

MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY MEETING HELD ON 12 JANUARY 2021

Present: Councillors C Atkins, R Berry, J Chatterley (Chairman), K Choudhry, P Duckett, D Franks, J Gambold, M Headley, D McVicar, I Shingler and Y Waheed (Vice-Chair)

CFO P Fuller, DCFO A Hopkinson, ACO G Chambers, ACFO A Peckham and Mr J Atkinson

19-20/FRA/65 Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

19-20/FRA/66 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

19-20/FRA/67 Communications

Letter from Lord Greenhalgh

The Chair advised that he had received a letter from Lord Greenhalgh which included performance indices from various fire and rescue services up to June 2020.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that a presentation was being prepared for the Service's Corporate Management Team in advance of it being submitted to a future Authority meeting.

COVID-19 Inspection

The Chair reported that he had received correspondence relating to the draft letter on the outcome of the inspection of the Service's COVID-19 response.

The Chief Fire Officer added that the final inspection result was still awaited following the submission of the Service's response to the draft inspection outcome letter.

Sharing of Correspondence

It was noted that both the Chair and Chief Fire Officer circulated communications to Members of the Authority on a regular basis in the period between Authority meetings.

19-20/FRA/68 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 December 2020 be confirmed as a true record.

19-20/FRA/69 Public Participation

Members noted that no questions had been received in accordance with the public participation scheme approved at the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority held on 5 April 2000 (Minute 99/fa/94 refers).

19-20/FRA/70 Audit and Standards Committee 1 December 2020

Councillor Headley submitted the draft Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 1 December 2020. He reported that, as of the date of the meeting, the audit of the Statement of Accounts had not been concluded by EY, the Service's external auditors. An apology had been issued to the Committee for the delay. Subsequent to the meeting, the accounts had been signed off before Christmas.

Councillor Headley drew the Authority's attention to the Statement of Assurance. This document set out the Service's financial assurance, governance framework and operational assurance arrangements.

The work required to pull the Statement together was recognised.

RESOLVED:

That the submitted Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 1 December 2020 be received and the recommendations of the meeting be approved.

19-20/FRA/71 Budget Setting

The Assistant Chief Officer – Finance and Corporate Services introduced his report that provided information to allow Members to consult further on a draft Revenue Budget, Capital Programme and Council Tax for 2021/22. The report would be discussed in greater detail at the Members Budget Workshop on 19 January 2021, with the final budget proposals being submitted to the next meeting of the Authority on 11 February 2021 for approval.

The Assistant Chief Officer reported that the timetable had been amended from previous years due to the lateness of the Chancellor's announcement on the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review and uncertainties around the level of pandemic funding available.

A Council Tax increase of 1.99% was being proposed. This would increase the precept for a Band D equivalent property by £2 per annum. Efficiency savings covering the period 2021/22 to 2023/24 totalled £704,000.

The Assistant Chief Officer reported that there would be a minimal increase of £13,000 to the Revenue Support Grant received by the Service.

Members' attention was drawn to the forecast reduction in business rate and Council Tax income resulting from the ongoing pandemic. Business rate revenue was £117,000 less than forecast in the previous year's budget and the reduction in Council Tax income was £533,000. This was somewhat offset by a Council Tax support grant of approximately £400,000. The Authority had also had the foresight to allocate the year end underspend of approximately £700,000 into a Collection Fund deficit reserve.

Following the observation that the Council Taxbase forecasts for Bedford Borough Council were significantly lower than the other two constituent authorities, Councillor Headley commented that the assumptions had been made based upon the forecast increase in claims against the Council Tax reduction scheme.

In relation to the Capital Programme, it was noted that the projects included in the Programme were similar to previous years, including investment in ICT infrastructure. An email detailing the £513,000 of new bids had been circulated to Members via email on Friday, 8 January 2021.

The Assistant Chief Officer advised that the proposals had been subject to consultation and to date, just under 200 responses had been received. Around 80% of respondents were in favour of the proposed 1.99% Council Tax increase, with over 60% in favour of a £5 increase per Band D equivalent property as suggested by the National Fire Chiefs Council.

Members considered the appendices of the report, particularly the Medium Term Revenue Plan (Appendix 1). The Assistant Chief Officer highlighted the following budget lines: removal of 3% Fire Fighter Pay increase 2020/21 from Base Budget, pensions changes and the offset

by grant of the additional employer costs, the revenue contribution to capital, the revenue support grant, business rate baseline, business rate top-up, including the 2019/20 revised top up, business rates grant, Collection Fund Deficit and use of Collection Fund deficit reserve.

The use of the Earmarked Reserve for budget-setting did not cover the full four-year period and Members would have to further discuss how to bridge the gap at the Budget Workshop so that a balanced budget for the four year period could be considered at the next meeting of the Authority.

It was also agreed that the Council Taxbase and employer pension grant would be subject to further discussion at the Budget Workshop.

Councillor Headley expressed concern about the proposed increases in expenditure relating to scrutiny panel decisions and new projects in the Capital Programme and requested further information on these to be discussed at the Budget Workshop.

The Chair advised Members that if there were any further suggestions for areas of discussion at the Budget Workshop, that these be forwarded to the Assistant Chief Officer.

RESOLVED:

1. That a draft revenue budget requirement of £31.286m, as per Appendix 1 of the report, with a council tax increase of 1.99%, be approved for further consultation.
2. That a draft Capital Programme of £1.038m as per Appendix 4 of the report be approved for further consultation.

19-20/FRA/72 Work Programme

Members received the updated Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme be received.

19-20/FRA/73 Executive Committee 7 January 2021

The Chair advised the Authority that the Executive Committee had met on 7 January 2021 and the Minutes of that meeting had been circulated to all Members of the Authority on 11 January 2021 for information.

The main item of discussion at the meeting had been the process for appointing a successor for the Chief Fire Officer as Paul Fuller had announced his intention to retire as of 30 June 2021.

The Chair reported that the Executive Committee had delegated authority in relation to the appointment of Principal Officer posts, and was

seeking endorsement from the Authority to proceed with arrangements to appoint to the post of Chief Fire Officer.

In response to a query, the Chief Fire Officer and the Secretary and Monitoring Officer advised that, whilst the combination of the roles of Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive was not required under the National Framework, almost every Fire and Rescue Service had appointed to a combined post as this gave the Chief Fire Officer the authority to undertake staffing matters delegated to the Head of Paid Service as set out in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

Members of the Authority expressed their regret at the Chief Fire Officer's departure and agreed that a Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive should be appointed to succeed Paul Fuller on his departure from the Service. It was agreed that the appointment of the successful individual should be ratified by the full Authority at the conclusion of the selection process, noting that this may necessitate the calling of a special meeting solely for this purpose.

RESOLVED:

That the submitted Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 7 January 2021 be received and that it be agreed that:

- (a) the process to appoint a new Chief Fire Officer to succeed Paul Fuller following his decision to leave the post on 30 June 2021 be approved and that the Executive Committee be given delegated authority to conduct the appointment process.
- (b) the post of Chief Fire Officer be advertised requiring operational competency and including the role of Chief Executive/Head of Paid Service, with a single point salary.
- (c) the appointment of the successful applicant will be ratified by the full Fire and Rescue Authority at the conclusion of the selection process.

The meeting ended at 11.16 am