

## EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

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### 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, 7 December 2023.

Present: Councillors Galley (Chairman), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Asaduzzaman, Azad, Dowling, Evans, Geary, Goddard, Maples, Marlow-Eastwood, Muten, Osborne, Redstone, Scott, Shing, Theobald 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 PROVISION OF MONITORING OFFICER, DEPUTY MONITORING OFFICE & LEGAL SERVICES**

*The Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer left the meeting for the duration of this agenda item.*

- 1.1 The Fire Authority considered the arrangements for the provision of legal services and Monitoring Officer support from 1 April 2024. The current legal services collaboration between the Fire Authority and Brighton & Hove City Council (B&HCC) was due to expire on 31 March 2024. The Monitoring Officer (MO) was the chief legal advisor to the Fire Authority and Senior Leadership Team, the role was a statutory function as set out in the Fire Authority's Combination Order. Historically, since the creation of the Fire Authority in 1997, the function had been provided by B&HCC as part of the split between constituent authorities, with East Sussex County Council providing support through financial services & internal audit. The Deputy Monitoring Officer was appointed by the MO and contracted to East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service for 2 days a week, providing a wide range of legal support including prosecutions, and support for governance matters. The Service also bought into a wider legal provision from B&HCC, this was very responsive and was cost effective in terms of benchmarking.
- 1.2 It was agreed that the Monitoring Officer of B&HCC continue to be the appointed Monitoring Officer for the Authority. That the provision of Legal Services, Monitoring Officer appointment and deputising arrangements are to be provided by B&HCC for a three-year period with the option to extend for a further two years. To delegate authority to the Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer to agree the detail of the new agreement with B&HCC and to note that, in accordance with the Authority's Procurement Standing Order (PSO) 4.1, the Treasurer, after consultation with the Monitoring Officer, Procurement Manager and Chairman, had approved a waiver of PSO 2.7.

#### **2 2024/25 TO 2028/29 STRATEGIC SERVICE PLANNING AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN**

- 2.1 The Fire Authority were updated on the Authority's financial planning position in advance of the receipt of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement (LGFS) for 2024/25 and the submission of budget proposals and a refreshed Medium Term Finance Plan (MTFP) to the Fire Authority at its meeting in February 2024. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) had met on 28 November 2023 to discuss a number of proposals that could allow a balanced budget to be set.

- 2.2 There remained significant financial uncertainty due to another 1-year settlement and a Parliamentary General Election in 2024 with no party indicating that there would be increased investment in the Fire Sector. There was a risk that even a May 2024 election would not leave sufficient time to carry out a Comprehensive Spending Review and this could result in a further one year settlement for 2025/26. A significant proportion of the savings and flexibilities being considered were one-offs. Lower levels of reserves meant there was less financial flexibility and it was important that there was a realistic reduction in ambition and acceptance of what could be achieved in the current financial climate. The settlement figures were not due until 19 December 2023, but the Government had published a revised Local Government Funding Policy Statement which confirmed the Council Tax referendum principles. It was disappointing that despite presenting a strong case for additional council tax flexibility of £5, the fire sector had only been allowed a maximum of 3%.
- 2.3 Members discussed the impact of raising Council Tax on local council tax payers given the current financial situation but recognised that in the absence of a sustainable financial settlement from government then increasing council tax was the only way to protect local services. Members had a lengthy discussion during which many concerns for future funding, and the expectation on the Service to perform more for less money were aired. These included concerns around the Service being able to plan properly when in receipt of 1-year settlements and that the Government need to address this manner of local government funding.
- 2.4 The Fire Authority noted the report and its assessment of the potential funding gap for 2024/25, provided comment on the risks and assumptions set out in the report and provided comment on the savings proposals set out in the report and agreed that they would be presented with formal proposals for decision in February 2024.

### **3 INTEGRATED TRANSPORT FUNCTION FORT ROAD SITE, NEWHAVEN**

- 3.1 The Fire Authority considered an update on the business case for the re-development of the Fort Road site in Newhaven and seeking approval to vary the capital programme to reflect the scheme costs. Members asked what liaison had been undertaken with other blue light services and other organisations with heavy fleet vehicles and were reminded that this project had a long history. The Integrated Transport Function project had been underway in various guises for well over 8 years and lengthy negotiations had taken place with South-East Coast Ambulance Service, Sussex and Surrey Police and other local authorities. As there had been no workable options to progress in a collaboration the approach to the project had changed, and it was this that had been presented to Members over the past few months, culminating in this report. Continuing with the current provision was no longer an option and the grant was running up to its deadline for being utilized.
- 3.2 It was confirmed that the outsourcing figure of £80,000 was a conservative estimate, currently the Service outsourced all heavy fleet maintenance but by bringing Fort Road online as the Engineering hub the Service would have the capacity and facilities to bring this in-house, potentially creating opportunities to undertake work for other organisations. There was confidence in the contingency planning and fund level which was in accordance with best practice. Pre-planning advice had been sought and any delays would be mitigated by resequencing the programme. The anticipated timeframe would be to submit the planning application in February 2024 with a view to completion of the project by 2025.
- 3.3 The Authority agreed that the existing capital schemes for Integrated Transport and Fort Road RIBA Stages 1-2 would be deleted and replaced with a new scheme Fort Road – Engineering Workshop and that the gross funding for the scheme is increased from £0.880m to £2.836m. They agreed that the Fire Transformation Fund grant of £1.5m be recognised in the capital asset strategy giving a net scheme budget of £1.336m and the forecast revenue consequences of the scheme would be built into the MTFP. The Authority noted that the Senior Leadership Team had approved the full business case.

**COUNCILLOR ROY GALLEY**  
**CHAIRMAN OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY**

7 December 2023