

MEETING: 19 JANUARY 2009

SUBJECT: SAFETYWORKS!**JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER, CLERK TO THE AUTHORITY AND THE FINANCE OFFICER**

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to outline, for the consideration of Members, a proposal to defer the new SafetyWorks! project, contained within the Estates Development Plan, in favour of continued occupation of the existing SafetyWorks! centre.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Safetyworks! was established in 2001 as part of the Newcastle Healthy City Project and was originally supported by grant funding through the Single Regeneration Budget mechanism, together with support from partner agencies. Since its inception, the scenarios and programmes provided at the centre have been very well used and, overall, it has proved to be an extremely effective facility, as a number independent evaluations have demonstrated over the years.
- 2.2 Due to the centre's popularity and effectiveness, when the SRB funding ceased, the Authority became the senior supporter of Safetyworks! with a number of organisations also providing assistance to maintain this community safety provision. Furthermore, due to the ongoing success of the facility and its ability to assist the Authority in supporting its aim of creating the safest community, the Authority determined, at its meeting held on 19th February 2007 that the Chief Fire Officer should consider the relocation of SafetyWorks! to an alternative building that would be capable of housing enhanced facilities in the short term (3-5 years) and to also examine the potential commissioning of a purpose built facility. (Minute 129/Feb 2007(i-iv) refers).
- 2.3 Following on from this, as Members will recall, an Estates Development Plan was adopted by the Authority at the meeting held on 23rd July 2007 (Minute 34/2007(i) refers) The Estates Development Plan is designed to further develop the Authority's building portfolio, which has been substantially revitalised through the PFI Project, through the construction of three replacement fire stations at Fulwell, Rainton Bridge and Hebburn. It was also agreed at the meeting that the above proposal to relocate the SafetyWorks! facility should be encompassed within the Estates Development Plan. (Minute 34/July 2007 (i-ii) refers).
- 2.4 Subsequent to this, significant work has been undertaken into the identification of a suitable building capable of providing an acceptable interim solution and the costs associated with leasing such a property, together with the potential for offsetting these costs with financial support from partners currently involved with

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the existing SafetyWorks! facility.

- 2.5 This work culminated in the identification of an industrial unit on the Bentall Business Park, Washington which was capable of providing the necessary scope for the enhanced facilities in the short to medium term, on a leasing basis. This building would provide a suitable interim community safety centre whilst further research was undertaken into the viability of constructing a bespoke SafetyWorks! centre.
- 2.6 Considerable further work went into clarifying legal issues associated with the existing lease on the industrial unit in Washington, currently held by the City of Sunderland, together with work aimed at establishing the financial cost of leasing the building.
- 2.7 The outcome of this work has identified that the Authority could take on the lease at a cost of £120,000 per annum, although this sum would be offset initially by a six month rent free period. In addition, there would also be a requirement to meet the annual business rates of approximately £56,000 a year. Financial assistance from key partners has also been identified in the short-term, including a significant, non ring-fenced, contribution from Northumbria Police, but no long-term funding stream has been identified.

3 CURRENT FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- 3.1 Unfortunately, since the Estate Development Plan was endorsed by the Authority, there has been a marked downturn in the UK economy, and the financial effects of this will undoubtedly impact on the public sector, including this Authority, in the months and years ahead.
- 3.2 Whilst the Revenue Support Grant for the Authority for the next two years (2009/2010 to 2010/2011) has already been set as 1.26% and 1.1%, it is possible that future financial settlements could be lower than this, which will in turn, require the Authority to contemplate making difficult decisions on future service provision.
- 3.3 In tandem with these economic pressures, the Audit Commission has just published a national study entitled, 'Rising to the Challenge, Improving Fire Service Efficiency'. The key message of this report is that the Audit Commission believes there is up to £200 million in efficiencies still to be extracted from Fire and Rescue Services in England. Whilst the Chief Fire Officer believes that there are further efficiencies to be gained within the service the Audit Commission figure of £200million is a contentious one which will require careful analysis and subsequent consideration. Nevertheless, the content of the report, in combination with the economic downturn will, as stated above, potentially result in the Authority having to face up to difficult decisions in the future.
- 3.4 As a result of this, having re-examined the case for re-locating SafetyWorks! the Chief Fire Officer does not believe that the benefits to be derived from re-locating and expanding the facilities currently on offer can be justified in light of the potential financial difficulties that could emerge in the near future. Consequently it is proposed that the SafetyWorks! project is deferred in favour

of maintaining the existing community safety facility in Benwell.

- 3.5 It is also proposed that the funding set aside in the Authority's Capital Programme (£160,000) to purchase and install the proposed new scenarios is earmarked to allow an upgrade of the existing SafetyWorks! facilities in line with any findings arising following a full condition survey and needs analysis.
- 3.6 The Policy Advisory Committee of the Authority is scheduled to consider the contents of this report at its meeting on Monday 12 January 2009 and feedback on the deliberations of the Committee will be provided at the meeting of the full Authority on the 19 January 2009.

4 RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 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 based on control measures being in place given that it is not a core function of the Authority.

5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A comparison has been undertaken in the full year running costs for both sites, and maintaining the existing facility in Benwell will achieve savings of approximately £177,000 per annum in future financial years.

6 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no health and safety implications in respect of this report.

7 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no health and safety implications in respect of this report.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 The Authority is requested to consider the above report and provide recommendations with specific regard to:
- a) Deferring the relocation of SafetyWorks! and
 - b) Refurbishing the existing SafetyWorks! in accordance with the outcome of a condition survey/needs analysis, with the funding currently earmarked for the move to the new centre.
 - c) Receive further reports as appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The undermentioned Background Papers refer to the subject matter of the above report:

- Rising to the Challenge, Improving Fire Service Efficiency; December 2008; Audit Commission
- Working for Safer Communities, Crime Concern – Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service Schools Education Evaluation : February 2004;
- SafetyWorks! : Evaluation of “Think for life’ Pilot Programme: Philip Angiew : Angier Griffin
- New Deal for Communities, Feasibility and Development Study;Northumbria University, Community Safety Research Unit