

Notes of the Policy Planning Forum

30th March, 2009, at 10.00 am
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: **Members of the Authority**

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

Officers: **West Midlands Fire Service**

Chief Fire Officer – V Randeniya;
Acting Deputy Chief Fire Officer – M Clark;
Assistant Chief Officers – A Brandon, J Brown, M McGregor, T Prosser (Acting) and D Tweddle;
B Deeks.

Clerk to the Authority

N Sharma, S Phelps, G Wythes and A Sahota.

Treasurer to the Authority

L Bateman.

Apologies: Councillor Alden.
Mr Bagley and Mr Denny.

13/09 **Uses of Resources Audit**

Pauline Mack and Pragati Raithatha of the Audit Commission gave a presentation on the new Use of Resources assessment.

It was reported that the change had been brought about due to the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework coming into effect from April, 2009. For the first time, Use of Resources Assessment would be undertaken on the same basis for local authorities, fire and rescue, police and PCTs.

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The new Use of Resources assessment would now be based on three themes, as follows:-

- managing finances;
- managing resources;
- governing the business.

All three themes would still be fed into the Value for Money (VfM) conclusion, have a Key Line of Enquiry and be scored from one to four.

Members were informed of differences and similarities between the old and new Use of Resources assessment. The new assessment was wider including workforce and natural resources. It also fed into the wider Organisational Assessment and placed more emphasis on outcomes for local people, emphasising the importance of partnership working.

The Use of Resources assessment still showed how the organisation was performing and many individual elements remained, meaning evidence could be carried forward from the recent assessment.

The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter also identified a number of key points for the Authority to consider. The main points were that the costs of the Authority were relatively high and that financial management and comparative performance review needed to be more fully integrated if sufficient value for money improvements were to be achieved.

Members responded that the Authority was proud of its service, which was founded on longstanding experience of the needs of the local community. Members had taken an informed decision to provide a quality service with rapid response times and would oppose cuts in service that affected risk. The Authority had achieved the biggest reduction in primary fires in 2007/08 across all fire and rescue services, and Members felt that prioritising efficiency savings could jeopardise such performance as well as putting public safety at risk. The Authority had also taken the view that it was essential to build up financial reserves, following their severe depletion as a result of industrial action, and in the face of financial uncertainty in the future. Members were disappointed that data collection was inconsistent and that there was insufficient benchmarking on the relative performance of fire authorities with regard to modernisation. It was also suggested that cost per head of population across metropolitan fire authorities was a fairer comparison of service costs. Members emphasised that the Authority had improved and acknowledged that more could be done.

14/09 **Comprehensive Area Assessment**

Gary Stevens of the Audit Commission gave a presentation on the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

Members were informed that CAA would come into effect from 1st April, 2009, and had five key elements:-

- it assessed what made a real difference to people;
- it looked at how public services worked together, as well as individual organisational performance;
- it focused on local and national priorities;
- it provided robust, but proportionate assessment of local services;
- assessments would be reported directly to the public in straightforward language.

It was reported that the reason for change was to reflect on the need for public services to work together through Local Area Assessments and Sustainable Community Strategies. It would reflect on what mattered the most to local people, concentrate on outcomes achieved for local communities and continue to provide independent assurance that local public services were effective and providing value for money.

The CAA framework would be broken down into two elements; Area Assessment and Organisational Assessment.

The Area Assessment would be forward looking and focused on outcomes in local priorities. The Assessment would ask the following questions:-

- how well did local priorities express community needs and aspirations?
- how well were the outcomes and improvements needed being delivered?
- what were the prospects for improvement?

Four themes would run through the assessment:-

- sustainability;
- inequality;
- vulnerable people;
- value for money.

A green and red flag scoring system would be used to signal real innovation or major worries about future outcomes.

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The Organisational Assessment would be based on two elements, Value for Money and Performance, across four themes, which would be linked to the Use of Resources Assessment:-

- managing finances;
- governing the business;
- managing resources;
- managing performance.

Each Organisational Assessment would contain an explicit statement on the performance of key services.

A central objective of the new assessment system was to minimise any additional administration on assessed bodies. A key principle had been to use locally produced data sources to assess performance and to use the COUNT principle (collect once, use numerous times) across the inspectorates involved in CAA. The 189 national indicators in the new National Indicator Set and evidence from inspection and audit, information from government offices and other agencies would also be used. The information would then be assessed by local inspectors from the Audit Commission.

The CAA would be reported annually at a public meeting, anticipated to be held in November, with a new dedicated website as the central hub for members of the public to find out more information on local services. Local Strategic Partnerships and local authorities would receive regular updates on the CAA's emerging findings and those areas that had been identified for concern.

The CAA would continue to be closely focused on local priorities and linked with the ongoing development and delivery of Local Area Assessments. It would also look at partnership working and ask how well local services were engaging local people together.

(Meeting ended at 12 noon)

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