

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, 8 September 2022.

Present: Councillors Galley (Chairman), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Azad, Dowling, Evans, Geary, Hamilton, Maples, Marlow-Eastwood, Peltzer Dunn, Powell, Redstone, Scott, Taylor, Theobald, Ungar and West

Apologies: Councillor Osborne.

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 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE OUTCOME REPORT 2021/22

- 1.1 The Fire Authority considered a report presenting the annual performance results for 2021/22. In total there were twenty-one indicators, but only sixteen had comparable data due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Eight of the top-level indicators improved or met the target set in 2021/22 and eight showed a decline. Comparison would remain difficult with the years affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, however, there was already a noticeable direction back to pre-pandemic levels. There had been an increase in both the number of incidents and the levels of staff sickness. There had been a reduction in serious fires and the Service was performing as expected with regards to containing a fire to the room of origin.
- 1.2 Members queried what were the improvements that were so successful in Eastbourne and Rother and sought clarity on increases in Accidental Dwelling Fires (ADF) despite the significant outreach work being undertaken. The Covid-19 pandemic had changed and impacted how the Service had to work. The Annual Assessment of Risk was used to target those groups that were most in need of safety advice especially in the prevention of ADFs, the improvements in Eastbourne and Rother demonstrated the success of targeted initiatives.
- 1.3 Members asked about attendance at Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs) and response times. The Authority were reminded that they had taken the decision not to attend AFAs, as it was still early days it would be a while before the figures would be available on this change. Control officers provided challenge to calls, under a nationally recognised process, to establish that it was indeed a false alarm, if there was any doubt the Service would attend. The Service had consulted with the public on how they would like to see response standards reported, there were two ways of measuring; an 'on station' response and an 'on-call' response.
- 1.4 There was a question regarding whether increasing number of Electric Vehicles (EV) presented an increased risk. This was a well-known risk, lithium batteries burn in a specific and difficult to control way, the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) had provided national guidance and additional local guidance had been put in place. Members could assist in the management of this risk by ensuring that their planning colleagues considered EV fires when granting permission to build underground car parks or the fitting of charging points in existing.

- 1.5 Members were reassured that the Service was addressing the increase in staff sickness figures. During the pandemic staff sickness had reduced dramatically and was now showing a return to pre-pandemic levels. There were several factors influencing the figures, including NHS waiting times, ill-health retirements, and delays to occupational health appointments. Work was underway to improve Occupational Health facilities and the Service had introduced wellbeing hubs, wellbeing champions, and Mental Health first aiders. This was a national point of focus as sickness in fire and rescue services was difficult to manage due to the nature of the work we do. There were injuries that people could work with in other careers that they could not in the fire service. However, back and Musculo-skeletal injuries had been overtaken by mental health as a cause of absence. The Service was encouraging conversations and that it was OK to say that you are not OK. The Service had improved its response to trauma, but the nature of what crews attend would always be an issue. The increased retirement age would also have an impact, and potentially there would be increased long-term sickness, being a firefighter was a difficult job at 50 and even tougher at 60.
- 1.6 The Fire Authority approved the performance results and progress towards achieving the Service's purpose and commitments, also the remedial actions that had been taken to address areas of under performance in the priority areas.

2 REVENUE BUDGET & CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2022/23

- 2.1 The Fire Authority received a report presenting the findings of the Month 4 monitoring undertaken on the Revenue and Capital Budget 2022/23 and Capital Programme 2022/23 to 2026/27. It was agreed by the Fire Authority, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, that this item could be discussed simultaneously with agenda item 180 – Strategic Service Planning & Medium Term Financial Plan 2023/24 as there were many overlaps that would affect this report.
- 2.2 The current year forecast was for a Revenue overspend of £446,000 due to pressures including being over establishment with Firefighters and costs of overtime in the Safer Communities Directorate and Training. There was an underspend/slippage of 40% regarding the Capital Programme, this affected both fleet/engineering and estates. There were worldwide supply chain disruptions affecting both programmes, both in terms of availability of vehicles and the cost of materials for estates projects. Officers described work taking place to prioritise projects and Members supported an approach that committed to a smaller number of projects, delivered them in full and then moved on to the next tranche rather than trying to deliver more than was possible at once.
- 2.3 There were several risks affecting the organisation including additional pay awards and inflationary pressures on non-pay spend above the 2% budgeted. There were national pay negotiations ongoing for all staff. The offer to Green book had been £1,925 per person, currently in consultation, and the 2% offer made to Grey/Gold book staff had been rejected. Recent public sector pay awards more generally, for example to police and NHS staff had been around 5-6%. It was expected that risks resulting from both pay and non-pay inflation may be in the region of £1,300,000 to £2,000,000 on top of the forecast Revenue overspend.
- 2.4 Members were deeply concerned by the inflation figures and that these were predicted to rise further. There was no indication of when the rises would end, and that the Authority were clearly not in times of "business as usual" in terms of budget setting. Members were keen that the Service continue to seek additional funding from central Government.

- 2.5 The Finance team were working closely with other departments to get more accurate budget forecasts. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) had agreed some actions including management of vacancies and oversight of overtime claims. They would also be reviewing options to manage non-pay related spending including expenses, travel, hire of external venues and printing costs. Members were reminded that the Authority had some contingency within the Revenue budget and reserves which it could use to fund unplanned spend in the current financial year.
- 2.6 The Authority has been well managed financially and this put it in a good position when compared to some other Fire Authorities, to tackle the financial challenges ahead. Because of the uncertainty surrounding both funding and costs a full update of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) was not possible this year. Instead, the paper provided an illustration of the potential funding gap the Authority faced in 2023/24. This was the third year in a row that a one year settlement had been received from Government. It was unclear what this year's settlement would look like, figures were not due until late December 2022, but the messaging from Government indicated that Local Authorities would not get any additional help on either pay or price inflation. The funding scenarios had been reviewed and were based on cash +2% (for Settlement Funding Assessment) and the spending assumptions included the full year impact of forecast pay awards for 2022/23. There was also an assumption that a pay increase of 4% for all staff for would be necessary in 2023/24. The "illustrative scenario" for next year was a potential funding gap of £3,000,000. Members were reminded that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Authority's expenditure was staffing with the majority of that being frontline.
- 2.7 The Service confirmed that they were continuing, through several channels, to lobby Government regarding funding. Officers held regular meetings with the local MPs and had been very clear with them about the situation that the Authority faced. The Chairman had written to the Fire Minister and the NFCC had made submissions to Government. Officers were doing all they could but were aware too of the wider context and that all Fire Authorities were in the same position.
- 2.8 The Authority were grateful for the information and clarity and were understanding of the likely need for them to re-visit the Integrated Risk Management Plan. Support was expressed for continued lobbying for a fair and equitable funding settlement including increased council tax flexibility. The Authority recognised that it was possible that they may have to consider the "core Service offer" at this challenging time.
- 2.9 The Fire Authority agreed to note the risks to Revenue Budget and projected overspend, risks to the Capital Programme, reduced net forecast drawdown from reserves, grants available and spending plans, monitoring of savings taken in 2022/23, and the current year investments and borrowing.

3 STRATEGIC SERVICE PLANNING & MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2023/24

- 3.1 The Fire Authority considered the report providing Members with an update on the Authority's financial planning position in advance of the start of the Service Planning and Budget Setting process for 2023/24 onwards. The Fire Authority discussed this report simultaneously with item 179 – Revenue Budget & Capital Programme Monitoring 2022/23 as there were many overlaps that would affect this report. The key discussion points on this report are covered in the notes for the previous item.

- 3.2 The Fire Authority agreed to accept an additional recommendation to this report, stating:
- “The Fire Authority requests a report to a future meeting outlining the range of options available to deal with the risk factors raised in the report.”
- 3.3 The Fire Authority agreed to note the report and its assessment of the potential funding gap for 2023/24, considered the risks and assumptions set out in the report, policy preferences for Council Tax namely continued lobbying for increased flexibility, and approved the planning assumption that Protection Grant would continue at its current level and to build this into the MTFP.

4 CORE CODE OF ETHICS

- 4.1 The Fire Authority considered a report providing Members with an update on progress in implementing the national Core Code of Ethics Fire Standard that had been developed in partnership with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), Local Government Association (LGA) and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC). The Core Code of Ethics had been introduced in May 2021 and was designed to help employees of Fire and Rescue Services act in the best way towards each other and while serving the public. Those who govern fire and rescue services are asked to demonstrate their commitment to the Core Code of Ethics by championing its use.
- 4.2 The Service had long been committed to ensuring staff had clear guidance on expectations regarding behaviour, including the Service values of Proud, Accountable, Integrity, and Respect. This had been further enhanced with the creation and implementation of the Leadership and Behaviour Framework and rolling reviews. Members were pleased to see that there was significant reference to equality, diversity and inclusion in the code.
- 4.3 The Fire Authority agreed to note the progress of the Service in implementing the National Code of Ethics, the move of the Code into business as usual, and confirmed its commitment to the Code of Ethics

COUNCILLOR ROY GALLEY
CHAIRMAN OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

8 September 2022