



<u>Committee and date</u> Annual Council 18 th June 2009 10.00 am

<u>Item</u> 17 <u>Public</u>

<u>Paper</u> I

Chair's Report of the Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority Meeting held on 29 April 2009

Prior to commencement of the meeting the Chair advised Members that this was the last Fire Authority meeting to be attended by the Vice-Chair, Councillor Mrs Holyoak, as she is retiring. He thanked her for her work on the Authority and for the active role she has played on its various committees. She has always been keen to support the many events organised by the Service and has at all times championed its employees, never missing the opportunity to thank them for their work. Her contribution to the Authority will be sadly missed, as will her sense of humour and outgoing personality. Her colleagues, both Members and officers, joined the Chair in thanking Councillor Mrs Holyoak for her work and in wishing her a happy and healthy retirement from her Fire Authority role. The Chair then presented Councillor Mrs Holyoak with a Fire Authority plaque and a bouquet of flowers.

Human Resources Committee

At the request of the Fire Authority's Human Resources Committee officers undertook a review of the Service's mediation process, which took into account current legislation and best practice advice. Following the review the Fire Authority has agreed the Committee's recommendation to source mediation services through an external provider.

In addition the Committee put forward recommendations for enhancement of the Service's maternity policy as one of the means of attracting more female firefighters and these recommendations have also been agreed by the Fire Authority.

Standards Committee

Following the resignation of two non-elected, Independent Members of its Standards Committee the Fire Authority has agreed that the recruitment process to replace them can commence.

Committee Clerk's Note

New regulations to be enacted soon are likely to enable the establishment of joint local authority Standards Committees. This could result in the sharing of expertise and a reduction in costs. Furthermore, it would not then be necessary for the Fire Authority to recruit two new, non-elected, independent Members. Under the circumstances, the Chief Fire Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority and Chair of Standards Committee, has agreed that the recruitment process be delayed in order to explore setting up a joint Standards Committee locally.

Audit and Performance Management Committee

In March 2009 the Fire Authority's Audit and Performance Management Committee, with assistance from its officers and Internal Audit, carried out a full review of the Committee's terms of reference. This resulted in a number of proposed amendments to place more emphasis on the audit function and to set out specific responsibilities of the Committee in a logical order. The Fire Authority has accepted the recommendations from the Committee and agreed new terms of reference.

Annual Audit and Inspection Letter

The Fire Authority has received the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter 2007/08 from the Audit Commission. The 'Key Messages' contained within the Report are that the Fire Authority:

- Achieved an 'improving strongly' judgement as part of the Commission's final annual Direction of Travel assessment. Outcomes have improved in most priority areas and performance is improving faster than elsewhere in the reduction in numbers of accidental dwelling fires and injuries;
- Maintained its score of three under the Use of Resources Assessment, which examines the Authority's financial management and its arrangements for achieving value for money;
- Maintained a score of 4, i.e. performing strongly, for the overall fire and rescue service assessment; and
- Received an unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements, and unqualified value for money conclusion.

The Letter also stated that the Fire Authority is well positioned to ensure continued delivery of improved outcomes across all priority areas, as it has strengthened corporate and financial planning and improved financial capacity.

West Midlands Regional Management Board

As required by the Fire and Rescue National Framework, the West Midlands Regional Management Board undertook a review in October 2008 to identify any further areas of efficiency, which could be achieved through collaborative working and sharing functions at regional or sub-regional level. The review established that, whilst some further small-scale efficiencies could be achieved, the real opportunity for capacity building rested in the sharing of knowledge and expertise. It recommended that a Regional Improvement Group be established, led and co-ordinated by an Improvement Manager. The West Midlands Improvement and Efficiency Partnership has indicated that a grant of £175,000 may be available to finance this work. Subject to the availability of such grant aid, the Fire Authority has agreed the formation of a Regional Improvement Group and the appointment of an Improvement Manager for a term of 12 months.

Fire Authority Work Plan 2009/10

The Fire Authority, which was established as a stand-alone authority in April 1998, carries out various functions in accordance with legislation and its Standing Orders. Some of those functions must take place at specific times of the year in order to comply with statutory deadlines. During this time, however, the Authority has had no formal work plan, setting out what its activities will be throughout the year. In order to provide some structure to the work undertaken and to ensure that it carries out all of its functions in a timely manner the Fire Authority has agreed a Work Plan for the year May 2009 to April 2010.

The Scheme for Payment of Members' Allowances 2009/10

The Fire Authority has formally agreed its 2009/10 Scheme for the Payment of Members' Allowances, whereby basic, special responsibility, co-optee and travel allowances will increase automatically by the percentage to be agreed by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services and to take effect from 1 April 2009. In autumn 2009 an Independent Remuneration Panel will carry out a full review of the Scheme, taking into account the views of Members and the allowances paid by other fire authorities.

Integrated Risk Management Planning Members' Working Group Update

Having considered the recommendations made by its Integrated Risk Management Planning Members' Working Group, the Fire Authority has agreed:

- The Strategic Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2009 – 2012, which clearly sets out the key priorities for IRMP over the next three-years, and the proposed communication strategy;
- To explore further the implications of co-locating aerial appliances within the County;
- Funding to implement the recommendations from the review of water rescue provision; and
- The proposed timetable to develop the 2010/11 Draft Action Plan and the subsequent consultation strategy.

Outlook for 2008/09 Final Accounts and 2009/10 Budget

The Fire Authority has received an update from its Treasurer on the prospects for closing the 2008/09 Accounts and on other events, which are likely to impact on the 2009/10 Budget. It has also approved a number of virements recommended by its Committees. The Chancellor's recent budget indicated that the 2010/11 grant settlement will remain the same, so any external impact on the Fire Authority's 2010/11 budget is likely be minimal.

There is, however, concern about the pressures, which may be placed upon the Fire Authority's funding in the future by the Government, which in turn may result in the need to find further efficiencies. The Treasurer agrees that it is sensible to revisit the Fire Authority's projected budgets, in particular, the assumptions made about future grant settlements, and to start planning early for the 2010/11 budget. He shares Members' concern regarding preservation of service delivery.

Investment and Treasury Management Policy

One aspect of the final accounts, which the Fire Authority examines each year, is the level of its investments, cash and borrowing. This has been given added impetus this year by reports from the Audit Commission and Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), published in March 2009 in the wake of the Icelandic bank crisis.

Taking into account the above reports, the Fire Authority has revisited its current Investment Strategy, agreed in February 2009, and noted the investment situation as at 31 March 2009. It has confirmed the current approach to lending and tasked its Audit and Performance Management Committee to review Treasury Management Practices. Prior to undertaking the review, the Audit and Performance Management Committee and other Members will receive training in treasury management. This will take place once Shropshire Council has reviewed its treasury management policies and the Fire Authority has aligned its policies with theirs.

Analysis of Audit Commission National Report – Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency

In February 2009, the Audit Commission published a report entitled 'Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency'. The report challenges fire and rescue authority members and Chief Fire Officers to consider those areas where they might improve efficiency and effectiveness in light of a tight funding settlement in 2011 and current economic difficulties. Also within the report are 15 questions for fire services to ask themselves.

At the request of the Fire Authority, its officers have since responded to those questions and identified a number of areas for further improvement together with recommended actions. They have also undertaken analysis of the data, on which the Commission based its conclusions, to determine the relevant performance of this Fire Authority/Service in comparison with family group fire and rescue authorities/services. Having seen these documents, the Audit Commission has commented that they provide the most in-depth analyses of the National Report they have seen.

The Fire Authority has now tasked its officers to prepare an Improvement Action Plan, based upon the contents of the analyses, and it has delegated authority to its Audit and Performance Management Committee to monitor implementation of the Plan.

Comprehensive Area Assessment 2009 - Overview

Officers have briefed the Fire Authority on the recently launched Comprehensive Area Assessment process, introduced by the Audit Commission, and how the new process for fire and rescue authorities differs from Comprehensive Performance Assessment, which it replaces.

It is envisaged that, on a voluntary basis, fire and rescue services will, as a matter of good practice, complete and maintain a self-assessment of their operational performance, and verify this assessment through a robust peer review process at least once every three years. Both the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) have stated that insufficient capacity exists nationally to peer review all fire and rescue services during 2009.

Consequently, and when balanced against the Service's current 'Service Assessment' performance (where the maximum score of '4' has been achieved for the second consecutive year), the Fire Authority has agreed to defer its peer review until 2010/11. This will allow CFOA and the IDeA to focus resources on 'weak/poor' performing fire and rescue services during 2009/10.

As an interim arrangement, and to provide a degree of assurance to both the Fire Authority and Audit Commission, preparations are underway, through the West Midlands Regional Management Board, to carry out 'critical friend' peer reviews in the region during June/July 2009. There are no costs to the Fire Authority for the regional review.

Equality and Diversity Update

Following the achievement of Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government in August 2008, the Fire Authority commenced work on a self-assessment against Level 4. An external consultant supported the self-assessment process and in March 2009 confirmed that the Fire Authority satisfies the requirements of Level 4.

Councillor Dr Jones, the Fire Authority's Equality and Diversity Champion, said how pleased she was with this result. She congratulated officers on achieving Level 4 and thanked them for their work. In turn the Chair thanked Councillor Dr Jones for her contribution as Champion.

FiReControl Update

The FiReControl project is moving forward and Communities and Local Government (CLG) will complete the next financial analysis of the business case within a few months. The West Midlands Regional Control Centre is due to begin fit out of information and communications technology equipment in May. The Fire Authority's officers are fully engaged with discussions around the recruitment of current staff into the Regional Control Centre along with all relevant human resource management issues.

The Local Authority Controlled Company Board has been presented with a new, enlarged, staffing model, which, if agreed, will increase the costs set out in the CLG business case significantly. The proposals will come to the Fire Authority before any agreement is made to increase costs and the Chair of the Fire Authority, as a Director on the Board, will be closely monitoring any requests for additional funds.

Telford and Wellington Fire Stations

Having considered proposals for the redevelopment of Telford and Wellington Fire Stations and future funding requirements, the Fire Authority has agreed, for the purposes of capital budget planning, the allocation of £500,000 in the year 2012/13 for works at Telford and £1,000,000 in the year 2013/14 for works at Wellington. As a result of the current financial position and possible restrictions on future finances, it should be recognised that these works represent aspirations and not a commitment to the schemes. Officers will carry out full costings and capital appraisals for both schemes before bringing them to the Fire Authority for approval.

Chief Fire Officer Recruitment

At its meeting on 11 February 2009 the Fire Authority granted permission for the existing Chief Fire Officer to retire. The Brigade Managers' Employment Panel was subsequently tasked with dealing with all aspects of the recruitment process for his replacement. Final interviews for the post are to be held on 20 May and an Extraordinary Meeting of the Fire Authority will be held on 22 May 2009 to agree the appointment of the successful candidate.

The Chair advised Members that this would be the last Fire Authority meeting, which the present Chief Fire Officer would attend. The Chair thanked Mr Taylor for his work as Chief Fire Officer and said that the Authority would be losing a valuable asset. Mr Taylor responded that he had enjoyed being Chief Fire Officer for four years and working with the Fire Authority. He thanked Members for everything they had done for him.

Committee Clerk's Note

At the Extraordinary Meeting the Fire Authority agreed the appointment of the current Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Paul Raymond, as new Chief Fire Officer with effect from 1 July 2009.



Stuart West
Chair
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
May 2009

Background Papers

Agenda and papers for the meeting of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority held on 29 April 2009

The agendas and reports (with the exception of exempt or confidential items) for all Fire Authority meetings and those of its Committees appear on the Brigade's website:

www.shropshirefire.gov.uk

To access reports go to the Authority's website. Click on Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority on the right hand side of the screen, then Fire and Rescue Authority, then 11 February 2009 and the various reports and appendices will be listed.

If you have any difficulty with the website, please contact Lynn Ince, Management Support Officer on 01743 260225.