

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Report of a virtual meeting of the East Sussex Fire Authority held at 10:30 hours on Thursday, 23 April 2020.

Present: Councillors Galley (Chairman), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Barnes, Dowling, Ebel, Evans, Hamilton, O'Keeffe, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Powell, Pragnell, Scott, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald and Tutt

The agenda and non-confidential reports can be read on the East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service's website at <http://www.esfrs.org/about-us/east-sussex-fire-authority/fire-authority-meetings/> A brief synopsis and the decisions relating to key items is set out below.

1 URGENT ITEMS AND CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

- 1.1 The Chairman welcomed Members, the press and public to the first virtual meeting of the Fire Authority and gave all those in attendance a brief explanation of how the meeting would be conducted.
- 1.2 The Chairman informed the Authority that he had received the resignation of Cllr Scott from his post as Labour Party Group Leader. Cllr Scott was thanked for his service to the Authority in that role over the past years. The Chairman then welcomed Cllr Evans as the new Labour Party Group Leader.
- 1.3 A query was raised regarding the additional grant of £136,000 which had been promised to the Service in order to be spent on its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer (ADR/T) confirmed that all Covid-19 related spend was tracked and reported via NFCC to the Home Office.
- 1.4 The ADR/T explained that the a second tranche had been announced by the government totalling £1.6bn but as yet it was unknown how this would be allocated. The sector was working collectively via NFCC to bid for additional funding.
- 1.5 As well as spending on PPE for frontline staff there had been additional expenditure made on cleaning both contractor services and consumables, some staffing costs and on IT equipment in order to facilitate and support mobile working.
- 1.6 The longer term financial impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic were clearly not yet known. The Service was less exposed both to increases in costs through service delivery and also to loss of income from fees and charges than other local authorities. The biggest impact was expected to be on Council Tax and Business Rates through the Collection Fund, which would impact on the 2021/22 budget, as collection rates reduced and claims for council tax support increased. There would also be an impact on the taxbase in 2021/22.

- 1.7 Members were updated on the impact on staff well-being as a result of Covid-19. The Coronavirus Working Group (CWG) was working hard to look after all aspects of the health & safety of the entire workforce and paying great attention to well-being. There had been a spike in March 2020 of staff sickness with absences at 8.6% but, at the time of the meeting, the sickness level had stabilised. There had been no tested or confirmed cases of Covid-19 but some were now undergoing testing. Staff who were symptomatic, or had household members who were symptomatic, were self-isolating in accordance with government guidance. There were a handful of staff who were on the government list of those who were extremely vulnerable, 1.4% of the workforce. There was a focus on the well-being of all staff. Many were now working from home, and some of those were reporting that they felt isolated, others were juggling working and home schooling. There was a lot of work being undertaken to try to ensure those working from home were supported. The CWG was working to create a wellbeing cell to address all these matters.

2 INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN 2020-2025

- 2.1 The Fire Authority considered a report seeking approval for the draft 2020/2025 Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) to be published for the purpose of public and stakeholder consultation.
- 2.2 The draft IRMP, detailing the strategic direction for the Fire Authority for the next five years (2020–2025), was ready for the Authority to consider and publish for the purpose of public and stakeholder consultation. The Fire Authority were reminded that no decisions would be taken at this meeting on the proposals. The Authority were reminded they had been involved in the drafting process and there had been 12 months detailed work undertaken to get to this stage. The draft IRMP was the most comprehensive ESFRS had compiled and it was essential to ensure that ESFRS had the right resources in the right place in order to address risk. Further detailed work would be required in relation to the impact assessments, planning assumptions, policy implications, delivery timeline and implementation options. This work would be completed and presented to the Fire Authority at its meeting on 3 September 2020, alongside public consultation feedback reports, in order to help inform the Fire Authority's final decisions. Following advice, there was a strong legal case for proceeding with the consultation as the requirement for the Fire Authority to have an updated and fit for purpose IRMP was not changed due to COVID-19.
- 2.3 Some Members were clear that whilst they supported the need for a consultation to be conducted on the proposed IRMP, they believed that now was not the right time. There was anxiety that a consultation at this time would not be well responded to as people were otherwise concerned with the current impact of COVID-19.

2.4 Cllr Scott proposed the following motion, seconded by Cllr Evans:

“In the midst of this unprecedented crisis, where none of us know what the post COVID world will look like or even when it might arrive, we move that East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service defer the consultation process until the crisis and any Public Inquiry that may follow has passed, to allow both Government and ESFRS to have a better understanding of what resources, people and equipment may be needed in the future to deal with National Incidents such as coronavirus”

2.5 Members debated the motion at length, many had been sent emotive emails about this consultation. Some reminded their colleagues that the HMICFRS inspection report had stated that the existing IRMP, which expired this year, was not fit for purpose. They may have been supportive of a short delay if it were deemed to be beneficial and there were dramatic changes to the requirements on the fire service, but could not support freezing the consultation for potentially a minimum of a couple of years particularly as Covid-19 did not immediately change the risks faced by the Service and the need to improve current cover.

2.6 *Cllr Hamilton left the meeting at 11.15am.*

Some struggled to understand why fellow Members were requesting a delay as it was them as the Fire Authority, not the Service, who had responsibility for providing an IRMP which was fundamental to the work of the organisation. There was strong sympathy that this was not the ideal time to consult but the need to do so was unavoidable. Members took part in a recorded vote on the proposed motion with the results being as follows:

FOR: 5 (Cllrs Ebel, Evans, O’Keeffe, Powell, Scott)
AGAINST: 12 (Cllrs Barnes, Dowling, Galley, Lambert, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Pragnell, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald, Tutt)

The motion was not carried.

2.7 Members voted on the recommendations as set out in the report as follows:

FOR: 12 (Cllrs Barnes, Dowling, Galley, Lambert, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Pragnell, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald, Tutt)

AGAINST: 5 (Cllrs Ebel, Evans, O’Keeffe, Powell, Scott)

2.8 The Fire Authority resolved to approve the draft IRMP (and relevant associated appendices) for public consultation, noted the proposed minor wording changes to the Authority’s purpose and commitments. They agreed the proposal to recommend an eight-week consultation period, alongside the associated draft consultation, communications and engagement plan, and noted the intention to bring back a fully costed project implementation plan, and additional suite of detailed impact assessments, to the Fire Authority meeting in September 2020.

3 INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN - CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION PLAN

- 3.1 The Fire Authority considered a report presenting them with the communication and consultation plan for the Integrated Risk Management Plan. The plan had been revised in light of guidance issued by the Consultation Institute in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.2 External advice on conducting a consultation at this time had been sought from the Consultation Institute. These consultation providers had given the Service alternative options to the traditional face to face approach which was not possible under the current national restrictions. The plan included using various media channels to reach the public.
- 3.3 The Service would not be reliant on digital media as some members feared, and had a list of over 500 local groups in the county and city including those that were hard to reach. The consultation would use telephone interviews and 10,000 postcards were being sent to those residents the Service knew to be adverse to digital contact to encourage awareness of the consultation and how to take part. Information on the consultation would also be available in e-bulletins and magazines produced by local authorities in the area
- 3.4 Members queried whether there were stocks of the plan available in other languages. They were informed that this was not a new communication challenge and, in line with other local authority's processes, there would be papers made available in other languages available on request.
- 3.5 The Authority sought reassurance that the telephone interview sample size would be large enough to provide robust data. The independent consultancy firm carrying out the interviews would contact enough people to ensure that there were 600 full interviews undertaken. The Authority would be provided with Member packs, containing all the information needed to respond to their constituents and make sure that they are giving the right information and directing people to take part in the consultation.
- 3.6 Members then voted on the recommendations:
- FOR: 12 (Cllrs Barnes, Dowling, Galley, Lambert, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Pragnell, Sheppard, Smith, Taylor, Theobald, Tutt)
- AGAINST: 4 (Cllrs Ebel, Evans, Powell, Scott)
- 3.7 The Fire Authority approved the changes to the consultation plan in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, presented as option B; approved the proposed 8 week consultation period; did not elect to include a further 12 optional in depth surveys presented as option C; and noted that the additional costs would be funded from the corporate contingency.

4 FORT ROAD, NEWHAVEN DISPOSAL REPORT

- 4.1 The Fire Authority considered a report regarding the proposed disposal of the Fort Road, Newhaven site. Following the completion of Saxon House in Newhaven, the old Fire Station site in Fort Road was surplus to Service requirements. In January 2013 the Policy & Resources Panel approved the disposal of the site at the best price reasonably obtainable. Lewes District Council (LDC) offered £525,000.00 for the site, conditional on securing residential planning approval. The LDC purchase offer demonstrated best price for the Fire Authority.
- 4.2 The Fire Authority approved the disposal of the Fort Road site to Lewes District Council at £525,000.00 noting that the disposal is subject to residential planning permission being secured by Lewes District Council; approved the draft Heads of Terms (Subject to Contract); and delegated authority to the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer in consultation with the Chief Fire Officer and the Deputy Monitoring Officer to take all necessary steps to complete the disposal

COUNCILLOR ROY GALLEY
CHAIRMAN OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY
23 April 2020