

Report of the Policy and Finance Committee meeting held on 24th January 2008

Present: Councillors R Butcher, J Goodwin, G Harper, G Murphy,
R Pegram (Chairman), D Raines and H Williams.

Apologies: Councillors C Carter and S Giles

This report contains items considered by the Committee which are submitted to the Fire Authority for information. The following matters were also considered by the Committee and separate reports are included on the Fire Authority's agenda for decision:

- **Medium Term Fire Authority Plan**
- **Service Improvement Plan 2008/09**
- **Fire Authority Budget 2008/09**

1. SINGLE EQUALITY SCHEME 2008 -2011 AND CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN

The Committee has received a report on the draft Single Equality Scheme 2008 - 2011 and draft Corporate Equality Action Plan 2008 – 2011 which brings together existing schemes and action plans for promoting race and disability equality. .

Members have noted that the action plans seek to promote equality but would not result in any lowering of standards.

The Committee has welcomed the integration of the current schemes and plans into single documents covering both race and disability and thanked Alison Scott, Equality and Diversity Adviser, for her work in drawing up the documents. The Scheme and the Action Plan is subject to consultation and will be recommended for approval by the Fire Authority in May following discussion by the Community Safety Committee.

2. CONSULTATION RESPONSE TO NATIONAL FIRE AND RESCUE EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY STRATEGY 2008-2018

The Committee has received a report on a Government consultation on a draft national strategy for equality and diversity in the Fire and Rescue Service and on a proposed response.

The draft Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Strategy acknowledges that equality and diversity are central to effective protection of the public through fire prevention and emergency response. The Strategy's vision is to create by 2018 a service which demonstrates that it serves all communities equally to the highest standards, building on a closer and more effective relationship with the public and creating a more diverse workforce which better reflects the local working population. It aims to do this by providing a framework for action which will drive change at a faster pace than previously. The Strategy requires action by Fire Authorities in the following 5 priority areas and sets out a number of actions at national, Authority, and individual level for each of the priorities and identified outcomes for each:

- Leadership
- Service Delivery
- Employment Practice
- Evaluation & dissemination of good practice
- Accountability

The Committee has noted that one of the outcomes is to increase the proportion of women and black and ethnic minority employees in the Service, as they are currently under-represented. Members were advised that the focus should be on targets for recruitment rather than on the overall make up of the Service as a whole.

The Committee has agreed unanimously that the response to the consultation be approved as set out in the Appendix 1 to this report.

3. CONSULTATION RESPONSE TO DRAFT NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE 2008 - 2011

The Committee has received a report on the content of the draft National Framework for the Fire and Rescue Service 2008 – 2011 and on a proposed response to the Government consultation.

The main proposed changes since the last National Framework document include:

- Scaling down the narrative to key 'must/should' messages so that the priorities are more transparent.
- Lifespan – moving to a three-year document so expectations highlighted in the National Framework run alongside the Fire and Rescue Service's financial commitments.
- Structure – moving away from the nine original chapter headings and creating the following four new chapters focusing on key strategic priorities:

Chapter 1 - Prevention, Protection and Response - covering the core business of Fire and Rescue Authorities in analysing risks and taking action to meet and mitigate the effect of those risks.

Chapter 2 - Resilience - covering the delivery of key resilience programmes and the actions authorities need to take to ensure they are fully equipped to meet the demands of the resilience agenda.

Chapter 3 - Diversity and Workforce - covering the importance of mainstreaming diversity in all levels of the Fire and Rescue Service and workforce development, training and pay and conditions.

Chapter 4 - Governance and Improvement - covering institutions in place to support the delivery of Fire and Rescue Authority business, the new Local Government White Paper framework including Local Area Agreements, Performance Assessment and Finance.

The Committee has noted:

- There are some issues in the draft framework that are welcomed such as the alignment of the lifespan of the document with the funding settlement and the Fire Authority's own Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP).
- There are the following areas of concern:
 - Greater clarity on the emerging structures within the service and how they are expected to develop over the lifespan of the framework.
 - There should be much more emphasis on the role of Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) and what it will do, both to support the development of the service and promote its role within Government and in other Local Authorities.
 - There appeared to be an assumption that as the service already attended flooding incidents then further development of this role was not a new burden. The response makes it clear that further expectations should be accompanied by appropriate new burdens funding.
 - The document subtly expands the remit of the Regional Management Board into the IRMP process. The point is made that this development should be more open and explicit.
 - There are several references to what the Fire Authority must do to ensure delivery of the FireControl project, but the document is vague on exactly what CLG would do and how any new burdens would be funded.

The Committee has agreed unanimously to endorse the proposed response to the consultation as set out in Appendix 2 to this report.

4. CONSULTATION RESPONSE ON ESTABLISHING A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR THE FIRE SERVICE

The Committee has received a report on draft proposals by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) to establish a Centre of Excellence (CoE) for the Fire Service in England and on a proposed response to the consultation. The proposals cover the reasons for the establishment of the CoE, its functions and governance arrangements and funding options.

The demise of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Fire Services has meant that some important functions which had previously been delivered centrally - principally the development and maintenance of operational doctrine and procedures – have effectively gone into decline. There is widespread recognition in the FRS that this needs to be addressed and this aspect of the CoE's remit is supported. However there is a lack of clarity about the proposed role of the CoE, and how it is to be funded, so that it is difficult to judge whether the proposal represents value for money. Potentially the CoE would be of considerable value to smaller FRSs such as Cambridgeshire which does not have the economies of scale to undertake some specialist functions. There were concerns that it was inappropriate for the CoE to be involved with the Fire Service College at the outset and that it should start small and expand into other areas once established.

The Committee has agreed unanimously that that response attached as Appendix 3 to this report be approved and submitted to the CLG.

5. FIRECONTROL PROJECT – TRANSITION GOVERNANCE, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Committee has received a report on draft proposals from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) for the governance of the transition phase of the FireControl project and the proposed response.

The draft proposals document sets out the guiding principles and ways of working to ensure that effective assurance and decision making structures are in place, seeks confirmation from the FRAs that the necessary steps will be taken, and confirms that the national team will continue to work closely with and support FRAs to successfully deliver the project. The Chairs of fire authorities are asked to sign up to support the principles outlined by the CLG.

The Chief Fire Officer supports the need for effective management of the FireControl project, and a structure satisfying all the CLG principles has been implemented. However, there remain concerns about the one dimensional aspect of the agreement. Without CLG giving some meaningful indication of how it intends to commit to the effective implementation of the project, through its own set of operating principles, the Committee was advised that it would be unwise to sign the agreement if the Authority was not to be potentially constrained in its

future decision making.

Cambridge and Peterborough is the only Fire Authority not to have signed up in support of the agreement, but the Committee supports the stance that the Authority should not sign up in the absence of corresponding commitments from the CLG to support the FireControl project.

The Committee has agreed unanimously that that response attached as Appendix 4 to the report be approved, signed by the Chairman and submitted to the CLG.

6. UPDATE ON THE NEW PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

The Committee has received a report on the new performance framework for local authorities which sits alongside the new Local Area Agreements (LAAs) to be drawn up in each area.

The Committee has noted:

- that of the 198 national performance indicators, only 2 relate to the functions of the fire and rescue service.
- that each LAA will be based on performance against 35 of the 198 national indicators , plus 16 statutory indicators relating to education.
- that fire and rescue authorities are statutory partners in the new LAAs and will contribute to the identification and achievement of locally agreed objectives and targets,.

The Audit Commission and six other inspectorates are developing jointly an outcome focussed, proportionate and risk based Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) to be introduced from April 2009. Each year's CAA will have four elements:

- an area risk assessment identifying risks to outcomes and the effectiveness of their management;
- a scored use of resources judgement for each public body including fire and rescue authorities in the area;
- a scored direction of travel judgement for each local authority and fire and rescue authority in the area; and
- publication of performance data for each area against the set of national indicators.

The Committee welcomes the opportunity for the wider engagement with partners and to contribute to the identification and delivery of local objectives. The Service's experience in the delivery of community safety may be particularly relevant to the achievement of targets to reduce crime and disorder.

7. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2007/08

Members have received an update on revenue and capital spending as at 31 December 2007, a summary of which is attached as Appendix 5 to this report.

The budget for 2007/08 was approved at the Fire Authority meeting on 15 February 2007. The total budget was set at £26.256m with a total precept of £13.862m. The Policy and Finance Committee on 21 June 2007 approved the revenue carry forward of £909,000 from 2006/07. To date, £754k of this has been applied to the budget to fund schemes that have been or are due to be completed. New Burdens funding relating to the Fire Control project has been allocated to the Authority in the form of an earmarked grant. The additional £98,000 means that including carry forwards, the net budget for 2007/08 is £27.107m.

Members have discussed and noted:

- Overall, the budget is 5.24% underspent to the end of December 2007. Net controllable expenditure is 6.03% underspent.
- Although there is underspending on employee costs, the appointment of 4 new firefighters in January, forthcoming training at the Fire Service College, and the appointment of a Training provider will all result in a reduction of the overspend by year end.
- Energy costs are expected to increase as the winter progresses and due to increased tariffs.
- Transport costs have been underspending primarily as a result of the Service's move to provided vehicles following the fleet review and that the savings will be reinvested in the purchase of further vehicles.
- A new contract for the printing infrastructure will be agreed by the end of the financial year, reducing the underspend on this heading.
- The upgrade of Breathing Apparatus (BA) is now subject to user testing in Lincolnshire and this will be brought to a conclusion by the end of the financial year.
- The new Fire Service's website will be completed by the end of February and that thereafter work will commence on the intranet.

The Director of Resources has advised that as a consequence of these and other changes, the underspend is expected to be less than 1% of Budget at year end

The Committee has noted the position on revenue and capital spending.

8. HUMAN RESOURCES DATA – APRIL TO DECEMBER 2007

The Committee has received a report on relevant statistics and trends concerning employees in Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service for 2007/08 to the end of December 2007.

The Committee has noted in particular:

- Wholetime firefighters remain 3% above establishment following the Authority's decision to over-recruit in the short term.
- There has been a reduction in the availability of Retained Duty Staff (RDS). The availability of RDS staff continues to be challenged and 23 staff, equivalent to 10.5 hours of cover, have left the service. There is a need to increase the recruitment of RDS staff and a separate report on this is to be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee
- FireControl staffing remains steady although there has been an increase in sickness, reduced morale and an increase in requests for secondments.
- Career breaks are kept under review and these have fallen from 7 to 4 since April 2007. Requests which are not in accordance with the policy are being refused.
- There has been an increase in the number of agency temps due primarily to the need to cover for long term sickness absence.
- There has been a marked decrease in the number of formal discipline cases as issues are increasingly being dealt with by management action.
- 10 new grievances have arisen in the last two months, 7 of which relate to the new Crewing and Leave Order. A fuller report on these will be included in the next report to the Committee.
- Sickness amongst Wholetime staff has increased from 9.71 working shifts lost per annum for August to 12.11 for December.

The Committee has discussed the level of sickness absence including:

- Factors affecting sickness levels amongst staff
- National and regional comparisons and the reliability and comparability of data
- The involvement and support of Trades Unions in reducing sickness absence
- Management action taken and proposed to reduce the level of sickness.
- The arrangements in place to actively monitor sickness levels and to hold managers to account for plans to reduce sickness.

The Chairman of the Committee has expressed his concern at the unacceptably high level of sickness absence and has suggested that the Scrutiny and Performance Committee should actively monitor this issue.

The Committee has noted the report.

CHAIRMAN

Source Documents	Location	Contact
Agenda, reports and minutes of the Policy and Finance Committee – 24/01/08.	Hinchingsbrooke Cottage Brampton Road Huntingdon	Michael Brown 01480 444572 michael.brown@cambsfire.gov.uk