

<b>Notes of the Policy Planning Forum</b>
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**22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2013 at 10.30 am**  
**at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham**

**Present:**           **Members of the Authority**  
Councillor Edwards (Chair);  
Councillor Idrees (Vice-Chair);  
Councillors Chambers, Clinton, Collingswood, Davis,  
Eustace, Finnegan, Foster, Hogarth, Mottram,  
O'Reilly, Quinnen, Shackleton, Singh, Spence,  
Tranter and Wright;  
Mr Ager.

**Officers:**           **West Midlands Fire Service**  
Deputy Chief Fire Officer P Loach;  
Assistant Chief Fire Officer P Hales;  
Director of Human Resources D Johnson;  
P Mika.

**Clerk and Monitoring Officer**  
S Suthi-Nagra.

**Apologies:**       Councillors Sealey and Yardley;  
Chief Fire Officer, Clerk and Treasurer.

16/13       **Chair's and Deputy Chief Fire Officer's Announcements**

The Chair made a number of announcements as follows:-

- Firefighter Stephen Hunt of Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service had tragically died tackling a blaze. Members stood in silent tribute in memory of Stephen Hunt and conveyed their deepest sympathy to Stephen's family and friends. Whilst a date of the funeral had not yet been determined, transport would be provided for those members who wished to attend the funeral;
- Councillor Melyvyn Mottram JP was welcomed to his first meeting as a member of the Authority;

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- an in-house Local Government Association Leadership Development Programme had been arranged for members on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2013. The Chair asked any members who were interested in attending to notify the Clerk. In the event of any spaces, the offer would be opened up to members of the joint Fire Control Project Board.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that:-

- a briefing document on the delivery of 'The Plan' had recently been emailed to all Members. Members were now requested to confirm whether they had received the document and whether they were happy to receive regular updates in this format. The Service aimed to update members via social media and other technological means in the future to ensure that information was received in a timely fashion;
- the Fire Brigades Union had recently initiated a ballot for industrial action as a result of the firefighter pension reforms. The Fire Service had subsequently initiated its Business Continuity Plan in order to minimise any disruption to the community within the West Midlands. The Service was currently awaiting the outcome of the ballot and had made all information from various sources available to staff to enable them to make an informed choice when voting;
- research and analysis on the use of brigade response vehicles for high rise buildings was ongoing;
- in response to the tragic death of Firefighter Stephen Hunt, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service had taken up the Fire Service's offer to assist in a fire investigation in relation to an incident in Hampshire where a Firefighter had died.

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### **Smethwick Fire**

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer updated members on the recent fire at a recycling plant in Smethwick.

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The fire, which had been caused by a sky lantern, had been the biggest ever within the West Midlands and following over 400 calls to report the incident, had taken over nine hours to put out with over 200 firefighters dealing with it in very tough conditions, including rapid winds.

A number of resources were utilised by the service and a multi-agency approach was used, including the Police, the Ambulance Service, water authorities, Canal and River Trust, the Environment Agency and Public Health England.

Over the border resources from Staffordshire and Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Services had also been utilised along with 30 pump rescue ladders. Obtaining a lot of water to extinguish the fire had been a priority as well as protecting the surrounding buildings which contained cardboard and paper.

The fire had been successfully extinguished with no loss of surrounding buildings or serious injuries. Fire cover across the West Midlands had also been maintained.

Members considered the next steps as an organisation and any impact on policy and legislation.

The recycling plant had high stocks of recycling materials, at an estimated cash value of £6million, and had previously been inspected by Fire Officers who had found that the site complied with current regulations. However, officers felt that the guidance stipulating a 6 metre separation between stacks was outdated and should be similar to that of tyre stacking which was 15 metres between stacks. The Service would be looking at its own policies to consider how to influence national guidance on stacks.

There had been considerable media interest, particularly via social media, and regular briefings had been undertaken to keep people informed.

Members thanked the service for their hard work in extinguishing the fire.

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Following concerns raised in the media in relation to only one fire engine being available to tackle a blaze across the whole of the West Midlands, it was reported that during the transition period of crews having to relieve existing crews on fire grounds, the service had become vulnerable as most resources had been diverted to the Smethwick fire. However, a number of vehicles in transition were available and officers would still have responded to a fire, albeit the 5 minute call out time could not have been guaranteed. Officers did emphasise that the service had been stretched at this particular time.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported that unlike a sky rocket, a sky lantern still had a live flame when it came down which not only posed a risk, but caused damage.

The Service was actively advocating the ban on the selling of sky lanterns and Poundland had reportedly withdrawn the sale of them since the Smethwick fire.

The estimated cost of the fire to the Service was £100,000 and a bid to the Government's Bellwin Scheme for emergency financial assistance would be submitted in order to offset some of the costs from Government.

Members viewed a short video on the impact of the fire and the resources used to extinguish it. The video could be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/westmidsfire/review/70647016/b04e7af80a>

The Service would continue to promote the importance of fire safety to raise the profile of the Authority and the Fire Service.

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### **Financial Update 2015/16**

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer gave an update on the proposals arising from the recent Spending Review for 2015/16 and how it would affect the Fire Service as follows:

- The Department for Communities and Local Government would be reducing the Fire Service budget by 10%;

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- an innovation fund would be created and if the Service could demonstrate this, they would be able to apply for 2 ½% funding;
- capital grants had been cut from £70million to £45million in Year 5;
- further information would be given on funding being made available for those local authorities imposing a two year Council Tax freeze;
- more guidance was awaited on a 10% national cut to the Fire Service. How formula grant would be applied had not yet been confirmed;
- a £30million resource fund would be made available on a bid for basis to encourage joint working between Fire Authorities and greater collaboration between the three blue light services.

In response, the Chair reported that the proposed reductions in 2015/16, which would equate to approximately £4 ½ million, would have a significant impact upon the Service, as it was in addition to the savings realised in recent years as a result of introducing brigade response vehicles, reductions in staffing, a management review and collaborative working with Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Authority.

It was anticipated that by enabling flexibility on Council Tax, a base could be built to prevent the closure of fire stations.

The Chair would be writing to local MPs with a view to them lobbying Government to enable greater flexibility in setting Council Tax.

(Meeting ended at 11.38 am)

Contact Officer: Suky Suthi-Nagra Democratic Services Unit Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council 0121 569 3479
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