

Notes of the Policy Planning Forum

14th December 2009, at 9.15 am
at Fire Service Headquarters, Birmingham

Present: **Members of the Authority**

Councillors Alden, Ali Khan, Chambers, Clinton, Delaney, Douglas-Maul, S Davis, Eustace, Gazey, Hinton, Idrees, Jones, O'Neill, M Robinson, Ryder, Singh, Skinner, Spence, Tagger, and Ward; Mr Topliss.

Officers: **West Midlands Fire Service**

Chief Fire Officer – V Randeniya;
Deputy Chief Fire Officer – M Clark;
Assistant Chief Officers – A Brandon, J Brown and T Prosser (Acting);
M Griffiths, D Johnson and P Mika.

Clerk to the Authority

S Phelps, M Broxton, S Suthi – Nagra and A Sahota.

Treasurer to the Authority

S Kellas.

Apologies: Councillors G Davies, Mulhall, Stevenson and Turner.

33/09 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman made a number of announcements as follows:

- The revised date for the Parliamentary Reception was Thursday 14th January, 2010. Members were informed that if they had any topics that they wished to be raised during the visit they should advise the Director of Corporate Services.
- On Thursday 3rd December, 2009, on behalf of the Authority, he attended an awards ceremony held in St Martin's Church in the Bull Ring, Birmingham to recognise the achievements of a number of operational staff, support staff and members of the public.

Policy Planning Forum – 14th December, 2009

- On Sunday 6th December, 2009 he attended the Brigade's Carol Service and was grateful for the Members of the Authority who attended the enjoyable occasion.
- The Fire Minister, Shahid Malik, would be visiting the Regional Control Centre on 4th January, 2010.

34/09 Corporate Strategy – Key Priorities

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported on the draft Key Priorities which would be included within the 2010/2013 Corporate Strategy. The draft Key Priorities were: Communities and Partnerships; Response; People; and Value for Money. Members were informed that the consultation period was up until the end of January 2010.

35/09 Budget and Precept for 2010 – 2011

Members received a presentation from the Director of Finance and Procurement with regard to the likely precept for 2010/2011 and the following two financial years, based on a forecast of the next three years' revenue and capital budgets and the likely three year financial settlement from the Government.

A number of national issues might also impact on budget setting over the next three years but the funding implications were not clear at this point: New Dimension funding; Regional Fire Control; Fire Link; firefighter and command training; 'Rising to the Challenge'; and Community Safety initiatives.

The presentation also highlighted the anticipated funding difficulties over the medium term and considered different scenarios arising from grant allocations in future years, ranging from a cash standstill position to a 5% reduction each year from 2011/12. Further scenarios also highlighted the impact of zero percent precept increases.

The presentation focused on a three year rather than a five year planning horizon. Due to the uncertainty of grant funding from 2011/12 the benefit of considering longer term forecasts was recognised as being of limited benefit.

Budget preparation work was continuing and further reports would be made to the Policy Planning Forum on 25th January, 2010 and the Authority on 15th February, 2010.

Members endorsed the proposed precept increase of 2.5% for the purpose of further development of the budget proposals.

Policy Planning Forum – 14th December, 2009

36/09 Transfer of Ownership of New Dimension Assets

Members received an update on the Authority's position regarding the transfer of New Dimension Assets.

37/09 External Audit Assessments

Mark Stocks and Gary Stevens of the Audit Commission gave a presentation on the outcomes for the Authority in relation to the Organisational Assessment and Use of Resources.

The Authority had been identified as performing well in regard to Managing Performance and Use of Resources. Strengths had been identified under Managing Finances; Governing the Business; and Managing Resources. Some strengths identified were:-

- good track record of operating within its budget whilst maintaining good service performance;
- the Fire Service had a clear vision of what it wanted to achieve for its local communities;
- the Authority had appropriate arrangements to ensure that it had a productive and skilled workforce.

Areas for improvement highlighted by the Audit Commission were:-

- developing a detailed service and financial plan for the future;
- ensuring that all services were efficient;
- understanding cost base, impact of services and value for money;
- the development of a clear medium term workforce plan;
- ensuring action plans were in place to achieve the required workforce that mirrored the ethnic mix in the area.

Members raised concerns about the Use of Resources score for Managing Finances and asked for an explanation. The external auditors responded that they recognised the Authority's good track record at managing finances but the Authority needed to plan ahead better. The Authority had to look at potential risks and have contingency plans in place.

(Meeting ended at 12.10 p.m.)

*Contact Officer: Amarjit Sahota
Democratic Services Unit
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
0121 569 3189*