropriate) and progress would be monitored. Some key areas of improvement were:-

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

20th April, 2009

- the processes for managing value for money were still developing. The Authority needed to continue to integrate financial and performance management to assist it in deriving maximum value for money from its ongoing activities and future reviews of its asset and personnel structure;
- to ensure that appropriate technical advice and expertise was sought and the transition to IFRS was therefore well planned and accurately delivered;
- to further develop the strategic framework for managing partnership activities to ensure the sharing of good practice, cost effectiveness and appropriately balanced borough based financial budgeting, delegation and authority.

Members expressed disappointment with the overall assessment score and did not feel this truly represented the Authority's performance and in particular external auditors should only assess the Authority against other metropolitan fire authorities which had comparable costs and service issues. Concerns about the reliability of data used for Performance Indicators had already been expressed to CLG.

The Audit Committee worked proactively and had a wide remit and Members had attended training throughout the year to improve their knowledge and understanding and played a major part in monitoring risk management.

Mr Stocks recognised that there had been significant improvements since the 2007/08 assessment that would be reflected in the next report. He undertook to refer the Authority's remarks about the fairness of value for money comparators to the Audit Commission.

The Authority noted the Letter and thanked Mark Stocks for attending the meeting and presenting the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter.

34/09

Transfer of Ownership of New Dimension Assets

The Authority was informed that the New Dimension Project was a collaborative initiative between Communities for Local Government (CLG) and the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) intended to enhance the ability of the FRS to respond to major disruptive events involving chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials, collapsed or unstable structures and to displace large volumes of water.

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

20th April, 2009

The New Dimension (ND) vehicles and equipment were currently owned by CLG. However, there was no option for CLG to continue to own these resources for the medium term. A number of options relating to the future ownership had been explored by CLG, but in its opinion the option that made most sense was for the ownership of these assets to be transferred to the FRSs, which would produce the following benefits:-

- it would ensure that New Dimension capability could be fully integrated into FRS core business and from a Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) perspective would unite ownership with use of the capability, providing FRAS with control over the assets they hosted;
- provision of a maintained and fully operation fleet of ND vehicles and equipment through CLG's procurement of a £100m long term maintenance contract with Vosper Thornycroft Critical Services. This maintenance contract commenced in October 2008 and had received positive feedback from FRSs;
- access to free, comprehensive future assurance for the New Dimension capabilities. CLG appreciated that New Dimension provided national capabilities; therefore it would require future overarching governance once the assets had transferred to individual FRAs.

On this basis, CLG had agreed to fund a long term Assurance Body (FRS National Resilience Board) led by the Chief Fire Officers Association, which would ensure that the capabilities were fit for purpose and did not degrade over time.

Members were informed that CLG had confirmed that it was committed to future funding of the New Dimensions project for the Comprehensive Spending Review 07 period. In line with the New Burdens principle, CLG had recognised the FRAs needed continued funding to support the New Dimensions capabilities.

CLG had also indicated that it would wish to mainstream New Dimensions grants into the Revenue Support Grant and that it was looking to do this in line with CLG/LGA policy, but only when there was a clear history of actual costs to take account of.

Members considered a draft Transfer Agreement. CLG had asked for a response from FRSs by 27th April 2009.

Members deliberated on a response to be submitted to CLG.

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority
20th April, 2009

Members noted that this was just a response to the proposal and did not commit the Authority to anything.

Resolved that the Chief Fire Officer be authorised to send the Authority's approved response to the proposed 'Transfer of Ownership of New Dimension Assets', as now submitted to the Communities for Local Government.

35/09 Minutes of the Executive Committee

The minutes of the meetings held on 2nd and 16th March, 2009 were received.

36/09 Notes of the Policy Planning Forum

The notes of the meetings held on 2nd and 30th March, 2009 were received.

37/09 Minutes of the Audit Committee

The minutes of the meeting held on 30th March, 2009 were received.

38/09 Minutes of the West Midlands Regional Management Board

The minutes of the meeting held on 30th January, 2009 were received.

Resolved that the acts, proceedings and recommendations of the West Midlands Regional Management Board, as set out in the minutes now submitted, be approved and adopted.

39/09 Exclusion of the Public and Press

Resolved that the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including any individual and the authority holding that information).

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

20th April, 2009

40/09 **Sedgley Fire Station Site Options**

It was reported that the Executive Committee on 10th November, 2008, approved the removal of the fire engine at Sedgley Fire Station and requested a further report considering options for the site (Minute 49/08).

The Authority was informed that there had been limited partner interest in the site. The site could be used for community or youth engagement, but alternative arrangements were already in place at other Fire Service sites for the delivery of these functions. Considerable investment would be needed in modifying the internal layout if the station was to be used for alternative use. Continuing maintenance costs were also being incurred in respect of the site.

Members were of the opinion that due to the current economic climate further investigations were required into the possible futures uses of the site.

Resolved that the Chief Fire Officer be requested to undertake further investigations into the future use of the site at Sedgley Fire Station and submit a further report in due course.

41/09 **Vote of Thanks**

Members thanked the Chairman for the courteous and professional manner in which he had conducted meetings of the Authority during the current municipal year.

(Meeting ended at 11.59 am)

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