

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Report of a virtual meeting of the East Sussex Fire Authority held at 10:30 hours on Thursday, 11 February 2021.

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

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 FIRE AUTHORITY SERVICE PLANNING PROCESSES FOR 2021/22 AND BEYOND - REVENUE BUDGET 2021/22 AND CAPITAL ASSET STRATEGY 2021/22 TO 2025/26

- 1.1 The Fire Authority considered a report detailing the Fire Authority's Revenue Budget 2021/22, Capital Strategy 2021/22 – 2025/26 and Medium Term Finance Plan for 2021/22 – 2025/26 for approval. The budget proposals for 2021/22 and the five year Medium Term Finance Plan (MTFP) had been considered by the Policy & Resources (P&R) Panel on 21 January 2021. The report had been updated to reflect the latest council tax and business rates information, collection fund positions and the best understanding of how schemes to compensate authorities for the impact of Covid-19 on Collection Funds and council taxbase would operate.
- 1.2 The P&R Panel recommended two options, either no increase (0%) or an increase of 1.99% (the referendum threshold for fire authorities was 2%). A decision to freeze council tax, even for a single year would permanently impact the Authority's future income. The loss of income resulting from a freeze in council tax for 2021/22 was estimated at £0.551m (2021/22) rising to £0.618m (2025/26). Across the 5 year MTFP the total loss of income would be £2.9m. This would increase the level of future savings required under the best case scenario to £0.9m (2025/26 base) and £5.3m (5 year total) and under the worse case scenario to £3.1m and £10.9m respectively.
- 1.3 There remained significant uncertainties for funding after 2021/22 which the Covid-19 pandemic had exacerbated. New legislation resulting from the Grenfell enquiry was likely to impose fresh demands on prevention services and there was no clarity on the extent to which Government would fund additional costs. The Fire Authority, in line with the joint National Fire Chief Council (NFCC) / LGA Comprehensive Spending Review 2020 submission, had lobbied for a fair and sustainable medium term settlement for the fire sector including additional local flexibility to increase council tax by 2% or £5 whichever was the greater, a position that would be difficult to maintain if the Authority did not take the increase in council tax available to it in 2021/22.

- 1.4 The Authority had acted prudently in establishing reserves and balances to meet its assessed risks and to provide one off funding for specific priorities. The level of reserves would significantly reduce over the life of the MTFP bringing forward the need to borrow and reducing the financial flexibility the Authority had outside its Revenue Budget. Members were reminded that the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) consultation undertaken in summer 2020 had demonstrated that 80% of the public supported an increase in council tax for the fire service.
- 1.5 The Treasurer was satisfied that the budget was based on robust and transparent estimates. The Chairman of the P&R Panel had initially been supportive of a precept freeze but, once presented with the details, was concerned about the long term implications of such a gesture. It had been helpful for the Authority to be presented with both options, but he would be supporting a 1.99% increase. Members were agreed that this had been an exceptionally challenging year, they had all carefully considered both options and were sure that the potential long term risks of a freeze would be too high and therefore were unanimously supportive of a 1.99% precept rise.
- 1.6 The Fire Authority approved an increase in council tax of 1.99% and thus approved the budget proposals and the net budget requirement of £40.704m for 2021/22, the council tax requirement of £28.303m; and the council tax and precepts. They agreed the capital programme for the next five years and the capital budget of £6.105m for 2021/22 including plans to use CIL, capital receipts, revenue contributions and new borrowing to finance capital expenditure. Approval was given to a one off contribution of £0.210m from the revenue budget to the General Reserves to return it to the policy minimum of 5% of the net revenue budget, the fees and charges; and that the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer, in consultation with the Chief Fire Officer and the Chairman be authorised to make any adjustments to the presentation of the budget to reflect the Final Local Government Settlement.

2 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2021-22

- 2.1 The Fire Authority considered recommendations regarding borrowing limits, prudential indicators and limits, the investment strategy and policy as required by Section 3 (1) of the Local Government Act 2003 and the Prudential Code for Capital Finance 2017. The emphasis continued to be on security and liquidity. The strategy and limits were consistent with the proposed capital programme and revenue budget previously dealt with at this meeting.
- 2.2 The Fire Authority agreed to approve the Treasury Management Strategy and policy statement for 2021/22 (and adopt for the remainder of 2020/21) and determined that for 2021/22 the Authorised Limit for borrowing shall be £15.155m. They adopted the prudential indicators as set out in the Appendix 2 to the report and approved the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Statement for 2021/22 as set out in the attached Appendix 3.

3 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2021-22

- 3.1 The Fire Authority considered the Fire Authority's Pay Policy Statement for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. The Localism Act 2011 imposed a duty on relevant local authorities to prepare pay policy statements for each financial year, beginning in 2012/12, the Fire Authority was required to approve the statement by the statutory deadline of 31 March 2021. Members were satisfied with the statement, but sought clarification on re-engagement of employees. They were informed that re-engagement was a process, not undertaken at ESFRS, where an employee retires and is then re-employed. At ESFRS all vacancies were put out to open application to which anyone could apply for the role making the process transparent and fair for all. The Fire Authority approved the Pay Policy Statement as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

4 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM) PROJECT - ADDITIONAL FUNDING REQUIREMENT

- 4.1 The Fire Authority were provided with an update on the delivery of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) project, which aimed to deliver business critical enhancements to prevention, protection and response services, and they were asked to approve an additional investment of £1.094m bringing the total project budget to £1.969m to fund its full delivery.
- 4.2 The report outlined additional funding requirements for the CRM project to enable delivery of business benefits impacting the legal requirement to enforce the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order and meet legal expectations of the Fire and Rescue Services Act in respect to prevention of fires and ensuring risk information is available to crews, a critical firefighter safety provision. The enhancements would ensure that protection, prevention and Site Specific Risk Information (SSRI) related elements of the IRMP could be fully realised. The Service had not invested specifically in a Prevention Risk Management tool to date, but it was important that the risk information collected from prevention, protection and response activities, using the upgraded CRM system, was easily accessed by the appropriate member of staff at the appropriate time and that without the CRM enhancement, this would not be an efficient and reliable process.
- 4.3 The HMICFRS inspections review had clarified the expectations of the National Framework for prevention, protection, response and resilience. Additional functionality, unforeseen at the time of the original CRM business case, was required to respond effectively to the Grenfell enquiry outcomes, HMICFRS observations and recommendations for improvement specifically related to firefighter risk information (SSRI related), Safe and Well/Home Safety Visits and Business Safety inspections. The identified enhancements across the three areas, Minimum Viable Products (MVP's), now required an enhanced investment if the benefits were to be fully realised. This would ensure the Service was able to respond appropriately to areas requiring improvement, continue to meet its current and foreseeable statutory obligations, supply required intelligence to central government, implement key elements of the current IRMP and share risk critical information across teams and partners to support the effective safeguarding of staff and the public.

- 4.4 The Lead Member for IT told the Authority that whilst integration between systems had been lacking in the past he was confident that this project was futureproofed in so far as was possible, and he had no hesitation in recommending it to Members for approval.
- 4.5 The Fire Authority agreed to note the progress on the current SSRI development and completion of the upgrade to Dynamics 365 as part of the CRM project. Members agreed to the additional funding for the completion in full of the delivery of the MVP2 modules (Prevention, Protection and Sharing Risk Information enhancements) at a cost of £0.946m and the additional funding for the completion of the MVP3 modules (Prevention, Protection and Sharing Risk Information enhancements) at a cost of £0.148m from the source identified in the report. They noted the risks to the funding sources set out in the report and that should they crystalize then the Authority would need to consider reallocation of resources currently committed to other priorities.

5 PEOPLE STRATEGY 2021-2025

- 5.1 The Fire Authority considered the ESFRS People Strategy 2021-2025 which had been developed both collaboratively and in support of and aligned to the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) and the Corporate Plan. The strategy had been reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team, other senior officers and Trade Unions and took into account the findings of the 2019 HMICFRS Inspection and the State of the Fire and Rescue Service Report of January 2020.
- 5.2 The Authority were informed that the People Strategy had been created to fully align with the IRMP and the NFCC's People and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategies. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) was woven throughout the Service and external EDI was front and centre to the Safer Communities Strategy. The People Strategy set out where the Service intends to be in 5 years' time, with the aim to better understand and represent our communities.
- 5.3 With regards to Training delivery, the EDI training was being revised and sessions on behaviours were being rolled out to all staff. The training was currently virtual, but this was a blended approach and not solely e-learning. There was a benefit to virtual provision in our specific circumstances, as the Service was shift based it enabled staff greater flexibility to complete courses.
- 5.4 Members queried what was being done to try and ensure that the workforce better represented the diversity of the community it served. There had been no significant Firefighter recruitment for 10 years and there was a high retirement profile coming up. Recruitment would be opening in June 2021. ESFRS had already been determinedly recruiting diversity into volunteers and cadets and there was heavy engagement regarding this matter both locally and nationally.

- 5.6 The Fire Authority agreed to approve the People Strategy 2021-2025 and the subsequent plan of work. Members noted the funding required in order to deliver the deliverables outlined within the strategy and that that regular reports on the delivery of the People Strategy would be presented to the Senior Leadership Team and the Fire Authority. The Authority agreed to delegate authority to the Chief Fire Officer, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chair, to make presentational amendments to the People Strategy.

COUNCILLOR ROY GALLEY
CHAIRMAN OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

11 February 2021