

Agenda Item 21a

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Report of a meeting of the East Sussex Fire Authority held at Fire Brigade Headquarters at 10.30 hours on Thursday 5 June 2003.

Members present: Councillors Carden, Dyason, Gadd, Hawkes, Mrs Healy, Kemble, Mrs Leigh, Livings, Lock, Murphy (Chairman), Neighbour, Paskins, Reid, Scott, Skilton, Stevens and G Theobald.

1. PREPARATIONS FOR PRECEPTING

- 1.1 Combined Fire Authorities (CFAs) were set up, under Section 6 of the Fire Services Act 1947, between 1996 and 1998 following local government reorganisation with powers to raise finance locally by drawing their funding as a levy from their constituent authorities. The Local Government Bill, which is currently progressing through Parliament, contains provisions to make CFAs precepting bodies. Current indications suggest that the commencement date for precepting will be 1 April 2004.
- 1.2 The Local Government Association's (LGA) role in CFAs' move towards precepting status has been to concentrate on developing advice and guidance for member authorities and, where necessary, lobbying the Government on the implementation of the new policy. To this end, the LGA created the Levying and Precepting Task Group to look at the implementation issues and decide appropriate action for the LGA to take. The East Sussex Fire Authority is represented on the Task Group by the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive (CFO&CE) who is acting as the Chief Fire Officer adviser to the Group and the Authority is working with the billing authorities on its preparations for precepting status.
- 1.3 In general terms, CFAs are unable to carry reserves or balances. The move to precepting status will mean that CFAs can exercise the full range of these tools that are essential to good management. However, this new freedom brings a number of responsibilities surrounding issues of size and purpose for which proposals will need to be developed in the budget preparation process for 2004/05. One of the key areas of concern will be the level of balances required. In this latter respect, fire has some unique challenges and, in particular, the fluctuations in expenditure which arise from the unfunded pension scheme can be considerable. To this end, CFAs will need to develop an approach to how they intend to create their balances and reserves and an area to explore early in the development will be to determine what amounts, if any, will transfer across from the constituent funding authorities. In some cases, this will be clear, but in others there will be the potential for dispute and it will only be resolved by debate

as it is most unlikely that the Government will issue any regulations to cover this detailed financial aspect. Such agreements are also likely to be affected by other aspects of the overall financial existing arrangements.

2. MODERNISATION PROGRAMME: INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLANS

- 2.1 As part of the modernisation agenda, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has issued guidance to Fire Authorities, (Fire Service Circular 7/03) requesting that each Authority produce an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) by September 2003. Following a 12-week consultation period, the plan is due to be implemented in April 2004. The Plan should outline the Authority's view of how best to reduce the risk to the community, taking into account the risk from fire and special services, and the risk to heritage and the environment. To enable this Plan to be implemented, the ODPM has proposed to remove the current prescriptive standards of fire cover.
- 2.2 The Brigade has established a dedicated Project Team to undertake this work as agreed by the Urgency Panel on 17 April 2003 and has nominated a Principal Officer and Practitioner with specific responsibility to assist in the production of an IRMP.
- 2.3 The main issues for the Authority to consider with regard to IRMP are:
- reducing the number of fires and other emergency incidents occurring;
 - reducing loss of life in fires and other emergency incidents;
 - reducing the number and severity of injuries occurring in fires and other emergencies;
 - reducing the commercial, economic and social impact of fires and other emergency incidents
 - safeguarding the environment and heritage (both built and natural); and
 - providing communities with value for money.

3. EAST SUSSEX STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

- 3.1 Partnership working is seen as a vital element in the Authority's aim of driving down risk in the community and is part of the "Joined-Up Government" strategy to which it subscribes. The Fire Authority is pleased that it is currently represented on three Local Strategic Partnerships, four Public Service Agreements, five Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnerships and approximately twenty working groups resulting from them. Activity has risen to such a level that the Brigade has established a "Partnership Focus Team" to manage levels of participation and to provide guidance to local managers, thus ensuring the constant focus upon the Organisations stated aims and objectives. As activity becomes more formalised within the different partnership groups, it is considered beneficial for the Fire Authority to determine its own strategy and scope for involvement at each level.

4. INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE

- 4.1 The Fire Authority considered a confidential report from the Chairman of the Urgency Panel covering its recent meetings on issues arising from the current industrial dispute and a further confidential update from the Chief Fire Officer

- and Chief Executive on the most recent information available both nationally and locally.
- 4.2 The CFO&CE had sought the Panel's guidance in relation to how local issues arising from the industrial dispute should be dealt with.
- 4.3 With regard to financial implications of the firefighters' pay negotiations, it was noted that the proposed pay offer of 4% in November 2002, 7% in November 2003 and a subsequent 4.2% in 2004/05 would exceed the 2003/04 provision made in the Fire Authority's Revenue Budget by approximately £168,000.
- 4.4 In the light of advice received from the CFO&CE on the implications of Fire Service Circular 7/03 (see paragraph 2 above) a number of actions were determined including new Terms of Reference to be prepared for the Way Forward Working Group with the overall aim of ensuring that the outcome of the Integrated Risk Management Plan for the Authority should provide the community with a first class civil protection service to drive down risk. It was also noted that significant resource implications would be required to prepare the Plan in accordance with Circular 07/03 and that appropriate decisions will have to be made about available sources of funding in due course.
- 4.5 The Panel had considered the CFO&CE's advice that, bearing in mind the overall fire service provision in East Sussex, and the conclusions made by HM Fire Service Inspectorate in their 2002 Inspection in relation to the fact that East Sussex Fire Brigade was at the lower end of the scale for crewing levels and should consider increasing its numbers of operational personnel, there remained less scope for more radical future change than in the larger metropolitan areas.
- 4.6 The Panel had noted that the Government was likely to publish imminently its White Paper on the future of the Fire Service, the contents of which were likely to be based upon the following principles:
- the overriding objective would remain for the service to reduce loss of life, injury, property and environmental damage including both heritage and societal loss;
 - preventative rather than reactive measures would become the focus of service delivery;
 - there would be a wider role for the service in relation to Civil Protection and Community safety; and
 - fire cover would be based upon the Integrated Risk Management approach and the Plans currently being prepared by all Fire Authorities.
- 4.7 The CFO&CE had advised the Panel that this would involve all Fire Authorities, including East Sussex, refocusing services, re-engineering them where necessary and re-investing in accordance with the final outcomes of the Integrated Risk Management Plans.

4.8 The Fire Authority also considered a further paper from the FBU relating to regional allowances which was tabled at the meeting.

Councillor Mike Murphy
CHAIRMAN OF THE FIRE AUTHORITY