

Notes of the Policy Planning Forum

**18 January 2016 at 10.30 am
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham**

- Present:** **Members of the Authority**
Councillor Edwards (Chair);
Councillor Idrees (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Afzal, Aston, Atwal Singh, Barlow,
Barrie, Clinton, Craddock, Davis, Dehar, Douglas-
Maul, Eustace, Hogarth, Miks, Mottram JP, Quinnen,
Sealey, Shackleton, B Singh, P Singh, T Singh,
Spence, Tranter and Young.
Mr Ager.
- Officers:** **West Midlands Fire Service**
Chief Fire Officer (P Loach)
Deputy Chief Fire Officer (P Hales);
Assistant Chief Fire Officer (G Taylor);
M Griffiths (Treasurer), M Hamilton-Russell, S Barry, S
Shilton, S Timmington, S Vincent and S Warnes.
- Clerk and Monitoring Officer**
K Gowreesunker (Clerk)
- Apologies:** Councillors Skinner and Ward;
Mr Bell.
M Dudley (Monitoring Officer) and S Sahota (Deputy
Monitoring Officer).
- Observers:** A Afsar, M Pym.

1/16 Chair and CFO's Announcements

The Chair welcomed all attendees to the Policy Planning Forum.

The Chair informed Members of opportunities that were coming up for Authority Member development:

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- 15 February 2016: Transport Engineering Workshops visit
- 11 April 2016: Community Heritage Centre Tour at Aston Fire Station
- Date to be confirmed: Employment Law update

The Chair recapped announcements made by the Government earlier in January regarding the transfer of Fire Service policy responsibility from the Department of Communities and Local Government to the Home Office. MP Mike Penning had become the new Fire Minister and he had been invited to visit West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS).

The move to the Home Office presented a potential impact upon budgets with no guarantees regarding the provisional settlement issued in December 2015 (which represented a £10 million reduction over a four year period). Home Secretary Theresa May had stated that, in her view, the Fire and Rescue Service could realise more efficiencies.

Additionally, the move to the Home Office indicated a strengthening of Home Office view that Fire and Rescue Services should develop closer working arrangements with the Police. A new policing and crime bill to enable closer working between the emergency services would be tabled for first reading in February 2016, with Royal assent expected by December 2016. This was expected to enable PCCs to assume the governance role of FRAs.

Connections between West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and WMFRA were also discussed along with the ongoing potential to develop closer collaborative opportunities with other FRSs to provide improved operational delivery and efficiencies.

The following points were raised in discussion prompted by the Chair's announcements:

- The Government did not consult before transferring control of fire policy to the Home Office. There had been no consultation with the Local Government Association, the Chief Fire Officer's Association, or with the Fire Brigade's Union (FBU).
- The Chair and the Chief Fire Officer meet with the PCC on a regular basis. WMFRA were positive regarding increasing collaboration with the Police, for example discussions had been

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held regarding joint use of estates. However, WMFRA felt that governance and management mergers with the PCC would be a time-consuming and expensive distraction that could potentially impede development of cost-saving collaborative opportunities.

The Chief Fire Officer welcomed all attendees to the Policy Planning Forum.

In relation to the points raised by Members' questions (as above), the Chief Fire Officer advised that the Principal Officers are operational experts but the posts are politically restricted. Governance remained with the Fire Authority and politicians. It was important for WMFS to have the support from Councillors and the connection between Members and the Fire Service was as good as it ever had been. Such support, from Councillors and Chief Executives, was illustrated in the keenness for the Fire Service to be part of public reform.

WMFS already worked with services that had different profiles and a case for regionalisation had already been developed, making savings without reducing the emergency cover.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that as part of the consultation on the provisional settlement, WMFS had noted that the ten lowest funded police forces, which included West Midlands Police, have flexibility on council tax (the ability to raise income from council tax by £5 rather than 2%). WMFS had stated that it should have the same flexibility as those Police forces.

The Chief Fire Officer provided a brief update on staffing: the provisional settlement had been more favorable than forecast and as a result; the Service had reduced the number of firefighter posts that would be disestablished. This would also reduce the reliance on, and the number of voluntary additional shifts.

The FBU had issued a notice of dispute and more consultation would be carried out.

Presentations to the Forum

The following presentations were given to the Policy Planning Forum:

[ILO: UNCLASSIFIED]

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- The Budget
- The Plan

2/16 **The Budget**

Mike Griffiths, Strategic Enabler of Finance and Resources, provided a presentation on the budget:

The provisional financial settlement was issued in December 2015 and provided a better settlement than had been forecast. However, it must be noted that the settlement still represented a reduction in core funding of approximately £10 million over the next four years:

- Core Funding Reductions

	£Ms	%
2016/17	3.3	5.3
2017/18	4.0	6.8
2018/19	1.7	3.1
2019/20	0.7	1.3

The provisional financial settlement does not account for New Dimensions funding where a decrease is also expected, although such funding is a low figure compared to core funding.

In terms of the wider fire sector, the metropolitan fire and rescue services including WMFS, fared better than the majority of services regarding core funding reductions. WMFS received almost the lowest funding decrease in the country. However, in terms of core spending, WMFS fared the worst out of all fire services because the Service is heavily reliant on core funding.

The provisional financial settlement is for a four year period and would be subject to an efficiency plan being approved. The efficiency plan for WMFS includes:

- Staffing
- Commissioning
- Internal restructures

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- General budget reductions
- Council tax base increases

In addition to the requirement of an efficiency plan, the settlement remains very provisional due to:

- the state of the UK economy, how it fares, and what changes there could be as a result
- the move of the fire service to the Home Office and any future changes to police and fire budgets

The council tax precept for WMFS is the lowest in the country, at £54.95 per year for a Band D property. An increase of 2% would equate to an increase of £1.09 per year.

With regard to capital funding, there is no specific direct capital funding for the next four years. However, WMFS capital requirements are fully funded over the next four years and is able to undertake funding for major projects including the rebuild of Coventry Fire Station and the redevelopment of Aston Fire Station.

At the time of the meeting, the remaining issues to be resolved were:

- 29 January – conclusion of ratepayers consultation
- 31 January – council tax / business rate figures
- Early February – final finance settlement
- 15 February – Fire Authority meeting

3/16 **The Plan**

Phil Loach, Chief Fire Officer, provided a presentation on 'The Plan':

Following on from the budget settlement, officers had considered the Integrated Risk Management Plan and how WMFS conducts its prevention, protection and response activities, the provision of emergency cover, and the examination of resources. The Service had been forecasting cuts and is confident that the service delivery model will continue to be provided. However, it is based on the need for additional shifts.

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'The Plan' will be accessed via an interactive website. It is a website that Members can use when out within their communities and with colleagues at their respective councils.

'The Plan' will link to the new interactive Community Safety Strategy (CSS), which was demonstrated to Members at the Policy Planning Forum held in December. The aim is to use the CSS as an improvement tool with Members. Both 'The Plan' and the CSS will go live in April 2016. A demonstration will be delivered to Members at the Policy Planning Forum on 1 February, and a report will be presented at the Fire Authority meeting on 15 February.

The following points were raised in discussion prompted by the presentation on 'The Plan' and the subjects covered during the course of the Policy Planning Forum:

- Officers have set out to deliver the priorities as agreed with the Fire Authority. With regard to staffing, options were explored by the Service in liaison with the representative bodies and the option of additional shifts was identified as the best option and the intention remains to use additional shifts.
- Additional shifts are different to the current terms and conditions. The Fire Brigade's Union cites that the terms and conditions state overtime is to be paid at time and a half (in accordance with the Grey Book). Voluntary additional shifts are not part of Firefighters current terms and conditions and are not overtime and therefore, can be paid at flat rate. The Service will also pay a 25% disturbance allowance to those carrying out voluntary additional shifts. Firefighters terms and conditions are not affected by these proposals.
- The cost associated with using overtime remains the same as previously. Paying at time and a half for overtime instead of using voluntary additional shifts does not achieve any significant savings. It only works if payment is at flat rate. Indeed, if time and a half was paid, the Service would need to reduce the number of firefighters by more than it needs to. It should be noted that the option is scaleable, with savings now predicted to be £4 million rather than £7 million as per previously, reflecting the outcome of the provisional financial settlement.

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- Consideration is being given to recruiting firefighters in year three of the provisional financial settlement.
- A Member raised concerns regarding a particular incident involving the use of an Oil Burner in a domestic premise (laundry beads were used in an oil burner as a cheap alternative to scented candles, as advocated via social media). Gary Taylor, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, committed to sending a briefing note to all Members following the meeting which would explain the background to the incident and the actions taken to communicate to communities at a local and national level, highlighting this risk.

(Meeting ended at 11:52 am)

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