

Notes of the Policy Planning Forum

Agenda Item No. 14

**13th October, 2014 at 10.30 am
At Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham**

- Present:** **Members of the Authority**
Councillor Edwards (Chair);
Councillor Ides (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Atwal Singh, Clinton, Collingswood,
Delaney, Douglas-Maul, Eustace, Finnegan,
Hogarth, Lines, Mott ram JP, O'Boyle, Phillips JP,
Quinten, Sealey, Shackleton, Singh, Spence, Tranter
and Young.
- Officers:** **West Midlands Fire Service**
Chief Fire Officer (P Loach);
Deputy Chief Fire Officer (P Hales);
Assistant Chief Fire Officer (G Taylor);
Asif Asfar, J Connor, Mike Griffiths, Mark Hamilton-Russell,
Simon Shilton and Neil Spencer.
- Clerk and Monitoring Officer**
R Jones.
- Apologies:** Councillors Aston and Davis;
Mr Ager.

16/14 **Chief Fire Officer's Announcements**

Members observed a minute's silence in memory of Firefighter Russell Field who had died yesterday of pneumonia. Russell had returned to work recently on a restricted basis. The Authority's condolences would be passed to his family.

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Policy Planning Forum 13th October, 2014

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the Scrutiny Committee today would receive an update on the operation of the high rise training facility. The facility was currently not fully operational due to issues with wind driven and pressure affected equipment. Negotiations were continuing with the contractor who was installing such equipment.

He reported that on 10th October, 2014 a request had been received as to the Service's availability to respond to life threatening incidents between 7.00 am to 11.00 am today during the industrial action being taken by Ambulance Service employees. Firefighters were consulted and a response was made to affirm that they would respond to such incidents on a 'best endeavours basis'. No requests were received.

The Chief Fire Officer informed members that he had taken the opportunity to make the West Midlands Fire Service case at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham two weeks ago. He had attended two panels on world class services and innovation and the use of technology and had shared what the Service was doing. During one panel discussion he had achieved recognition from the panel that the notion of 40% less incidents should mean 40% less fire fighters was too simplistic and did not demonstrate an understanding or recognition of the prevention work that was key to managing down risk. He was disappointed that at least one Police and Crime Commissioner still had the perception that firefighters sat around and waited to be called to a fire incident. He asked members to do whatever they could to help address this misconception.

17/14 Achieving Cost Savings 2015/18

Members received a presentation from the Chief Fire Officer on achieving cost savings between 2015 and 2018.

Members were reminded of the Service Delivery Model which underpinned the Service's priorities and objectives of Response, Protection and Prevention within The Plan. Breakdowns of what percentage of time was spent on Response, Protection and Prevention and the crewing of watches were also reported.

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**Policy Planning Forum
13th October, 2014**

The current net budget for 2014/15 was £103m (Formula grant £68m and Council Tax £35m). Of this 78% was spent on employee costs, 13% on running costs and 9% on capital financing.

Over the next three years the forecast reduction in the government formula grant was:-

2015/16	£5.8m	(8.6%)
2016/17	£4.4m	(7%)
2017/18	£4.1m	(7%)

If the forecasting was correct for 2016-18 these reductions would have to be made and the Chief Fire Officer or the Deputy Chief Fire had visited every colour watch to share this information at an early stage. Various staffing options were being considered along with the income option of a Council Tax referendum. A time line was also reported.

It was reported that the Tettenhall Fire Station, which was a twelve hour station, had asked to trial a combined watch. Officers had been told that this would not happen this year as a commitment to no further restructurings during the year had been made to all staff.

The following responses were made to members' questions and enquiries:-

- The Authority was the lowest Band D precepting authority in the country and even if a referendum went ahead dependent on the increased proposed it was likely that the Authority would still be in the lowest quartile.
- If the referendum option was used it would probably be between 2016 and 2018 and in line with the deficit that existed between a budget to maintain current Service Delivery standards and a reduced government grant. An additional £10 per household was used to demonstrate the impact on forecast deficits.
- Combined watches would be trialed in future at appropriate fire stations as an example of exploring other options.

**Policy Planning Forum
13th October, 2014**

- A referendum could only go ahead for the year those resources were required. If the public's answer was "no" then the Fire Authority would have to bear the referendum costs. It was for this reason that the Service was promoting awareness of everything it did and the Chair was trying to get the support of the Leaders of all seven authorities of the West Midlands.
- It was suggested that the public be made aware of the figures that would be required in preference to the percentages involved.
- Staff and trades unions were aware of the forthcoming gap in the budget despite having achieved savings over the last four years. Members were encouraged to raise such questions with staff – responses from firefighters would have more credibility.
- Savings and efficiency were things the Service had always tried to achieve. The number of support staff had been cut as much as was possible. Any future savings would impact on frontline staff.

A further report would be made to members in January, 2015 and updates on options and proposals would be received the following year.

(Meeting ended at 11.50 am)

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