

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Report of a meeting of the East Sussex Fire Authority held at County Hall, St. Anne's Crescent, Lewes BN7 1UE at 10:30 hours on Thursday, 5 December 2024.

Councillors Evans (Chair), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Asaduzzaman, Azad, Dowling, Goddard, Hill, Lunn, Maples, Marlow-Eastwood, O'Quinn, Osborne, Redstone, Scott, Shing, Theobald and Ungar.

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 MAYFIELD OPTIONS APPRAISAL – CONSULTATION OUTCOMES

- 1.1 The Fire Authority were presented with the outcomes of a formal public consultation and the recommendation by Officers in relation to the future of Mayfield Fire Station. The report summarised the findings and provided an assessment of the consultation responses received. The Fire Authority took the decision to develop a set of options for the future of Mayfield fire station, and to do this had undertaken a programme of pre-consultation engagement. At its meeting on 13 June 2024 the Authority reviewed the options and approved a twelve-week public consultation. This ran from 5 July 2024 to 27 September 2024, having been delayed until after the General Election on 4 July and extended to 12 weeks, from the standard eight, to accommodate the summer holiday period.
- 1.2 The level of engagement was good especially given the localised nature of the options. Full details of the consultation and the responses received were set out in detail in the report. The Service had been in receipt of expert, independent advice throughout the process. As with all consultations, the responses and findings are only part of the process. There had been no viable alternative options suggested during the consultation, but Officers had used the responses, alongside other analysis, to create the Hybrid Option 2 that was being recommended for approval.
- 1.3 Community Risk was under regular review and the risk profile of the Mayfield Station area had remained consistently low with the small number of incidents in the area being mostly attended by neighbouring stations. The availability of the Mayfield appliance was low and all previous efforts over a number of years to improve establishment numbers and appliance availability had not met the minimum of 50% availability. Public safety was paramount and the closure of Mayfield Station would not affect the community safety work undertaken in the station area.
- 1.4 There was a lengthy debate around the options and the responses to the consultation. It was noted by all present that no one would wish to be in the position where they are considering the closure of a Fire Station, but they had to consider the facts in front of them. It was agreed that whatever the decision taken, the Fire Authority must continue to lobby the Government for fairer and sustainable funding.

- 1.5 There was some concern that Hybrid Option 2 was being presented to Members for the first time at this meeting, but it was a reasonable step to use feedback from a consultation to create an alternative option. There was some discussion about whether the decision could be deferred and included with the wider Community Risk Management Plan consultation in 2025/26. Members were informed it was their right to choose to defer, but they had a responsibility to balance their reluctance to take a decision with their fiduciary duty and risk management.
- 1.6 The Authority queried why Option 1 had been included if it was not viable; it had been included in the consultation as it was for the Fire Authority to decide whether or not it was viable to continue as is. Officers compiled the options analysis on the basis of risk and what options were available, and had a duty to inform Members of each. In response to a question about road traffic collisions (RTC) on the A267, the Authority were reminded that the Service did not attend all RTCs only those that required an extrication. In the past two years there had been 17 RTCs on that particular road; the Mayfield Fire appliance had attended none of them.
- 1.7 By transferring the fire appliance into the spare fleet, greater resilience would be achieved across the county, resulting in the number of appliances in the fleet capital replacement programme reducing from 32 to 31. This will assist the Service in delivering its priority capital investments within the available funding, including refurbishment of fire stations and investment in training facilities. The future use of the fire appliance would be further considered as part of the spare appliance review planned for 2025. Spare appliances are regularly in use to facilitate maintenance of the fleet and were moved throughout the service area.
- 1.8 The Chair, on behalf of all the Fire Authority, recorded the upset felt by all involved and that this decision was not being taken lightly and it was noted that this was the first time that this had happened in East Sussex. The Fire Authority agreed to the recommendations in full.

2 EXTERNAL AUDITOR'S COMPLETION REPORT FOR THOSE CHARGED WITH GOVERNANCE AND STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2022/23

- 2.1 The Fire Authority were presented with the results of the External Auditor's Audit Completion Report and a disclaimed audit opinion on the Authority's 2022/23 Statement of Accounts. The Authority would normally expect to receive an unqualified opinion, as it had done since its formation, however the Auditors, EY, had taken the decision, based on significant national backlog and it not having the required resources available, not to undertake an audit for this set of accounts meaning the Authority was being issued with a disclaimed audit opinion even though all was in order and no issues had been found.
- 2.2 It was emphasised that it was through no fault of the Fire Authority that it had received a disclaimed audit, it was a result of a national failing within the public sector audit arrangements. It had also been an active decision of EY not to undertake a financial audit. This had not been the approach of other Auditors acting in the public sector. This was professionally unsatisfactory for the Treasurer and whilst there were no sanctions for the Authority as a result of this, it would have ongoing repercussions. The Authority would receive qualified audit opinions and potentially additional audit fees for two or three subsequent financial years, whilst the process to rebuild assurance on the accounts played out.

- 2.3 Members were very disappointed in the Auditors and keen to ensure it was understood, publicly that this was no reflection on the Authority or its Officers. The Fire Authority agreed to the recommendations in full.

3 HEALTH SAFETY & WELLBEING STRATEGY EXTENSION

- 3.1 The Fire Authority considered a report seeking approval for a two-year extension to the Health, Safety & Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2023. The strategy delivery plan had been more complex and taken longer than anticipated and it was recommended that an extension to the delivery timeframe be approved. The strategy remained fit for purpose and with an extension granted to 2025, Officers would be free to commence work on a revised, forward looking strategy for 2025-30 that would be presented to Members for their consideration and approval later in 2025.
- 3.2 The strategy was working and was helping the Service address some significant issues including exposure to contaminants and the implications of changes to the Pension age. The Service was feeding into national work on both these matters. There were also improvements being made to the Occupational Health offer, and the introduction of the Benenden health scheme was allowing the Service to address the issues of long term sickness and an ageing workforce.
- 3.3 A new set of Health & Safety Standards had been implemented in June, these were more transparent and easier to work through. A survey had been undertaken with staff at the start and a follow-up survey would evaluate their effectiveness, in addition to regular monitoring by Workplace Safety Representatives. There was some discussion regarding the impacts of mental ill health on the Service. As well as being a priority for the Service there was also a strong focus on this for the sector nationally. It was noted that whilst historically mental ill-health had been a leading cause of firefighter sickness, this was now musculoskeletal issues and the Service was addressing this accordingly. The Fire Authority agreed to the recommendations in full.

4 2025/26 TO 2029/30 STRATEGIC SERVICE PLANNING AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

- 4.1 The Fire Authority were provided with an update on the Authority's financial planning position in advance of the receipt of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement (LGFS) for 2025/26 and the submission of budget proposals and a refreshed Medium Term Finance Plan (MTFP) to the Fire Authority in February 2025. Key pieces of the budget picture were still missing but this paper reflected the outcomes of the Star Chamber process, ongoing work to review the Capital Programme and the identification of additional savings and flexibilities that may provide opportunities to balance the budget. The LGFS was due to be announced in the week commencing 16 December 2024, and Council Tax figures would be known in January/February 2025. A multi-year spending review by the Government was expected to conclude in Spring 2025, meaning the Authority could expect a further one-year settlement for 2025/26, which did not aid planning, and a multi-year settlement was now expected from 2026/27. Nationally, the sector remained reliant on significant one-off funding for investment in protection services and payment of employer's pension contributions making planning for the 2025/26 budget extremely difficult.

- 4.2 The revised financial planning assessment indicated a potential funding gap of up to £3.8m in 2025/26, including the net pressure from the Star Chamber process. It assumed that pressures on the 2024/25 budget would be managed out, aside from Safer Community Groups and a number of smaller ongoing pressures where additional funding was proposed. The latest position on savings options and flexibilities was set out in detail in the report and although good progress had been made with the total identified now standing at £2.824m (of which £1.933m was one-off) there was still a gap of £0.976m for which further options must be identified in order to balance the budget for 2025/26. If sufficient savings could not be delivered reserves could be used. The level of those uncommitted was now £2.2m, but this was not a sustainable option in the medium term and it was looking to be inevitable that there may be impacts on public facing services.
- 4.3 The Fire Authority were reminded that pay was a risk, they had provided for a 2% increase but if it were settled at a higher level there would be a significant financial impact of approximately £0.4m for each additional 1%. It was currently unknown what the claim would be to the national negotiating committee but it was worth noting that other recent public sector settlements had been around 5 or 6%. By way of illustration, the difference for the Service of a 2% and 4% settlement was £1.6m, therefore it was clearly important that the negotiations were couched at what was affordable.
- 4.4 The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) had released its finance policy statement, there were no figures but it set out the direction. It seemed likely that Fire Authorities would be able to set either a 2.99% or £5 precept increase, the latter of which would be beneficial to the Authority at a difference of c. £0.5m. There were also proposed changes to the grants, including removal of some and consolidation of others which could result in a significant loss of funding for the Authority. The Fire Authority agreed to the report recommendations in full.

COUNCILLOR AMANDA EVANS
CHAIR OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

5 December 2024