

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 19 DECEMBER 2011 at
11.00 am.

Present:

Councillor B Heron in the Chair

Councillors Bell, M Forbes, N Forbes, Haley, Mortimer, Mulvenna, Padgett, Renton, Stephenson, Trueman and Watters.

In Attendance:

Steve Nicklin (District Auditor)
Lynn Hunt (Audit Commission)

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Ahad, Gambling, Mole and Ord.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

51. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Authority, Part I held on 21 November 2011, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Annual Audit Letter 2010/2011

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority and the Finance Officer submitted a joint report providing Members with an outline of the content of the Audit Commission's Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for 2010/2011.

Steve Nicklin outlined the highlights of the report to members and explained that an unqualified audit opinion on the Authority's 2010/2011 financial statements had been issued by the auditors together with an unqualified Value for Money conclusion.

Members were referred to the Annual Audit Letter (Appendix 1) to note that the Authority's finance officers had coped well with the significant accounting changes that compliance with the requirements of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) introduced during the year and that the Authority had a good track record of delivering to budget and in making efficiencies.

Steve then went on to highlight the fact that the Authority was facing a 25% reduction in formula grant funding over the four year period covering 2011/2015 and acknowledged that this would present challenges. Alternative models of service delivery and innovative ways of working would therefore need to be considered.

The Vice Chairman referred to the benchmarking clubs which the Authority participated in and asked if any particular issues were being highlighted. Assistant Chief Fire Officer Brindle explained that much of the present benchmarking related to back-office functions as a result of the reviews which were currently being undertaken.

Councillor N Forbes then went on to say that the Authority consistently performed highly and that both Members and Officers should be proud of the way in which it was run. He did not feel that the successes were often promoted to the degree in which they should be.

The unintended consequence of being a tightly ran Authority was that there was little flexibility and relatively inefficiencies to be driven out which meant that the next 3-4 years would be extremely difficult given that excellent value for money had already been achieved.

The Chairman and Vice Chairman, on behalf of the Authority thanked the Finance Officer and his team for their outstanding work and also thanked the Audit Commission for the way in which they handled the audit work.

52. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the contents of the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for 2010/2011 be noted; and
- (ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

The Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2012/2013

The Chief Fire Officer and the Finance Officer submitted a joint report providing Members with information arising from the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2012/13 which was announced on 8 December 2011. This followed on from the Indicative Settlement for 2012/13 provided by the government on 7 February 2011.

Malcolm Page spoke to the report and reminded that written responses to the provisional settlement were required by 16 January 2012.

Referring to section 3.1 of the report Malcolm advised that the Authority's 'revenue spending power' would reduce by £1.095m or 1.94% in 2012/13 to £55.441m compared to the 2011/12 position of £56.536. The Authority's formula grant reduction made up most of this figure which was to reduce by £1.095m or 3.4% on 2012/13 from £32.191m to £31.096m.

The overall grant reduction of 3.4% in the provisional settlement remained unchanged although the Government had included the ongoing Council Tax Freeze Grant into the formula grant totals. This indicating that the Government had benefited from the increase in Business rates income by funding the ongoing Council Tax Freeze Grant from this increase rather than passing this on to local government.

Members were asked to note that the 3.4% formula grant loss of £1.095 was after floor damping of £2.763m had been taken into account. The loss of formula grant for Fire Authorities was limited to a 3.4% reduction in grant. The Authority's formula grant for 2012/13 was confirmed to be £31.096m after application of the floor. Without the floor, the grant reduction calculated would have been greater at £28.332, a reduction of 12% which was the largest percentage grant reduction of all Fire Authorities in the Country (as shown in appendix 1 of the report).

Malcolm explained that the Government intended to adopt a new distributional system for grant funding system from 2013/14 so it remained unclear how the Authority would fare in the last two years of the spending review period.

Members acknowledged that the main losers in formula grant changes were the metropolitan fire authorities whose formula grant losses averaged 9.45%. The scale of these losses being of great concern to the Authority. Lobbying was therefore being undertaken regarding this unfairness as some Authorities had even seen an increase in their budget.

In response to a question from Councillor Haley asking for the Finance Officers view on the Council Tax Freeze, Members were reminded that the Freeze would generate

around £700,000 income for the Authority however this was a decision for Members. Any increase must be capped by 4%.

Councillor N Forbes raised the issue of Lobbying and commented that he was extremely disappointed that the issues raised relating to the unequal impact had not been listened to or taken on board.

As a result of this, the outlook for the following years was extremely bleak and members recognised that they would be faced with some difficult decisions.

Further Lobbying would therefore be carried out at every given opportunity.

53. RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and the necessary delegation to the Chief Fire Officer and Finance Officer be approved.

Local Government Pension Scheme Consultation

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report presenting a response for consideration by Members on the consultation covering proposed increases to employee contribution rates and changes to scheme accrual rates appertaining to the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGSP).

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Hindmarch spoke to the report and referred Members to section 3.9 which gave a proposed response to the following five questions:-

- Do the proposals meet the policy and objectives to deliver the necessary savings in the LGPS?
- Are there any consequences or aspects of the proposals that have not been fully addressed?
- Is there a tariff or alternative measures which consultees think will help to further minimise any opt outs from the scheme?
- Are there equality issues that could result in any individual groups being disproportionately affected by the proposals? If so, what are considered to be the nature and scale of that disproportionate affect? What remedies would you suggest?
- Within the consultation period, consultee's views are invited on the prospects of introducing into the LGPS a link with state pension age as recommended to the Government in Lord Hutton's report.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that proposed changes were highly sensitive and contentious given that the LGPS was currently well funded and was actually offsetting the cash deficit in other schemes over the next few years based on the current level of membership being maintained. As a result proposed changes did not appear to be based on any rational assessment of cost of the scheme.

54. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the contents of the report be noted;

- (ii) the Chief Fire Officer submit a response to the consultation in line with the comments contained within the report, subject to any changes by Members; and
- (iii) Further reports be received as appropriate.

Fireworks and Bonfire Incidents 1- 6 November 2011

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report to inform Members on the incident activity levels, intervention programmes and incidences of anti-social behaviour (ASB) within the Authority area over the bonfire period covering 1st to the 6th November 2011.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer T. Capling outlined the report and reminded Members that as bonfire was traditionally the busiest period of the year a community safety campaign was undertaken during the weeks prior.

To influence young people staff developed a risk based programme to target secondary schools to deliver firework and bonfire safety messages. A new educational bonfire DVD was also produced.

A Service-wide poster and leaflet campaign was carried out and a public relations campaign was established. Feedback from these initiatives had been extremely positive.

Members were then advised of incident statistics in particular the number of attacks on Firefighters which had reduced down to 3, which was the lowest number of attacks on Firefighters recorded over the past 5 years.

Councillor Renton commented that he was amazed to see that explosives were still sold in shops and suggested that moves be made to prohibit this.

The Chief Fire Officer agreed and explained that whilst the Service did carry out retail inspections, it was the illegal sale of fireworks which was often the problem.

Councillor N Forbes then went on to say that 3 attacks on Firefighters were too many and that a zero tolerance approach needed to be maintained.

Members welcomed the value of the work which had been carried out within Local Authorities and commented that they should be informed of statistics to emphasise the impact which they had made and also help target future resources.

Members expressed their thanks to the individuals involved in the DVD and also agreed to feed information back to their constituent authority.

55. RESOLVED that:-

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

Correspondence List

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a list of items of correspondence that had been received since the last meeting of the Authority, and were not subject to a separate report.

56. RESOLVED that the correspondence list be received for information.

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

57. 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 contains exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the Authority holding that information) or information relating to consultations/negotiations in connection with any labour matter arising between the Authority and employees of the Authority (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraphs 3 and 4).

(Signed) B HERON
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.