



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 11 DECEMBER 2023 at
10.30am.

Item 3

Present:

Councillor Tye in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Dodds, Haley, Hunter, Johnson, Kilgour, Patterson, Smith, Warne,
and Woodwark.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors
Burdis, Keegan, Usher, Welsh and Wood.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

33. RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Meeting of the Authority held on 20
November 2023, Part I be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Bonfire Period 2023

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority) submitted a report to
inform Members of the outcome of the Bonfire Period 2023.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the 'Bonfire Period' was between
1st and 6th November inclusive and was traditionally the busiest time of the year for
the Service and partners for deliberate fires and associated anti-social behaviour
(ASB) related issues.

District Delivery Teams (DDT) began the delivery of schools' education sessions on the week commencing 2nd October. Using both internal and partner data, the Service identified and rated the schools across Tyne and Wear using the red/amber/green rating system (RAG). This allowed prioritisation to be given to those deemed at a higher risk of ASB related issues.

Members were then advised that Corporate Communications worked closely with partner agencies including Northumberland Fire and Rescue, Northumbria Police and the North East Ambulance Service to deliver joint messages around the bonfire period.

The Service also liaised with local authority contacts to agree increased refuse uplifts for all areas of Tyne and Wear. Removing combustible material from the streets of the community prior to it being ignited, was a key strategy in reducing the occurrence of fires and anti-social behaviour.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer then referred Members to Section 4 of the report and explained that the Service's proactive ASB prevention work increased, with more patrols by crews to identify areas at higher risk over the period.

Using a combination of local intelligence and historic data, crews increased patrols in known hotspots in order to identify stockpiles of materials that could be used to build bonfires, as well as insecure derelict properties and vehicles that could pose a risk of being involved in fire.

In addition to this, DCFO Nicholson and ACFO McVay were accompanied by two Fire Authority members, the Chair of the Fire Authority Councillor Phil Tye and Councillor Gary Haley on the 5th November. DCFO Nicholson along with Councillor Haley visited Stations in the North and West district of the Service. ACFO McVay along with Councillor Tye visited Stations in the East district of the Service. Both Councillors also visited Fire Control at Service Headquarters.

Members were then advised that following a pre-determined model, Fire control numbers were increased on the 3rd, 4th and 5th November from 1400hrs to 2300hrs. These timings centered on times of peak demand. During these times, pre-arranged SPATE mobilising procedures were ready to be invoked if deemed necessary.

As expected, SPATE was invoked on the 5th and remained in place until it was stood down at 2200hrs.

In total, between 1st and 6th of November, the Service took 829 calls. On the 5th, the Service took 382 calls, of which crews were dispatched to 153.

DCFO Nicholson explained that the Service continued to work with local partners in Trading Standards and Northumbria Police to monitor firework sales and illegal activity.

The Service worked with partners within Northumbria Police to seize a significant quantity of fireworks from a domestic premises in South Tyneside, these were part of an ongoing police investigation. Fireworks were handed to the Service by a secondary school in the region after it was found that a pupil had been selling them to other students. This was investigated by the police.

Members were then referred to the incident statistics in Section 7 of the report and were asked to note that whilst there had been a reduction in the number of attacks on fire crews from 7 to 5, any attack on an emergency worker was not appropriate and that this number should be zero. Thankfully, none of these resulted in injury to crews or significant damage to any appliance or equipment.

The Chair commented that the partnership work with LA's had been very successful and expressed his deep concerns about counterfeit goods being sold.

Councillor Haley expressed his thanks to staff for the time spent with him on the evening and questioned whether the 5 attacks on firefighters were in similar areas.

DCFO Nicholson agreed to circulate this further detail to Members' information.

Councillor Dodds commented that he had written about the illegal sale of fireworks on behalf of the Standards Committee and that he would also raise it at the next meeting of the LGA as this was not acceptable and had gone on for many years.

Councillor Woodward referred to the statistics detailed in Section 7 of the report and commented that overall, the direction of travel was good however there was still more work to be done.

34. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) The contents of the report be noted and endorsed; and
- (ii) Further reports be received as appropriate.

Budget Planning Framework 2023/2025

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority) and the Finance Director submitted a joint report setting out the key high level considerations in drafting the Revenue Budget for 2024/2025 and the longer term financial planning considerations for the Authority, which included:

- Identifying the main factors influencing the development of the Authority's financial plans into the medium term and setting out specifically the Budget Planning Framework for 2024/2025; and
- Setting out the context and planning assumptions used for drafting the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 which would be formally considered later in the budget cycle.

The Finance Director explained that there was an error within the report in that CPI was 6.7% and not 6.3% which was well above the Government target of 2%. In addition, Government had issued a Finance Policy Statement since the papers had been published.

The Authority based the MTFs on the one year Settlement provided by the Government for 2023/2024 which saw the grant funding level for 2023/2024 increase partly as a result of the continuation of the new service delivery grant of £0.629m. This grant had not been included in future years as it was unknown if this was permanent grant funding at the present time. The Settlement for 2024/2025 should confirm this position. The Authority was projecting to face a cumulative funding shortfall of £2.920m by the end of 2026/2027, which would improve if the service delivery grant funding was retained. The MTFs were continually reviewed and updated to reflect changing circumstances and latest known information, however due to there not being enough information to build a more meaningful resource projection over the medium term, an updated MTFs would be presented to Authority in February 2024.

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) published a report in November 2023 and in summary they stated that they would not be complacent, as inflation was still too high and would be watching closely to see if further increases in interest rates was needed. They indicated that they would keep interest rates high enough for long enough to get inflation back to the 2% government target. They also expected inflation to fall further in this financial year to around 4.5%, and a continuation of falling inflation towards its 2% target next year.

The Finance Director went on to say that the Chancellor delivered his Autumn Statement on 22 November 2023 however the actual grant funding level for the Fire Service would not be known until the Local Government Finance Settlement was published on 19th December.

Members were reminded that for 2023/2024 Fire Authorities were allowed additional flexibility to increase the Fire Precept by £5 on Band D (when previous increased limits had been capped at 1.99%).

The current MTFs approved in February 2023 assumed the £5 increase was applicable for 2023/24 only and that the lower limit of 1.99% would apply to future years.

Having received the Finance Policy Statement, Members were advised that the £5 increase on Band D properties had been removed however a cap of 2.99% was to be applied. As the Finance Director had assumed a 1.99% cap, there was still some additional flexibility.

The MTFs continued to assume little growth in the council tax base until more information was known and with regards to Business Rates, the impact of the current economic climate on Business Rates was likely to continue into 2024/2025 in terms of collectability and business survival. The position was being monitored in conjunction with the Tyne and Wear Local Authorities and may require adjustment once the Service had more details for this current year and for the estimated income for the coming financial year 2024/2025.

With regards to pay and pensions, the green book April 2023 pay increase of £1,925 on all salary scale points up to scp 43 and 3.88% on those scales above had been agreed. The grey book two year pay offer for operational fire-fighting staff of 7% from July 2022 and 5% from July 2023 had also been accepted and implemented.

For 2024/2025 a provision of 3% had been factored into the budget planning framework for both grey and green book pay awards. The position would however be kept under review throughout the budget process and any pay award in excess of these estimated levels would become a spending pressure for the Authority to manage.

Members were reminded that all Fire Fighters were now in the 2015 scheme which had a current rate of 28.8%. The Service had been informed that changes to employer contribution rates resulting from the 2020 valuations would now be delayed from April 2023 to April 2024. At this point in time there had been no further update to the rate and when it would come into effect.

In relation to the specific Fire Pension Grant of almost £2.6m which was allocated in 2023/2024, it still remained a specific grant in 2023/2024 despite the Government indicating this funding was to form part of the general grant settlement. At this stage it was assumed that it would remain a specific grant for 2024/2025 but this would not be confirmed until the Local Government Settlement was received. The Finance Director explained that he would monitor this situation carefully to ensure that the full allocation had been received, should the grant be merged into the Settlement.

The Finance Director explained that in relation to Pension Remedy, it was anticipated that there would be additional costs associated however it still remained unclear at this stage what these would be or where the additional cost burden would lie. Approximately 600 Members had been impacted however the Service was now in a good position to have the processes in place in order to pay the correct amended pension entitlements for those affected.

With regards to the apprenticeship levy, Members were advised that the cost in 2023/2024 continued to be in the region of £0.160m. The Authority had now put effective arrangements in place to fully utilise the government's levy funds made available each year to the Authority and the outcomes were now reflected in the 2023/2024 base budget, which had helped reduce the budgeted cost of training for recruits and other staff.

Councillor Haley commented that it was concerning that the Pension Grant may potentially be subsumed into the grant settlement as it could be lost over the years and additionally commented that the assumptions that Government had made in relation to the collection fund had been unrealistic, yet there had been a surplus this year.

In response to a further question from Councillor Haley in relation to Council Tax Collection and Business Rates, the Finance Director explained that the Service was in regular contact with the district councils however further information would not be known until January. The Finance Director went on to say that the Business Rates Income had historically been £4.1m which then reduced significantly at the height of covid when the Government did step in and provided a grant for the deficit funding. The levels the government were forecasting for business rates were seen to be optimistic and the Authority would only know the actual income in late January 2024.

The Chair commented that the withdrawal of the £5 levy in relation to Council Tax had been disappointing and therefore the Chief and Chairs had wrote to Government in this regard.

35. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) The proposed Budget Planning Framework summarised at Section 8 of the report be agreed which would guide the preparation of the Revenue Budget for 2024/2025; and
- (ii) It be noted that the MTFS 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 would be presented to Authority in February 2024 as part of the budget setting process.

(Signed) P. TYE
Chairperson