

## Item No 3(i)

Minutes of the Meeting of  
the TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND  
RESCUE AUTHORITY held in the  
Fire and Rescue Service  
Headquarters, Barmston Mere on  
MONDAY 17 FEBRUARY 2014 at  
10.30am.

### **Present:**

Councillor T Wright in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Burdis, M Forbes, N Forbes, Haley, Harrison, Mole, Mortimer, Ord, Padgett, Price, Renton, Stephenson and Stockdale.

### **Part I**

*The Authority observed a minute's silence in memory of firefighters Nial Hamilton of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and Clifford Cox of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service who had recently died whilst on duty.*

### **Apologies for Absence**

An apology for absence was submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor McAtominey.

### **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **Minutes**

61. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Authority, Part I, held on 20 January 2014 be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to an amendment to the third sentence of the fifth paragraph on page 14, to read '...cuts already made to the local authority'

## **Capital Programme 2014/2015 including Prudential Indicators for 2014/2015 and 2016/2017**

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority and the Finance Officer submitted a report presenting the proposed Capital Programme for 2014/2015, including the Prudential Indicators for 2014/2015 to 2016/2017.

The Finance Officer reported that the Capital Programme and Vehicle Replacement Programme totalled £5.552m, with £5.417m being allocated for continuing projects and £83,000 for new starts. The Capital Programme would be subject to variation during 2014/2015 as the Vehicle Replacement Programme may be varied following the fleet review and would also be reviewed once the full implications of the changes to the operational response model were clear.

The Authority would fund the Capital Programme through Government capital grants, other contributions, planned use of earmarked reserves and RCCO as appropriate. Members would be kept up to date during the year with quarterly reports on the progress of the delivery of the programme.

Members were directed to the Prudential Indicators for 2014/2015 to 2016/2017 which were fully set out in Appendix B of the report. The Authority was required to specifically approve the statutory Prudential Indicators relating to The Authorised Limit for External Debt of £54.828m and The Operational Boundary for External Debt of £49.828m for 2014/2015. The Prudential Indicators were there to confirm that the capital schemes proposed were affordable and within the provisions of the CIPFA Code.

Members were also notified that they had to approve the Authority's Annual Minimum Revenue Provision Statement for 2014/2015, which remained unchanged from last year, as this still represented the most appropriate basis for the Authority.

Having considered the report, the Authority: -

62. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) the Capital Programme and Vehicle Programme for 2014/2015 as set out in Appendix A be approved;
- (ii) the Prudential Indicators for the years 2014/2015 to 2016/2017 as set out in Appendix B, and specifically the Authorised Limit for External Debt of £54.828m and the Operational Boundary for External Debt of £49.828m for 2014/2015 be approved; and
- (iii) the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision Statement set out in Section 2.12 of Appendix 1 be approved.

## **Revenue Budget 2014/2015 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/2015 to 2016/2017**

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority and the Finance Officer submitted a report presenting the Revenue Estimates for 2014/2015, the Authority's Council Tax Requirement for 2014/2015, the Precept required to be levied on the District Councils in Tyne and Wear for 2014/2015 and an updated Medium Term Financial Strategy Statement.

The Finance Officer reported that the final Finance Settlement was issued on 5 February 2014 and this confirmed the position which had been presented to the Authority at its meeting in January. The Revenue Spending Power for the Authority would reduce by £2.077m (3.8%) in 2014/2015 to £52.302m compared to an adjusted £54.379m in 2013/2014.

The report detailed the total budget gap for 2014/2015 of £1.991m after taking into account final grant changes, £1.151m of cost pressures and planned IRMP actions saving £0.632m. This also reflected the revised assessment of business rate income and the increase in council tax precept income of £0.449m due to a growth in the council tax base. The budget gap for 2014/2015 was part of the overall £8.8m gap identified over the next three years which was covered by the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Given the budgetary situation, a review of frontline services had been unavoidable and at the meeting of the Fire Authority in January, approval had been given to the implementation of a number of reviews associated with the IRMP but at this initial stage, no efficiencies from these reviews had been built into the budget for 2014/2015. Referring to Appendix E which showed the movement in earmarked reserves and provisions, the Finance Officer highlighted that the major change in the reserve position was the transfer of funds from the development to organisational change reserve. Earmarked reserves of approximately £6m in total over the next three years would allow the Authority to set a balanced budget whilst savings from the IRMP actions were fully implemented and realised.

It was considered that level of general fund balances was required, it represented 7.25% of the proposed revenue budget and was within the appropriate limits. The proposed net budget for 2014/2015 was £51.858m and the Authority had received confirmation of the Council Tax Base from the district councils which stood at £19.538m and would account for 38% of the revenue budget. The Authority's local share of business rates income had been notified as £4.090m.

The Chairman stated that he had written to Brandon Lewis MP with regard to the easing of the threshold for increasing council tax before a referendum was triggered but he had not received a positive reply.

Councillor N Forbes commented that the Authority had lobbied hard for resource equalisation to be fully restored to at least its 2013/2014 level and it was extremely disappointing that this factor which underpinned fairness within the funding system had not been accepted by the Government. The message from Government was that they were incentivising growth but this was not something which was in the Authority's control.

As well as the existing reduction and that planned for 2015/2016, the Chancellor had indicated that funding cuts would extend to 2017/2018 at least and Councillor N Forbes stated that the Institute for Fiscal Studies anticipated that 60% of all government funding reductions were still to come. This was a matter of extreme concern for the future financial situation of the Authority.

Councillor N Forbes referred to paragraph 3.19 of Appendix 1 which explicitly set out how earmarked reserves would be reduced by £10m over the next three years. The Authority did not want to run reserves down to nothing and then be unable to respond to risks such as business rate appeals, costs of early retirement and severance etc. The maintaining of adequate reserves which would allow the Authority to manage and respond to matters such as this was a crucial part of the financial strategy of the Authority.

With regard to the reduction in reserves, Councillor Haley noted that some of the reductions were due to the new station being built at Marley Park and a similar approach would potentially be needed for any other new stations and he asked at what point the level of resources may become dangerously low.

The Finance Officer confirmed that there was a specifically earmarked reserve for special purposes and the development reserve had been allocated to support the Capital Programme which included the new fire station. Consideration needed to be given to how each area would be supported and how other sources of income such as capital receipts could be used. The Chief Fire Officer added that each year there was a financial assessment of allocated reserves and any large allocation for the rebuilding of a fire station would come before Members for their consideration.

Accordingly the Authority: -

63. RESOLVED that: -

- (a) the revised estimate for 2013/2014, as summarised at Appendix A be noted;
- (b) the proposed Revenue Estimates for 2014/2015, as summarised at Appendix A, be approved;
- (c) the Projected Pensions Account 2014/2015 detailed at Appendix B be noted;
- (d) the associated risks and their mitigation as set out in Appendix C be noted;
- (e) the updated position on the General Fund Balance (Appendix D) and Earmarked Reserves (Appendix E) be approved;

- (f) the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy Statement for 2014/2015 to 2017/2018 detailed at Appendix F be noted;
- (g) the Council Tax base of 19,538,109 (known as Item T) for the year 2014/2015, as notified by the billing authorities within Tyne and Wear under the new regulations, be noted;
- (h) the acceptance of the Council Tax Freeze Grant and a Council Tax freeze for 2014/2015 be approved;
- (i) the amounts for the Authority for the year 2014/2015, which represent a Council Tax freeze for 2014/2015, in accordance with Sections 42A to 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended, be approved as follows: -

- (i) £64.321,621 - being the aggregate of the amounts which the Authority estimates for the items set out in Section 42A(2)(a) to (d) of the Act;
- (ii) £44,783,512 - being the aggregate of the amounts which the Authority estimates for the items set out in Section 42A(3)(a) to (b) adjusted for item of the Act;
- (iii) £19,538,109 - being the amount by which the aggregate at (i) above exceeds the aggregate at (ii) above, calculated by the Authority in accordance with Section 42A(A) of the Act, as its Council Tax Requirement for the year, Item R in the formula in Section 42B of the Act;
- (iv) £73.1600 - being the amount at (iii) (Item R) above divided by the Council Tax Base (Item T), calculated by the Authority in accordance with Section 42B(1) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year; and

(v) **Valuation Bands**

|          | <b>£</b>        |   |
|----------|-----------------|---|
| <b>A</b> | <b>48.7733</b>  | being the amount given by multiplying the amount at (iv) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation and divided by the number which that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the Authority in accordance with Section 47(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands. |
| <b>B</b> | <b>56.9022</b>  |   |
| <b>C</b> | <b>65.0311</b>  |   |
| <b>D</b> | <b>73.1600</b>  |   |
| <b>E</b> | <b>89.4178</b>  |   |
| <b>F</b> | <b>105.6756</b> |   |
| <b>G</b> | <b>121.9333</b> |   |
| <b>H</b> | <b>146.3200</b> |   |

- (j) it be noted that under Section 52ZB of the Local Government Finance Act, the Authority's relevant basic amount of council tax for 2014/2015 was not excessive in accordance with the principles determined under Section 52ZC(1) of the Act (i.e. no referendum is required); and
- (k) it be approved that in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the billing authorities within the area of this authority be issued with precepts in the amount of £19,538,109 for the financial year beginning 1 April 2014, the amount of the respective precepts to be issued to each billing authority's area in accordance with Sections 42A to 48 of the 1992 Act.

### **IRMP Review of the Operational Response Model – Motion by North Tyneside Council and Petition submitted to Sunderland City Council**

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report informing Members of a motion approved by North Tyneside Council and a petition presented to Sunderland City Council regarding proposals approved by the Authority at its meeting on 20 January 2014, and requesting the Authority to determine its response.

The Deputy Clerk's representative reported that a petition had also been received from concerned citizens who wished the Fire Authority to protect appliances at Swalwell Community Fire Station.

The Authority were informed that North Tyneside Council had considered and approved the following motion at an Extraordinary meeting of the Council on 23 January 2014:

"This Council registers its opposition to any proposals which include the closure of Wallsend Fire Station

1. We call upon the Fire Authority to go back to the drawing board and reconsider options available, if necessary using part of their substantial reserves to allow time to complete this process.
2. We further request the Elected Mayor to launch an all party campaign to protect Wallsend Fire Station, especially in its strategic position to serve the whole borough and beyond.
3. We further request that the Mayor, in liaison with the Group Leaders of the Council, contacts the Conservative and Liberal coalition government and Eric Pickles in particular and registers our disgust at the public sector spending cuts and in particular the cuts being forced upon the Tyne and Wear Fire Authority."

A petition had also been submitted to the meeting of Sunderland City Council which had taken place on 29 January 2014. The petition had 47 signatories, all but one of which were elected members from the majority party represented on the Council, and was presented in the following terms:

“We the undersigned, petition the Mayor to convene an extraordinary meeting as soon as is practicable to discuss the following Notice of Motion:

This Council requests that the Tyne and Wear Fire Authority revisits its decision and consultation process that determined the future closure of Sunderland Central Fire Station.”

The Authority was asked to consider the motion and petition and how it would like to respond.

Councillor Price stated that he believed the Authority had made a grave error in voting for Option 3 at the meeting on 20 January. The Authority had always made clear that the decision was being forced upon them but the local MPs, the local councils and the public were against closing fire stations and Option 3 was too much, too fast.

Councillor Price said that Sunderland Central Fire Station had opened in May 1993 to replace the station on High Street West and the current location covered the city centre, the port and the Bridges shopping centre. He referred to the Fire Service website which says that the station covers several local council wards. It also said that the staff were the station’s main assets and that they undertake a number of community safety projects including Phoenix, Prince’s Trust and Young Firefighters. The current facility at Sunderland Central was accessible to all members of the community, located close to a bus station, three metro stations and was easy to reach by public transport.

It was highlighted that one area which had changed significantly since the opening of Sunderland Central fire station was the Vaux site. Major investments taking place both at Vaux and at Farringdon Row would require a more centrally based fire station to protect the new developments. Councillor Price catalogued some of the major incidents which had taken place in Sunderland over recent years and that had been dealt with by appliances from Sunderland Central fire station, emphasising that computer modelling could not predict such events. The recent helicopter crash in Glasgow and the current flooding in the south of the country only served to illustrate the unpredictable nature of the demands placed on fire and rescue services. The public were concerned about the possibility of increased risk and the certain increase in response times resulting from closures, whilst expressing frustration with Government cuts.

Councillor Price went on to say that not only was Sunderland Central the busiest station in the Sunderland council area, it was the third busiest in Tyne and Wear and responded to 3.5 call outs each day. The closure of the fire station would only save the Fire Authority £170,000 a year and it was a valuable community resource. No one could predict emergencies and it was important to retain stations at all costs.

Councillor Price proposed that, in line with the wishes of North Tyneside and Sunderland Councils, station closures be put on hold for at least three years to allow for additional negotiation to take place.

Councillor M Forbes stated that at the last meeting of the Authority, she had voted against Option 3 as this included the closure of Sunderland Central, Wallsend and East Gosforth stations and she felt that the closure of any station was a step too far. She stated that she felt that the basic principle of closing a central fire station made no sense when the savings were only £170,000 per year. She highlighted that this year, the Authority had an underspend of £800,000 and that there were other ways of achieving savings rather than closing fire stations.

Councillor M Forbes added that Sunderland Central station covered the high risk areas of the city centre. It had been made clear that speed of response would be reduced as a result of the closure, and she felt that this potentially this could lead to a slower initial and second response. She considered that this would place an unnecessary and undesirable pressure on firefighters and was pleased to support Councillor Price's proposal.

Councillor N Forbes commented that the Notice of Motion and the petition showed the general shock which people were feeling at the level of cuts which the Fire Authority faced. It was clear that Tyne and Wear was being disproportionately affected by cuts and that this was having grave consequences. All Members were aware of the magnificent work being undertaken in local fire stations but it was important to recognise that none of the stations operated in isolation and working at a Tyne and Wear level enabled the Authority to achieve the necessary scale needed for the diversity of specialisms and expertise which existed across the service area.

He also highlighted that there were a large number of calls made for smaller incidents such as rubbish fires and fires on wasteland and the understanding of risk had to be balanced against the resources available. Councillor N Forbes stated that no one wanted to have to make these decisions but the Authority had to do the best it could given the position it was in. Councillor N Forbes suggested that, in order to address the real and acknowledged concerns of Members and the public, the Authority should request the Chief Fire Officer to bring forward an implementation plan for the IRMP as soon as was practicable. This implementation plan should be for a three year period and as part of this that station closures should only be considered as a last resort and only in the final stages of the implementation plan. He also proposed that the IRMP be revisited annually by the Authority in the light of any changing financial settlements and that the Authority should continue to lobby Government and opposition MPs for a fairer financial settlement and also continue to explore additional sources of funding.

Councillor Mole expressed his thanks to officers from the Fire service who had come to speak to councillors at Gateshead and the clarity which they had provided on the IRMP. He supported what Councillor N Forbes had said and emphasised the need to ensure that colleagues in the district councils understood what was happening and that Members continue to support and lobby on the Authority's behalf. It was acknowledged that money was short but these sorts of cuts were not the way to address the deficit.



Councillor Burdis spoke to the Notice of Motion from North Tyneside Council and highlighted that they had stressed the need to lobby the Government and local MPs and that they were mindful of the reasons why the Authority was in this situation. She stated that she was proud of the work done on community safety and the way that the service had moved forward, and it was an injustice that such savage cuts were being imposed by a coalition government which had no feeling for public services.

Councillor Harrison stated that the understanding of the importance of the service was why North Tyneside Council felt so passionately about the situation. The Council recognised the financial pressures which the service was under but contrasted this with the funding which was being offered to flooded areas in the south of the country. The Notice of Motion recognised the pressures which were being dealt with but the risk management approach did not recognise the implications of further development of the north bank of the Tyne. The fire station at Wallsend was in an area of high risk and high deprivation and that was why the Council felt compelled to act.

Councillor Harrison went on to say that, whilst acknowledging the matters raised by Councillor Price, he believed that what Councillor N Forbes had proposed was the best way forward. It was necessary to make the planned changes absolutely clear and to continue lobbying in the right places.

Councillor M Forbes indicated that her prime objection to Councillor N Forbes' proposal was that it did not remove the option of closures altogether and said that she would like that element to be removed from the package and the possibility of closures reviewed if all other efforts failed.

Referring to the Sir Ken Knight review, Councillor M Forbes stated that this suggested there were elements of waste still to be addressed and until these were fully explored, she did not feel that closures should be included within the options as these would be irreversible.

Councillor Stephenson was appalled that the Authority found itself in this position, which was not of its own making, and that this was a national issue regarding the funding process for local fire services. Decisions had not been taken lightly and it was conceded that the Authority operated across Tyne and Wear, and what was an issue in one area, was an issue for all Members.

No one wanted to close fire stations but Councillor Stephenson queried where the Authority could go if the funds were not available. She believed that Councillor N Forbes' proposal covered all the areas in Tyne and Wear and looked collectively at what was being faced. The processes which were outlined could not be any clearer and regardless of what it was facing, the Authority was bigger than any one of the councils individually. Councillor Stephenson considered that Councillor N Forbes had presented the best option for preserving the fire service in Tyne and Wear and supported his proposal.

Councillor N Forbes commented that the Sir Ken Knight review did not take an appropriate view of what risk was and made recommendations based purely on the number of incidents attended, but these were numbers which had reduced due to the educational and fire preventative work of Tyne and Wear's firefighters. It was because the Authority had made efficiency changes over the last ten years that it now had no flexibility to make changes without huge impacts being felt across the service. He also reminded Members that there were still savings of £3.5m to be found on top of those identified by the IRMP. He stated that he believed he had proposed a framework in which the Authority could move forward.

Councillor Price noted that the main difference between his proposal and that put forward by Councillor N Forbes was the timing. Councillor N Forbes' proposal included the implementation of fire station closures to continue as of now and Councillor Price stressed that his proposal would put any closures on hold for three years to try and raise financing through other sources. Councillor Price stated that he would not want to go back to the people he represented and say that within three years, their local fire station could close. He accepted that the Authority had to move forward with Option 1 but believed that Options 2 and 3 were a step too far.

Councillor Ord asked if Councillor Price's proposal would take the Authority to the financial 'cliff edge' which had been discussed at the January meeting. The Chief Fire Officer replied that the future finances of the Authority were based on any of the three options which had been on the table and new proposals would have to be considered very carefully. There would undoubtedly be a financial impact arising from Councillor Price's proposal but it would not lead to the cliff edge scenario.

Councillor Renton echoed the comments of colleagues in saying that the Authority had received an unreasonable settlement. The Tyne and Wear service had been efficiently and well run over a number of years during which time fire stations had been closed and rebuilt and risk and response adjusted accordingly. He supported Councillor N Forbes' proposal.

Councillor Wright moved to suspend Standing Orders B22 and B25 and accordingly it was: -

64. RESOLVED that Standing Orders B22 and B25 be suspended for the remainder of the meeting to allow the consideration of a motion.

Councillor Bob Price moved, seconded by Councillor Padgett: -

“that the implementation of any options for the closure of fire stations are put on hold for a period of no less than three years so as to allow the fire authority, our local MPs, our local authorities and the general public to continue its lobbying of central government for the extra funding or alternative sources of funding to protect these valuable fire authority assets.”

Councillor Nick Forbes moved, seconded by Councillor Burdis, the following amendment: -

Delete all after 'that the' and replace with: -

"...Fire Authority requests the Chief Fire Officer to bring forward an implementation plan for the IRMP which includes the following considerations:

- The IRMP implementation plan should be for a minimum three year period
- Station closures will only be considered as a last resort
- Any station closures should only be in the final stages of the implementation plan
- The Fire Authority will revisit the IRMP annually in light of future financial settlements from Government
- The Fire Authority will continue to lobby Government and Opposition MPs for a fairer financial settlement
- The Fire Authority will continue to explore additional sources of funding to alleviate its financial pressures.

On the amendment being put to the vote it was declared to be carried with 10 votes for and 5 votes against.

The amendment was put as the substantive motion and was declared to be carried with 13 votes for and 2 against.

Accordingly the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority: -

65. RESOLVED that the Chief Fire Officer be requested to bring forward an implementation plan for the IRMP which includes the following considerations:

- that the IRMP implementation plan should be for a minimum three year period;
- that station closures will only be considered as a last resort;
- that any station closures should only be in the final stages of the implementation plan
- that the Fire Authority will revisit the IRMP annually in light of future financial settlements from Government
- that the Fire Authority will continue to lobby Government and Opposition MPs for a fairer financial settlement
- that the Fire Authority will continue to explore additional sources of funding to alleviate its financial pressures.

## **Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation Order) 2006**

66. RESOLVED that in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 the public be excluded during consideration of the remaining business as it was considered to involve a likely disclosure of information relating to an individual, which was likely to reveal the identity of an individual, the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the Authority holding that information) or to consultations or negotiations in connection with labour relations matters arising between the Authority and employees of the Authority (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraph 1, 2, 3 and 4).

(Signed) T WRIGHT  
Chairman

### **Note:**

The above minutes comprise those relating to items of business during which the meeting was open to the public.

Additional minutes in respect of other items are included in Part II.