

MEETING: 12 January 2009

SUBJECT: PROPOSED AMALGAMATION OF THE POLICY AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW COMMITTEE AND POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER AND CLERK TO THE AUTHORITY

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report sets out, for the consideration of the Committee, a proposal to amalgamate the current Performance Review Committee and the Policy Advisory Committee.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 As Committee Members will recall the Authority was subject to its first Comprehensive Performance Audit (CPA) in September 2005. The Audit Commission, who were responsible for undertaking the CPA work, identified a number of areas of effective practice within the Authority at this time. However, they also highlighted a number of potential actions that, if implemented, would help to improve the Authority's performance.

- 2.2 One of the areas that was highlighted by the Audit Commission was in respect of the Committee structure that the Authority had in place at the time of the audit. In the CPA report the Audit Commission noted that;

"Members serve on a number of sub-committees dealing with personnel, finance, best value and emergency planning, however, most business is undertaken by the full Authority, which reduces the time available for detailed consideration of strategic issues. Arrangements have not been reviewed for some time, although the Authority is currently evaluating the committee structure to encourage more challenge from Members and to ensure appropriate 'checks and balances' are in place".

- 2.3 In response to this Members determined that a full review should be undertaken of the role and structure of the Authority's committees with the specific intention of bringing forward proposals aimed at enhancing the functions of the Authority in respect of its role in providing strategic leadership for Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service.

- 2.4 This work was duly undertaken and a report was submitted to the Fire Authority on 20th March 2006. This report set out a revised committee structure (Minute 127/2006 refers) with associated terms of reference and, following Members approval, the changes took effect in June 2006.

- 2.5 Two of the changes introduced at this time, was the establishment of a Performance Review Committee and a separate Policy Advisory Committee. The role of the former was to consider past performance of the service and, based on this information, make recommendations for action designed to further improve the services provided by the Authority. The latter's role was to

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consider and make recommendations on the potential for future changes in the service based upon risk analysis and emerging external changes in the social-economic environment.

3 OPERATION OF THE COMMITTEES

- 3.1 The two committees have now been functioning for approximately 2 ¹/₂ years during which time the Authority has improved its performance across all of its areas of responsibility and this has been acknowledged by the Audit Commission in subsequent audits that they have undertaken. It has also been acknowledged that a particular achievement has been the adoption and effective development of a robust performance management system. This system has enabled the Performance Review Committee to comprehensively analyse performance trends and comment accordingly and, where appropriate, propose changes to service delivery.
- 3.2 At the same time, the Policy Advisory Committee has also played a valuable role as a sounding board for issues of key significance to the service, prior to such issues being presented at full Authority. This has particularly been the case with regard to the issue of contingency planning which has been and remains a pertinent topic.

4 POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE TWO COMMITTEES

- 4.1 Whilst both committees have played a valuable role in improving the overall performance of the Authority, it can be debated that the separation of their responsibilities into what are effectively 'backward looking' and 'forward looking' roles is not the most effective way in which they could be organised.
- 4.2 As has been previously stated the Performance Review Committee has a key role to play in examining the past performance of the service and providing recommendations based upon this information. However, it formally falls to the Policy Advisory Committee to examine emerging trends and consider potential policy initiatives as a result. However, this responsibility is undertaken without explicitly examining the past performance of the service.
- 4.3 This separation of functions does not provide for the most effective use of the valuable time of the Committee Members and, with just sixteen Councillors representing the whole Authority, two separate committees can also be seen as disproportionate, subsequently placing an unnecessary burden upon Members. As a result, it is proposed that consideration is given to the two committees being amalgamated and that the new Committee takes on an enlarged responsibility for analysing past performance and, with the assistance of this management information, critically assessing proposed policy initiatives aimed at improving performance and/or addressing emerging challenges, whether these be internally or externally generated.
- 4.4 Adopting this approach will have the key benefit of allowing Committee Members to consider policy initiatives from a more informed position, as they will be the focal point for analysing past performance, identifying and assessing emerging issues and subsequently considering future policies for recommendation to the full Authority. (Appendix A sets out the proposed Terms of Reference of the Committee.)

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- 4.5 Informal discussion with the Audit Commission, who put forward the original proposal to consider a review of the Authority's committee structure, have been undertaken in respect of this matter. They have stated that they understand the rationale underpinning the proposal contained in this paper and would be supportive of such a course of action should the Committee choose to progress with the matter.

5 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 5.1 A risk assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the risk to the Authority has been minimised as far as practicable. The assessment has considered an appropriate balance between risk and control; the realisation of efficiencies; the most appropriate use of limited resources; and a comprehensive evaluation of the benefits. The risk to the authority has been assessed as low utilising the standard risk matrix.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 The Committee is requested to:
- a) Consider the content of this report and provide appropriate guidance on the matter;
 - b) Receive further reports as appropriate
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