

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Report of a meeting of the East Sussex Fire Authority held at Fire & Rescue Service Headquarters at 10.30 hours on Friday 13 February 2004.

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

1. MODERNISATION ISSUES

1.1 Fire and Rescue Services Bill

1.1.1 The Fire Authority has considered a report of the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive on the Fire & Rescue Services Bill which was laid before Parliament on 12 January 2004.

1.1.2 The new Bill is the first substantial piece of legislation regarding the provision of Fire & Rescue authorities and their functions since the Fire Services Act 1947 and will provide a greater clarity with regard to their functions including, for the first time, a core function of fire safety. Provisions for road traffic accidents and other emergencies are also contained in the Bill.

1.2 Regional Management Board Arrangements

1.2.1 The Fire Authority has considered a report of the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive on the continuing development with regard to the implementation of Regional Management Boards (RMBs) by the establishment of joint committees of fire authorities so that they can work together in delivering a number of strategic services. Members have received constitutional guidance from the Local Government Association after discussions with the ODPM, and the Chairman and the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive have engaged in debate with members of the South East Region Fire Service Forum, who have taken legal and financial advice on the options for establishing a RMB.

1.2.2 A Form of Agreement has now been drafted which appears to be acceptable to all nine South East Fire Authorities and will create a joint committee to act as the RMB.

1.2.3 The Fire Authority has agreed to:

- i. participate in the Regional Management Board arrangements in the South East Region with a model constitution based upon that recommended by the Local Government Association and as previously discussed by East Sussex Fire Authority, with the Regional Management Board to be established by 1st April 2004;
- ii. the Monitoring Officer being asked to seek the establishment in the constitution of the position of Vice-Chairman/Chairman Elect of the Regional Management Board;
- iii. power being delegated to the Monitoring Officer (after consulting the Chairman, the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive and the Treasurer) to approve the final terms of an Agreement creating a joint committee to act as a Regional Management Board;
- iv. the Monitoring Officer (&/or anyone authorised by him whether an officer of the Fire Authority or not) being authorised to sign or seal, as appropriate, the Agreement; and
- v. note the recommendations of the Budget and Urgency Panels (set out in the Chairman's reports elsewhere in the agenda) which support the Fire Authority participating in the Regional Management Board.

1.3 **Regional Fire & Rescue Control Rooms**

1.3.1 The Fire Authority has considered a report of the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive on the recent publication by the ODPM on the future of Fire & Rescue Service Control Rooms in England and Wales. Members noted the work being undertaken in the South East Region and the recommendations of the Budget and Urgency Panels which had met on 15 January 2004.

1.3.2 The ODPM report recommends amalgamating current Fire & Rescue emergency control rooms, following the Government Office boundaries in England, resulting in nine control rooms and implementing this as a matter of urgency to harmonise their delivery with the Firelink (Radio Replacement) timetable.

1.3.3 Members had a number of concerns which will be referred back to the ODPM. These include:

- Quality of service – this may not meet the high standard already provided by our own Mobilising and Communications Centre.
- Non-core activities - this Fire Authority currently uses its Mobilising and Communications Centre staff to undertake a number of non-core activities, which are essential to the day-to-day running and strategic planning of East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service. Members also have concerns about the operational capability of any regional control room, particularly with the implementation of varying Integrated Risk Management Plans throughout the region that are designed to deliver the service according to local need.
- Location - the announcement of the location of the control room for the southeast region will have an immediate impact on the staffing strategy of the existing Mobilising and Communications Centre. Experienced personnel may not be encouraged to remain employed in what will be seen as a greatly reduced career opportunity. Effective management will be needed to maintain current staffing levels both now and during the transition from a local control to a regional control room. Consideration needs to be given to plans for redeployment, relocation or redundancy including how this is to be financed in the foreseeable future.
- Additional tax burden - reassurance is needed that there will not be any additional tax burden on the residents of East Sussex in financing a regional control room.

1.4 **Draft Fire & Rescue National Framework**

1.4.1 The Fire Authority has considered a report of the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive on the recent publication by the ODPM of the Draft National Framework for the Fire & Rescue Service. Members also noted the recommendations of the Budget and Urgency Panels which had met on 15 January 2004.

1.4.2 Three principal objectives are described in the Framework as follows:

- to provide clarity about the outcomes and objectives the Government wants to be achieved
- to set out what the Government expects Fire & Rescue Authorities and RMBs to do in order to achieve these objectives

- to explain what the Government will do to support Fire & Rescue Authorities and RMBs to meet these objectives
- 1.4.3 Consultation on the draft will be invited from key stakeholders, to be concluded by 12 March 2004, with the Government intending to produce a final version of the Framework for the financial year 2004/05.
- 1.4.4 East Sussex Fire Authority is generally supportive of the draft Framework but asked that consideration be given to a number of issues.
- 1.5 **Fire Service Circular 22/2003 – Transitional Funding for the Fire & Rescue Service Pay and Modernisation Deal**
- 1.5.1 The Fire Authority considered reports of the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive, and the Chairman of the Budget and Urgency Panels, on the issue of transitional funding for the Fire & Rescue Service Pay & Modernisation Deal, which is to be provided by Central Government (Fire Service Circular 22/2003).
- 1.5.2 ODPM intends to pay this funding to English Fire & Rescue Authorities by grant under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to be repaid by March 2006. It was noted that ODPM might consider paying the grant in 2003/04 but, if not, it will be paid as an additional element within the RSG for 2004/05, and deductions will then be made from RSG in 2005/06. Members were informed that receipt of grant will not be optional for individual Fire Authorities.

2. **FIRE AUTHORITY SERVICE PLANNING PROCESSES FOR 2004/05 AND BEYOND**

- 2.1 The Fire Authority has considered joint reports of the Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive and the Treasurer concerning the draft Fire Authority Service Planning and Revenue Budget processes for 2004/05 and beyond and taken into account the budget needs and draft capital programme which had appeared to the Fire Authority to be appropriate in the two months leading up to the meeting, and the earlier reports circulated to Members at the December 2003 meeting which had proposed a 2004/05 budget of £34.268m (an 18.1% increase on the 2003/04 base budget of £29.005m.)
- 2.2 Mindful in particular of the national concerns about increases in Council Tax and various communications from the Government in relation to the use of its power to cap expenditure, amendments to the budget were proposed which had the effect of reducing the budget requirement to £32.752m, (an increase of 12.9% on the 2003/04 base budget of £29.005m.)
- 2.3 The Treasurer advised that he considered the estimates (including the amendments proposed at the meeting) had been produced in a robust manner and that the risks had been adequately assessed by the Fire Authority. The balances and reserves would be reasonable and adequate, bearing in mind that they would be augmented by the assistance from the constituent authorities in passing a pro-rata share of their balances to the Fire Authority. The Treasurer further advised on the risks of capping and the medium and long term future prospects for Government funding.

- 2.4 The Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive confirmed that whilst the proposed budget was lower than that put forward in December 2003, to seek to take account of the latest national guidance and available comparative information from other combined fire authorities, it contained modest, yet essential service improvements and would not reduce front line services or staff. Whilst the level of budget was prudent, did not expose the Authority to high risk, and was sufficient to run the Service in the coming year, there would be considerably less flexibility within the budget to deal with the modernisation agenda and the requirement to re-pay the transitional funding provided by the ODPM. However, even with this reduction, the risk of capping by the Government had not been removed.
- 2.5 The Fire Authority has agreed that the amendments which reduced the increase to 12.9% should be adopted and, therefore, the Authority has approved the necessary detailed budget and service planning decisions and in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 1992:-
- approved the amount calculated by the Fire Authority as its budget requirement for the year 2004/05 at £32.752m; a 12.9% increase on the 2003/04 base budget of £29.005m;
 - approved the amount calculated by the Fire Authority as the basic amount of its council tax (i.e. for a Band D property) for the year 2004/05 at £63.80 (based on final taxbase figures);
 - approved the detailed calculations for the issue of precepts required by sections 40 to 48 of the 1992 Act;
 - agreed that Brighton & Hove City Council and the borough and district councils of East Sussex (the billing authorities) be advised by the Treasurer of the relevant amounts payable and the council tax in the other bands;
 - agreed that the precepts be issued accordingly.
- 2.6 The Fire Authority has also placed on record its appreciation to the East Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council for their contributions to balances, which have assisted the Fire Authority greatly in reducing its budget requirement.

COUNCILLOR MIKE MURPHY
CHAIRMAN OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY
16 February 2004