

Item No. 5 (i)

**Tyne and Wear Fire
and Rescue Authority**



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 MARCH 2024 at
10.30am.

Present:

Councillor Tye in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Haley, Hunter, Johnson, Usher, Kilgour, Patterson, Warne, Welsh,
Wood and Woodwark.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors
Dodds, Mullen, Keegan and also Kim McGuinness (PCC).

Declarations of Interest

Councillors Johnson and Hunter declared a personal and prejudicial interest in
relation to Item 5 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2024-2027
Consultation Findings and withdrew from the meeting during consideration of this
item of business.

Minutes

53. RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Meeting of the Authority held on 19
February 2024, Part I be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to
it being noted that it was not recorded in the minutes that the Chairman
intended to write a letter, to the opposition member regarding attendance at
meetings which was to be agreed with Councillor Woodwark.

Annual Governance Statement 2023-2024

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (the Clerk to the Authority) and the Finance Director submitted a joint report to present the Annual Governance Statement 2023/2024 and Code of Corporate Governance 2024 to the Authority for approval. ACFO McVay advised that for the Authority to meet the requirements of the Regulations an annual governance review had been conducted and an Annual Governance Statement 2023/2024 (Appendix A) prepared for publication following approval. Members were advised that this had been to Governance Committee prior to the meeting for consideration.

A key component of the Authority's governance framework was its Code of Corporate Governance, which aligned with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016. The Code of Governance had been updated for 2024 following the annual governance review (Appendix B).

ACFO McVay then referred Members to Section 2.7 of the report and explained that the good governance framework assisted the Authority in developing and shaping an informed approach to governance, aimed at achieving the highest standards in a measured and proportionate way by demonstrating compliance with the 7 good governance principles (as detailed within the report).

Members were advised that the review of the effectiveness of the Authority's governance framework confirmed the arrangements in place during 2023/2024 continued to be fit for purpose and good assurance could be given that the framework was operating effectively in practice.

The review had identified five new improvement actions for completion during 2024/2025 and the improvement action plan could be viewed in the Annual Governance Statement 2023/2024.

ACFO McVay explained that the previous Annual Governance Statement 2022/2023 contained four legacy improvement actions for completion during 2023/2024 and that these had now been completed.

Members were advised that the outcome of the annual governance review should satisfy the Authority that there were appropriate governance arrangements in operation and that through the delivery of the improvement action plan during 2024/2025, the Authority would enhance its governance arrangements.

This statement was intended to provide assurance that there was an ongoing process for reviewing the Authority's governance framework and its operation in practice.

54. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) The Annual Governance Statement for 2023/2024 be approved; and
- (ii) The revised Code of Corporate Governance 2024 be approved.

Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2024-2027 Consultation Findings

Councillors Johnson and Hunter withdrew from the meeting.

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (the Clerk to the Authority) submitted a report to present Members of the Fire Authority with the results of the formal public consultation on the draft Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2024-2027 and to seek agreement to the CRMP proposals.

CFO Heath advised Members that following the presentation of the draft CRMP 2024-2027 to Fire Authority on 11 December 2023, and Fire Authority approval to commence consultation, an eight-week period of formal public consultation and engagement was held between 12 December 2023 and 6 February 2024.

Consultation had been conducted in accordance with HM Government Consultation Principles 2018, resulting in a proportionate, targeted and concise consultation programme that formed part of the wider engagement piece with the response being broadly positive in relation to 24 proposals.

A wide range of methods were used to communicate, engage, and consult with internal and external stakeholders during the eight-week period. 127 letters were written, there had been 19 social media posts and two press releases.

Methods included face to face meetings between Principal Officers and elected Members; watch briefings; social media posts, letters to stakeholders; and information published on the TWFRS website and intranet, including frequently asked questions.

The Service also listened to early feedback from staff and the public and adapted the approach to consultation and engagement, for example by arranging five public information sessions (one in each of the five local authority areas) and holding staff information sessions (via Teams).

If agreed by Fire Authority, one specific area that the Service would continue to engage with communities on in relation to the proposals relating to Response (day crewing of Wallsend fire station), is that the Service would as far as reasonably practicable, ensure that there were two fire appliances within North Tyneside during the period when Wallsend was not crewed. 236 of the respondents disagreed with the response element for Wallsend although it was noted that the reasons stated mostly referred to simply not agreeing rather than any data or contra evidence supporting the proposal.

Members were advised that the full Consultation Findings Report could be found at Appendix 1 and all qualitative comments could be found at Appendix C to the full consultation report.

In conclusion, no evidence was presented during the consultation period to contradict the data and information used to inform the CRMP 2024-2027 and its proposals.

Questions were then welcomed from Members.

The Chair began by commenting that it was stated within the paper that as far as reasonably practicable there would be two fire appliances within North Tyneside during the period when Wallsend was not crewed and asked if this could be expanded on.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded by advising that on any given day it was an operational decision as to where resources were allocated to and that this does flex dependant on risk, demand and other factors. As part of a previous IRMP the Authority has approved the withdrawal of 2 appliances each day between 0000 hrs and 0800 hrs based on the data and risk profile. If the current proposals are approved today work will begin to consider how the service ensures that there continued to be an adequate spread and provision of fire appliances across the whole of Tyne and Wear to meet the risks. This will include ensuring that North Tyneside continues to have the necessary resources to meet the risk and demand in that area.

The Chief Fire Officer added that the control room mobilising system would propose appliance cover moves on E Days so that there was adequate coverage across the whole of the area and this is a well embedded process already.

Councillor Warne asked what the main areas discussed were during the staff consultation and was advised that the Service had attended Wallsend Station and also held a Teams Meeting with all members of staff which included a question and answer session. Comments received varied between green book staff in relation to prevention and station based was in relation to response.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that most members of staff that had been engaged with appreciated why for the service was focussed on enhancing rope and water rescue.

Councillor Welsh then commented that during the consultation period it was mentioned that consultation took place with the Representative bodies and asked what did this consultation consist of?

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded by advising that staff recognised the need for the enhancement of rope and water safety and that their preference was to stay as a 2 2 4 duty system rather than day crewed.

Councillor Usher asked whether the Service managed to have meetings with all those Councillors or Elected Officials who requested one and was advised that yes, there were many meetings with Councillors both face to face and via Teams and conversations had also taken place with MP's. Meetings with Tyneside Council had also taken place in relation to proposals affecting North Tyneside. It was advised that every elected official who asked for a meeting or wrote in had been engaged with without exception.

Councillor Bell thanked all staff involved and also members of the community for replying to the consultation.

Councillor Bell questioned whether this was based on a need to save money, and if approved how quickly officers would act.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the proposals were not based on a need to save money and that the proposal in relation to Wallsend was because it made sense for community and Firefighter safety. The budget was managed well but it was very challenging therefore the proposals were about efficiency as a means to strengthen effectiveness and services delivered.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that in relation to the proposal for Wallsend and the timings of any changes, it was anticipated that if approved, works would begin to be implemented in the middle of June but firm up over a 3-year period.

Councillor Wood then commented that it had been stated that the CRMP was evidence and data driven and questioned how it was planned to monitor this and whether the Service was able to adapt if the risk changes.

The Chief Fire Officer responded by advising that a well established process was in place and that reviews were undertaken to see if trends were changing. Performance was tracked which allowed the authority to take action. If risk was deemed to be increasing, then the Service could and does adapt to change.

Councillor Kilgour commented that the Fire Brigades Union in their response had stated the plans for Wallsend were based on a perceived demand and not actual risk and asked if this could be expanded upon.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that demand was one factor considered but the proposal was risk based and the evidence and data supported this.

Councillor Patterson referred to paragraph 4.5 of the report in particular that 62% of respondents disagreed with the proposals relating to response. However, qualitative feedback (free text question) indicated that some respondents had not read the CRMP or had misunderstood the proposal relating to Wallsend Fire Station before completing the survey and questioned what would be done in the future, in relation to the presentation if Councillors and the public thought that Wallsend was closing.

The Chief Fire Officer responded by advising that there perhaps more that the Service could do and that information could be presented in a different way in the future, the Service would most certainly do its best. However, it was advised that changes to fire station crewing and availability was often a very emotive subject and elicits a response that if the full details that were made available were accessed and reviewed it was clear what was being proposed.

Councillor Woodwark commented that clearly there was a discussion in the wider community about the value of service however the feedback from Firefighters in North Tyneside who lived in North Tyneside believed there was going to be a loss. The Chief Fire Officer responded by advising that in relation to Wallsend it was not about closing and that whilst day crewing might not be well received, there was no loss in Service or detriment to staff or the communities they serve.

Councillor Woodwark questioned what the capacity was for if it turned out wrong and was advised that what can be done can be undone, however the focus was on rope and rescue. It was advised that the same process for determining where resources should be deployed to meet the changing risks had been utilised for a considerable period of time and had proven to be reliable and accurate.

The Chief Fire Officer assured the Authority that he would never put the service at risk and that proposals were based upon risk and safety.

Councillor Warne asked for confirmation that there would be no jobs lost and was advised that there would categorically be no job losses as a result of anything in the CRMP.

The Chair questioned whether if proposals were agreed that this would mean that four fire appliances would be unavailable at midnight. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that since the previous IRMP/CRMP an additional fire appliance had been added to the fleet taking the total number of appliances from 24 to 25 which meant in effect that against the original basis for the withdrawal of 2 fire appliances at midnight, this had actually been 1 less against the initial base line. He was advised that if the proposal was approved, the CFO had instructed that his team bring forward the subsequent proposals to ensure that prior to any further appliances being made unavailable at midnight, the use of E days and how resources are deployed is established to avoid any unnecessary withdrawal of appliances and never reaching a position where 4 appliances are withdrawn as a result of this proposal. This will include consulting with the FBU.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer added that E days were never part of the CRMP But would be considered as part of the work outlined by the CFO.

Councillor Haley thanked everyone for responding and commented that no consultation was ever perfect however it had been very thorough, and that the consultation clearly demonstrated passion for the service.

Councillor Haley went on to say that there had been a high level of support across the region even when the Authority had had to make incredibly hard decisions and that because of the stable financial position the Authority was in it was able to invest in the Service and also extra posts. The extra appliance at West Denton proved that things could be reversed as if data was around demand and risk there would be another CRMP in the future.

55. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) The findings of the consultation be noted; and
- (ii) The proposals within the CRMP 2024-2027, for implementation from April 2024 be approved.

Auditor's Annual Report 2021-2022

Councillors Johnson and Hunter returned to the meeting.

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (the Clerk to the Authority) and the Finance Director submitted a joint report to provides the Authority with full details of the Auditors Annual Report for 2021/2022 issued by the External Auditors, Mazars LLP. A copy of their independent report, was attached at Appendix A.

The Finance Director explained that in summary, the AAR was very positive, providing a strong endorsement of the financial management and governance arrangements that were in place and embedded across the Authority.

The External Auditor issued an unqualified opinion on the Authority's Financial Statements for the year ended 31st March 2022 and in addition provided detailed commentary on the Authority's arrangements for achieving Value for Money, which was a new requirement for 2021/22 onwards. Details of the auditor's findings in respect of the audit of the accounts were included in their detailed draft Audit Completion Report issued on 29th January 2024 to Governance Committee and the audit was formally completed and the Statement of Accounts for 2021/22 signed off on 22nd February 2024.

The audit fees for the year had seen a small increase from the previous year's fees of £931 to £40,925 which reflected the additional work they had to carry out in respect of the Local Government Pension triennial reporting issues which has caused a significant delay in finalising the restated Accounts and completing the audit.

The Finance Director went on the say that the 2022/2023 accounts had also been approved.

Councillor Woodwark commended the finance team given that the accounts covered a period of volatility and change.

56. RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

Treasury Management Policy and Strategy 2024-2025, Including Prudential 'Treasury Management' Indicators for 2024/2025 to 2027/2028

The Finance Director submitted a report to present members with the Treasury Management Policy and Strategy (including both borrowing and investment strategies) proposed for 2024/2025 for approval, to note the Prudential 'Treasury Management' Indicators for 2024/2025 to 2027/2028, and to note any comments provided by the Governance Committee who met on 26th February 2024 to review and scrutinise this document on behalf of the Authority.

The Finance Director referred Members to the summary sheet circulated (Appendix 7) of the report and advised Members that in summary the proposed TMPSS for 2024/25 was compliant with the CIPFA Prudential Code and the CIPFA Treasury Management

Code of Practice which satisfied all statutory requirements covered by the Local government Act 2003.

There were no major changes being proposed to the prudent TMPSS of previous years which had served the Authority so well. This was based on an average borrowing cost of existing debt of 2.80% which was one of the lowest rates in the country and so reduced the annual cost of borrowing on the Authority's revenue budget.

The Finance Director advised that the key indicator for future new borrowing was set at 5% in 2024/25 and that the current rate of return on investments was 4.88% and was above the benchmark rate. This equated to more than £1.3m of interest receivable in 2023/24 as the Bank of England Base rates varied so too did the rate of return on investments.

Members were then advised that in relation to debt, the Authority had historic debt outstanding totalling £10.346m and it currently repaid 4% of the loan principal each year in accordance with the recommended Annual Minimum Debt Provision.

No new borrowing would be considered as the use of earmarked reserves was planned.

The Finance Director went on to say that in relation to the level of investments, the Authority had the bulk of its reserves invested currently standing at £27.514m.

The Operational Boundary for External Debt should not exceed £28.550m in 2024/25. These were monitored daily to ensure compliance and current highest levels of activity in 2023/24 was £24.943m to date.

Members were advised that in conclusion, the TMPSS provided significant reassurance to Members and it definitely added value to the Authority's resources by providing optimum funding arrangements to finance the Capital Programme and minimising borrowing costs on the revenue budget but also achieving a safe and significant rate of return on investments that it took great measures to minimise risk which benefits the revenue budget each year.

57. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) The Annual Treasury Management Policy and Strategy for 2024/2025 (including specifically the Annual Borrowing and Investment Strategies) be approved and,
- (ii) The Prudential 'Treasury Management' Indicators 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 be approved.

As this was the last meeting prior to his retirement, The Chair, on behalf of the Authority, thanked Dennis for his due diligence, commenting that the finances had always been kept under tight rein.

Councillor Haley, Kilgour and Woodwark, commented that Dennis had always been very diligent during turbulent times, a pleasure to work with and would be a huge miss.

The Finance Director commented that this was the happiest in his career he had been and whilst it had been challenging, it had been a pleasure to contribute and had been very rewarding.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that Dennis had always been of great support and very helpful and that he was very grateful for this.

(Signed) P. TYE
Chair

