

EXTRACT FROM THE DRAFT MINUTES 13 SEPTEMBER 2011 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Present: Councillors Mitchell (Chair); Brown, Follett, Littman, Morgan, K Norman, Powell, Summers and G Theobald

PART ONE**34. CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED MERGER BETWEEN EAST AND WEST SUSSEX FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

- 34.1 Chief Fire Officer, East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service Des Prichard, and Max Hood, County Fire Officer West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, were welcomed by the Chair Councillor Gill Mitchell.
- 34.2 Des Prichard thanked the OSC for the invitation to discuss the proposed merger between East and West Sussex Fire Authorities. He first introduced the new Borough Commander for Brighton & Hove, Mark Rist who had recently replaced Keith Ring.
- 34.3 Potential mergers of fire and rescue services had been mooted since 1970 but the first (Devon and Somerset) did not happen until 2007. Governance arrangements for fire services changed in 1997; for East Sussex a stand-alone combined fire authority was formed while in West Sussex the fire authority continued and still continues to be the County Council.
- 34.4 East and West Sussex Fire and Rescue Services work very closely together and operate joint training and recruitment facilities. Both are part of a regional consortium to purchase equipment.
- 34.5 ESFRS aimed to be a cost-effective service, looking to reduce risk and take preventive and protective action wherever possible. Due to grant reductions nationally, a potential shortfall of £1.3 million from 2014 – 2015 had been identified by the East Sussex Fire Authority which represents a large proportion of the total £40million budget. Approximately 80% of expenditure was on staff, national insurance and pension contributions.
- 34.6 All options had been considered, from 'no change' to a full merger. In his professional view the only option to deliver the required savings would be a full merger and this was now open to the current consultation, Mr Prichard told Members.
- 34.7 West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service County Fire Officer Max Hood outlined the different savings profile for WSFRS that followed from the comprehensive spending review, and amounted to more than £2.5 million. The details of the proportion of grant relating to the fire service were at present being drawn out in discussion with the Department of Communities and Local Government and the County Council.

- 34.8 The savings called for either collaboration or a full-scale merger. The rationale and business cases were included in the agenda papers and set out on the two organisations' websites. Mr Hood said operational improvements would be possible via a merger, that would increase resilience, enable a bigger control room with more staff and greater capacity without affecting front-line services. Savings could be found in areas other than fire engines, fire stations and firefighters, he told the meeting.
- 34.9 There was broad support from Government Ministers for fire service mergers. The proposed merger would make financial sense in his opinion and views are being considered, he said.
- 34.10 The Strategic Director Place, Geoff Raw explained that the Council was not leading on the proposals but working together with the Fire Services to ensure that the City's best interest was represented, via effective consultation and appropriate feedback.
- 34.11 Members were concerned about the potential impact on Brighton & Hove taxpayers and about any possible moving away from local control and how to make a merged authority locally relevant. Acknowledging that all Members would be expected to work towards delivering an effective service across the whole of Sussex, there was agreement that BHCC would wish to continue to exert significant influence with the service.
- 34.12 Members discussed the implications of a Joint Board, which would not seem to offer advantages compared with a merged authority.
- 34.13 OSC noted that the fire service needs of the City differed from those of rural areas of East and West Sussex and despite Fire Service efforts to reduce risk, most incidents occurred in areas of highest population density. Senior Fire Officers offered to arrange a visit to a fire authority in the region which included a large rural area as well as a Unitary authority.
- 34.14 The Senior Fire Officers were asked about the timing of the proposed merger in relation to the timescale for disaggregation of funding and setting the budget and Council Tax for WSCC. Members heard that work was in progress to identify current government funding and IT systems, property and investment needs were being investigated. Work on these surveys and the outcome of the public consultation would be completed by mid-October, ready for a final decision in December.
- 34.15 Asked about gaining agreement for the change between all involved, Mr Hood reassured the meeting that he worked closely with officers and Members who were all committed to an effective service and a sustainable solution. The Joint Steering Group had been working since late 2010. After the consultation there were still further checks and balances and Ministerial 'sign-off' would be required. If a merger were to take effect from April 2013, a Shadow Authority would be formed 6 months beforehand.

- 34.16 Mr Hood detailed the property arrangements for the fire stations, training centres and headquarters buildings in reply to a query.
- 34.17 Members questioned the 'Democracy/Accountability' and 'Clarity' ratings in the comparison matrix (report, table 10 refers) asking if five stars for the full merger option and one star for 'no change' were in fact fully justifiable. The meeting was told that representation at a national level would be significantly greater because the proposed authority would be one of the largest in the country. Similarly representation at the Civil Resilience Forum would be significantly more than double. Without a merger, cuts would be needed which may affect progress on community safety because then, the main focus would be on firefighting; whereas a merger would enable more effective service provision and integrated protection and prevention measures. There would be flexibility and capacity to support the differing needs of the City and Districts and Boroughs.
- 34.18 Operational principles and structures, local identity with the fire stations and work in relation to community safety issues were proposed to remain unchanged. All 13 areas would have 'Commanders' to interface with Local Authorities and local people about driving down risks.
- 34.19 There were on-going discussions with Trades Unions and staff as there would need to be some reductions when some services such as headquarters and training functions, Human Resources, IT, legal and finance were combined.
- 34.20 Members wished to offer support to fire services staff living or working in Brighton & Hove who may be at risk of losing their jobs and asked that the Council's Human Resources services be extended in this way during the period of the merger.
- 34.21 The Commission agreed to support the proposal for a full merger, subject to the business case being finalised. This support was conditional upon the number of Members of the new merged Authority being set at 24 (report table 3.12 refers) to allow for 4 BHCC Members that would enable all Brighton & Hove political groups to be represented. In addition, any change to these governance arrangements would need agreement of all 3 Local Authorities.
- 34.22 On behalf of OSC the Chair Councillor Gill Mitchell thanked the senior fire officers and wished for a successful outcome.
- 34.23 **RESOLVED:** That subject to the number of Members of the merged Authority being set at 24 and as minuted above, the proposed merger of Fire and Rescue Services be recommended for approval.

