

Minutes of the Audit Committee

13th October, 2008, at 3.00 pm
at the Fire Service Headquarters, Birmingham

Present: Councillor Turner (Chair);
Councillor Robinson (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Spence and Ward.
Mr Ager (Independent Member).

Apology: Councillor Jones.

27/08 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 7th July, 2008, be approved as a correct record.

28/08 **Consideration of External Auditor's Report to Those Charged with Governance**

The Committee considered the External Auditor's Governance Report for the 2007/08 Audit which had also been presented to the Authority at its meeting on 22nd September, 2008. Pragati Raithatha of the Audit Commission was present to deal with Members' questions.

The Report identified the key issues which the Authority needed to consider before the External Auditor issued the opinion, conclusion and certificate on the accounts. Ms Raithatha indicated that there might be some delay in signing off the accounts as John Gregory, the Audit Commission's Relationship Manager for the Authority, had unfortunately been taken ill.

One issue was outstanding, relating to the revision of the valuation of surplus firefighter accommodation which, as it was an integral part of a fire station complex, could not be disposed of. It was anticipated that an unqualified opinion could be given on the accounts, subject to satisfactory resolution of this outstanding issue.

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Members noted the issue of assets classified as surplus accommodation, and it was suggested that the usage of such areas be re-assessed to ensure that they were being put to best use.

Members also noted that some errors had been noted in the financial statements which management had agreed to adjust, and more information had been requested from the External Auditor on these matters so that the Committee could be reassured that these were not areas for concern.

Resolved that the Chief Fire Officer be requested to re-consider the policy on residential flats and houses.

29/08 Provision of Training at Height Facilities – Drill Towers and Training Buildings

Further to Minute No. 22/08, the Committee received a report for information with regard to the Brigade's drill towers and training buildings. Resources for a proposed pilot training at height facility had been earmarked from reserves in the sum of £250,000.

The report indicated that during 2005/06 and 2006/07 some training facilities had been demolished and others refurbished. There were currently seven training towers and six cold fire training buildings in use in addition to the facilities available at the Brigade Training Centre.

In December 2007 a further condition survey was conducted into the feasibility of bringing back into use towers located at a number of fire stations. In the meantime, however, in response to health and safety requirements and in order to provide more realistic training scenarios, a new design for a training-at-height facility had been developed, and fresh consideration had been given as to the best strategic location for such facilities bearing in mind the Authority's asset management plan. Subject to site condition surveys and planning permission it was proposed to pilot the new structure at one fire station, at an indicative cost of approximately £100,000. Subject to the outcome of the evaluation of the pilot scheme, provision of similar facilities at a further four sites would need to be considered when reviewing the Authority's capital programme.

Members asked if the proposed facility was a better option than refurbishing existing facilities, given the current financial situation.

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Officers indicated that it was anticipated that the proposed pilot facility would provide enhanced training opportunities and add to the mix of training facilities already available. The pilot scheme would be evaluated on its effectiveness and if it was not satisfactory then refurbishment of existing facilities may be another option.

30/08 Quarter 1 Internal Audit Progress Report

The Committee received a progress report on Internal Audit activity in the first quarter of 2008/09. The outcome of audit work on the relocation of the Headquarters, management of fuel at fire stations, bank account reconciliation and pension payroll was reported.

Members enquired into the detail of the discrepancy at one fire station with regard to fuel delivery records and fuel checks conducted. An investigation had revealed that incorrect entries had been made in the records with regard to a delivery of fuel that had not actually been made. Recommendations had been made to avoid future occurrences, which had been accepted by management. Members were assured that this incident appeared to have arisen out of a genuine misunderstanding rather than misconduct and that the Internal Audit recommendations had been followed up in a robust manner.

31/08 Work Programme 2008/2009

The Committee noted the work programme for the remainder of 2008/09.

32/08 Date and time of next meeting

Self Assessment Session – Monday 1st December 2008 at 1.30 pm
Audit Committee - Monday, 12th January, 2009, at 2.00 pm.

(The meeting ended at 3.45 pm)

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