

**BEDFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

**held on 11 January 2022 at 10.00am**

**PRESENT**

Councillors J Chatterley (Chair), J Burnett, M Headley, D McVicar and I Shingler

Chief Fire Officer A Hopkinson, Deputy Chief Fire Officer C Bigland, Assistant Chief Fire Officer A Kibblewhite, Assistant Chief Officer Chambers and Mr J Atkinson were also present

Councillors C Atkins, R Berry, K Choudhury, P Duckett, D Franks and J Gambold observed the meeting via Teams

**21-22/fa/078 APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Waheed.

**21-22/fa/079 DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY AND OTHER INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

**21-22/fa/080 COMMUNICATIONS**

**Government Announcement on Cladding**

The Chair referred to the recent announcement made by the Secretary of State advising that leaseholders of medium rise buildings (11-18 meters in height) would not be responsible for any costs relating to dangerous cladding, with developers responsible for the cost of replacement.

The Chief Fire Officer added that developers would be asked to contribute to a national remediation fund of £4 billion to cover these costs.

The Fire Safety Act 2021 was expected to come into force in mid-February and the Service had been developing communications around this which could be shared with Members.

As this type of building would not necessarily have been included in the normal inspection regime, the National Fire Chiefs Council had been asked to develop a business case setting out the financial implications of including medium-rise buildings in the inspection regime and determining the role of fire and rescue services and other partners in this process. Additional information and guidance was expected and would be shared with Members when it was made available.

The Chief Fire Officer had requested information on the number of medium-rise buildings in Bedfordshire earlier in the day and would circulate this figure to Members as soon as possible.

### **Efficacy of Breathing Apparatus**

Following reports of firefighters in New York City using their own oxygen supplies to assist residents of a fire suffering from the effects of smoke inhalation at a recent fire in the Bronx, Councillor McVicar queried whether, in the opinion of the Chief Fire Officer, the amount of oxygen available for the Service's firefighters was sufficient.

The Chief Fire Officer assured Members that, in addition to the self-contained BA sets used by firefighters, the robust procedures and guidance in place and additional equipment such as smoke hoods to assist casualties out of burning buildings, firefighters had access to additional oxygen canisters for the express use of casualties and an investment to increase the capacity of these had recently been made.

### **21-22/fa/081 MINUTES**

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2021 be confirmed as a true record.

## **21-22/fa/082 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).

## **21-22/fa/083 AUDIT AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE MINUTES FROM 2 DECEMBER**

Councillor Atkins introduced the Minutes of the informal meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 2 December 2021. She drew the Authority's attention to the recommendation of the Committee that the full Authority accept the invitation from Public Sector Audit Appointments to opt into the sector-led option for the appointment of external auditors to principal local government and police bodies for five financial years from 1 April 2023.

Participation in this scheme was advantageous to the Authority and had already resulted in savings of approximately £20,000 following a dispute over the fee increase proposed by the Authority's current external auditors.

### **RESOLVED:**

1. That it be agreed that the Authority accept the invitation from Public Sector Audit Appointments to opt into the sector-led option for the appointment of external auditors to principal local government and police bodies for five financial years from 1 April 2023.
2. That the Minutes of the Audit and Standards Committee meeting held on 2 December 2021 be received and the decisions made by the Committee informally be ratified.

## **21-22/fa/084 DRAFT 2022/23 REVENUE BUDGET, CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND COUNCIL TAX**

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer presented his report on a draft Revenue Budget, Capital Programme and Council Tax for 2022/23.

In introducing the report, the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer highlighted the following:

- The proposed revenue budget requirement was £32.876 million, which equated to a 1.99% Council Tax increase, just below the referendum cap of 2%. The increase in the Band D precept would be £2.04, from £102.41 to £104.45.

- A one-year settlement had been announced as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, making medium term financial planning more difficult. There had been an increase in the amount of Revenue Support Grant received by £72,000 from 2021/22; however, this was in the context of the RSG being reduced by almost 50% over a number of years.
- There were no capital grants in the budget, with all capital projects being funded through revenue contributions. At present, there were no new additional items to include in the Capital Programme, but this was subject to change as there were a number of reviews ongoing.
- In 2022/23, a reduction in business rate income was forecast.
- The forecast 2022/23 taxbase figures estimated when setting the 2021/22 budget had increased by 5,169 Band D equivalent properties and would result in additional council tax revenues for the Authority of £540,000 in 2022/23 above the income previously forecast. Final figures would be included in the budget submitted to the next meeting of the Authority.
- The Authority would be receiving a grant of £410,000 to cover increased National Insurance contributions. The cost of this increase was estimated as £170,000, with the remainder of the funding being un-ringfenced grant.
- There had been a surplus on the Collection Fund as not as many individuals had applied for Council Tax support as had been forecast. The overall amount due back to the Authority, taking into account both the surplus on the Collection Fund and the business rate deficit, was £380,000.
- The proposed Capital Programme of £1.371 million for 2022/23 included investment in front line operational equipment, ICT and software and the modernisation of the Service's buildings.
- The consultation was ongoing and results would be presented to Members at the next Budget Workshop.

In relation to Appendix 3 which set out the savings and efficiencies, the Assistant Chief Executive assured the Authority that he was confident that all savings forecast for 2022/23 were achievable.

The Chief Fire Officer commented that, in relation to the increased needs that may result in additional costs, a greater emphasis had been placed upon productivity and efficiency and that he welcomed Member challenge as the Service moved towards new ways of working.

In response to questions, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that the £35,000 saving associated with the Apprenticeship residential element removal was the result of the Service bringing the training in house so it could provide a more family friendly option for new staff as well as saving on the costs of accommodation. Savings associated with the cleaning contract related to the option to bring this service in-house.

The Service was exploring income generation options relating to the use of the drone, such as providing aerial photos to assist in the assessment of the condition of roofs and other parts of buildings that would be inaccessible without the hire of costly equipment such as ladders or scaffolding.

In discussing Appendix 2 to the report, which set out the assumptions and uncertainties, Members were advised that the fire fighter pension grant was likely to form part of the overall funding settlement in future years, a 2% pay award had been budgeted for but this may need to be increased, and an environmental impact budget had been introduced.

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer reported on the differences between the Local Government Pension Scheme, which was a funded scheme, and the Fire Fighter's Pension Scheme, for which the cost of the deficit fell to the Government. The valuation of the Fire Fighter Pension Fund was currently ongoing and challenges had been made in relation to how the age discrimination payments should be considered as part of this process.

In response to a question about the large variation between spending in year 3 on equipment as set out in Appendix 4, it was noted that further discussions would be required as to whether to prioritise achieving economies of scale or benefitting from ongoing innovation when purchasing fleet vehicles and other large equipment. There was no major variation to ICT and IT developments. Members were assured that, when investing in the Service estate, consideration would be given as to the future use and retention of the building in question before improvements were made. The Service had also made a bid for a decarbonisation grant so that boilers and other equipment could be replaced with more environmentally friendly solutions.

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer provided a detailed overview of Appendix 1, which set out the Medium Term Revenue Plan for 2022/23 – 2025/26. Line 22 set out the proposed level of revenue contributions to capital, which was currently set at £663,000 for 2022/23 and increased to over £2 million in Year 3 as set out in the Capital Programme. Line 29 related to the assumption of a 2% pay award. The £368,000 of new budget pressures was highlighted in line 43. Funding sources were detailed in lines 56 onwards, with line 64 illustrating the Council Tax increase.

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer confirmed that the Council Tax income was as forecast by the constituent authorities and used in their own budget setting processes.

In response to a question about the financial impact of the additional Bank Holidays, the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer advised that he would provide a written response to Members following the meeting.

**RESOLVED:**

That the budget proposals set out in the report and recommendations below be refined and taken forward for approval by the Authority at the budget meeting on 10 February 2022:

1. A revenue budget requirement of £32.876 million, as per Appendix 1 of the report, with a council tax increase of 1.99%; and
2. A Capital Programme of £1.371 million as per Appendix 4 of the report.

**21-22/fa/085 WORK PROGRAMME**

Members received the updated Work Programme.

The Chief Fire Officer reported that work was ongoing to identify additional items for the full Authority and Executive work programmes and encouraged Members to request additional items for consideration at future meetings.

**RESOLVED:**

That the work programme be received.

The meeting closed at 11.14 am.