

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 September 2024.

Councillors Evans (Chair), Lambert (Vice-Chair), Asaduzzaman, Azad, Geary, Hill, Hollidge, Maples, Marlow-Eastwood, O'Quinn, Osborne, Pragnell, Redstone, Rodohan, Shing and Theobald

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 REVENUE & CAPITAL BUDGET 2024/25 AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024/25 TO 2028/29 MONITORING AT MONTH 4 (END JULY)

- 1.1 The Fire Authority received a report providing an update on the revenue and capital budget 2024/25 and capital programme 2024/25 to 2028/29. This was the second report to Members for the 2024/25 financial year and highlighted the findings from the month 4 monitoring. A net revenue overspend of £1.1million had been identified and was due to pressures including £926,000 on overtime and on-call costs within Safer Communities, £230,000 in Service Training Centre and £118,000 of at risk savings, primarily from Future Foundations. There were also underspends including £100,000 of Treasury Management interest and £50,000 reduction in borrowing costs.
- 1.2 There would be a significant impact on reserves at year end if the overspend could not be reduced; the financial position was regularly reviewed and work was in progress via the Safer Communities Action Plan to reduce the reliance on fixed term contracts and overtime, the Strategic Review of Training to reduce the impact of training on availability, and to identify options for further spend controls across the Service. As part of budget setting for 2025/26 the Service was also looking at re-baselining staffing budgets within the operational Groups. The current year forecast a spend of £8.956 million out of the £11.245 million Capital Budget approved by the Fire Authority. This included the renovation works at Preston Circus and Design Guide projects at Bohemia Road and Eastbourne. It was noted that the Engineering Workshop Hub project at Fort Road Newhaven had received final planning permission.
- 1.3 Members enquired about overtime costs and the flexible resourcing pool (FRP). Due to changes to crewing models there had been an increase in staff movement between watches this year and as a consequence annual leave had been honoured leading to additional shortfalls in cover over the summer. There were plans to review training delivery ensuring the number of staff committed to training each day does not exceed agreed levels and was minimised at peak annual leave times. The Strategic Review of Training would see an increase in training being undertaken on station rather than at Service Training Centre. There would always be a need for overtime but current levels would reduce; overtime should be for short term, unplanned events and the detailed crewing plan would see the levels reduce by the end of the financial year. The FRP had an establishment of 5 people; it was working well but refinements would be needed to maximise the impact. Work was underway to identify the optimal affordable position in respect to core establishment, FRP establishment and overtime budget to secure the delivery of the core station policy.

- 1.4 With regards to reducing the number of long term absences Members were reminded that staff had access to the Service's Occupational Health and a trial of the Benenden scheme was assisting with some of the time delays in dealing with staff sickness. There had been a significant change in employment regulations over the past five years and firefighters, who used to be allowed to retire at 50, were now expected to work operationally until they were 60 years old. As a direct result, it was anticipated there would be an increase in the number of ill-health retirements and other age-related illnesses including hearing and sight problems. Members appreciated the update, they were concerned about future impacts of the changed retirement age as this had the potential to be a huge problem for fire services. They were pleased to hear the Service was updating its well-being offer and seeking to be as preventative as possible. However, it was understood there was a limit to what a single employer could do and individuals would continue to be supported in work as well as being directed to the NHS, Benenden, the Firefighters Charity and others to seek additional assistance.
- 1.5 Members were pleased there had been successful bids for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments from Lewes District Council (LDC) for Seaford and Barcombe Fire Stations but queried why there were none from Brighton & Hove City Council (B&HCC). CIL funding was actively pursued but the national regime was stacked against emergency services accessing these funds. Lobbying had taken place to change the guidance. It was hoped there would be further successful bids through LDC, particularly for Lewes Fire Station, although this was dependent on matching CIL funding being granted by the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA). There were also two much bigger bids that had been made to LDC and SDNPA for Lewes Fire Station but these had been unsuccessful and a meeting was being sought to plan a new approach. Bids had been made to other Local Authorities in the Service's area but all were unsuccessful and until national changes were made it would remain difficult for the Service to access them.
- 1.6 There was some discussion regarding borrowing and investment including the use of 95 day investments and ethical considerations regarding banks that were used. The approved Treasury Management Strategy prioritised security and liquidity over yield and that ESG (environmental, social and governance) investments were considered where they matched or exceeded the rates offered by non ESG investments. The Service had invested in ESG products and continued to explore new options however at the moment returns were not comparable and/or investment thresholds were too high. With regards to the 95 days investment in question it had been held for some time and had been made due to the interest rate being above the Bank of England base rate. The Fire Authority agreed to the recommendations set out in the report in full.

2 2025/26 TO 2029/30 STRATEGIC SERVICE PLANNING AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

- 2.1 The Fire Authority were provided with an update on the financial planning position in advance of the start of the service planning and budget setting process for 2025/26 onwards. Whilst the main purpose was to set the financial context for the service planning process the fundamental aim was to determine how best to deliver the Authority's purpose and commitments, the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) and the targets and priorities that underpinned them within the context of the current estimate of available financial resources for the period 2025/26 to 2029/30.

- 2.2 The report would normally set out a full review of the Authority's existing five-year Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). But, given the continued level of uncertainty, over the future of local government funding, it set out an assessment of the 2025/26 revenue budget only. A full review of the MTFP would be presented in December 2024 and February 2025. There remains significant uncertainty for Local Authority funding. It is anticipated that the Government would provide a further one year settlement for 2025/26, with a multi-year settlement from 2026/27 onwards, following a Comprehensive Spending Review in Spring 2025. The Budget Statement in October would set out spending limits for 2025/26 for Government Departments and may indicate the Government's intentions regarding council tax referendum thresholds. It was unlikely that the budget would provide detail on individual fire authorities settlements, this would be received on a provisional basis in late December.
- 2.3 The Authority remained reliant on one-off grants and as the existing comprehensive spending review cycle ended this year it meant even more uncertainty and made planning extremely difficult. There were a number of risks including that the Grenfell Tower one report outcomes remained not fully funded and the recent publication of the Grenfell Tower two would have impacts that were currently unknown. Pay remained a risk, for the last three years the Authority had budgeted 2% to cover pay awards and each year the pay award agreed by the National Joint Council had exceeded the Authority's budget provision. The Fire sector continued to lobby government for cash real settlements, retention of one off grants, funding for new burdens and for capital funding to be re-instated.
- 2.4 Lobbying continued for Fire Authorities to again be permitted £5 council tax flexibility rather than the current 2.99% limit. Appendix 2 of the report contained the 2025/26 Revenue Budget modelling and presented the best and worst case scenarios with regards to the funding gap which ranged from £1.1m to £3.7m. Members were reminded that around 70% of the Authority's annual budget was spent on staff and most of those were operational. Savings options were currently being explored which were estimated could deliver £1 - 1.5 million, however there would be far more work to do to meet the savings required by the worst case scenario. The Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer felt it was essential to record the difficult and stark message that the Fire Authority needed a settlement that matched or was close to the best case scenario otherwise there was a very real risk that the Authority may have to cut community facing services.
- 2.5 Lobbying remained essential, changes to legislation often meant more work and up until now these changes were funded by one-off grants which can be removed but the work associated continued, the expectations on the Service increased every single year. Officers were making requests to Government that these grants be included in base budgets. Collective meetings with MPs had been arranged and there were specialist meetings planned with the MPs for the Brighton & Hove City Council area with a focus on high-rise buildings and for Hastings with reference to flooding. There was further discussion on pay awards and whether there had been increased claims. The green book staff pay award had not yet been agreed for this year; grey book staff had agreed this year's pay award but no claim had yet been submitted for next year. For the past three years the award for both had been greater than the amount that had been budgeted, each extra percentage increase in pay equated to £413,000.

- 2.6 The Authority discussed the likely need to raise council tax precepts, it was undesirable but, if it were necessary they would appreciate the option of greater flexibility. Officers assured them that, where possible, alternative ways of funding were always being sought including consideration of sponsorship for the Cadets programme, applying for CIL funding, funding for sustainability improvements and reviewing the application of fees and charges for non-statutory functions. Members were very concerned at the possibility of cuts to services and requested that if these were needed that a list of options be prepared for them, but it was accepted that the Service may have to make changes to ensure that its budget was spent efficiently.
- 2.7 Members were reminded that currently there were some incidents that the Service attended when it had no statutory responsibility to do so. Most notably this included flooding, the statutory duty for which sat with the Environment Agency. Members agreed there needed to be efforts from Government and elected representatives to ensure other agencies were enabled and obliged to exercise their responsibilities and undertake all work necessary with regards to flood prevention to ensure flood defences were built, rivers and gullies were clear and extraction systems were working. ESFRS was a small part of the flooding response and lobbying was underway for those agencies to be forced to do their duties. The Fire Authority agreed in full to the recommendations as set out in the report.

3 FLEET & EQUIPMENT STRATEGY 2025-2030

- 3.1 The Fire Authority considered a report seeking approval for the refreshed Fleet & Equipment Strategy 2025-2030. The strategy sought to ensure that the workforce had the necessary fleet and equipment to make sure it could deliver excellent service to our communities. It identified key areas of work that had commenced and once implemented would ensure greater intra-operability with 4F partners. It also ensured that the Service made appropriate efficiencies. Updates included fleet agility and updating specialist vehicles e.g. wildfire response, the aim was to develop vehicles that were targeted, but had the ability to be more overarching and respond to more incidents.
- 3.2 Members were concerned with regards to finances as there was a lot in the strategy that was dependent on increased funding, and recognising that a functioning, viable fleet was essential the Service needed to be confident that it could achieve at least some of the “wish list.” Once multi-year funding was available again the Authority could be more confident in its ability to deliver this strategy, it was accepted that there was currently no pot of spare money and spending would have to be decided on a priority basis but the request today was for the Fire Authority to approve the strategic intent but not approve funding. The Fire Authority approved the Fleet & Equipment Strategy 2025-2030 and the other recommendations as set out in the report.

4 RESPONSE & RESILIENCE STRATEGY 2025-2030

- 4.1 The Fire Authority considered a report seeking approval for the Response & Resilience Strategy 2025-2030. The refreshed strategy had been based on the Strategic Assessment of Risk and the Community Risk Management Plan as well as in support of other Service strategies. The deliverables took into consideration findings from the third round of HMICFRS inspections and the 2023 HMICFRS State of Fire and Rescue Services report published in May 2024. Key points of note from the new strategy included the increased risk of lithium-ion batteries, the increased risk of wildfires and flooding and also increased collaboration and operational alignment with our neighbouring authorities.

- 4.2 There was some discussion regarding the context for the response times set out in the strategy and particularly the national standard versus local targets and whether the strategy document could be refreshed throughout the process. Members were reminded that the Annual Plan provided the context of what would be undertaken throughout the year and that the Service strategies would not be revised as they were statements of intent rather than actions. The Authority approved the Response & Resilience Strategy 2025-2030 and the other recommendations set out in the report.

5 PREVENTION & PROTECTION STRATEGY 2025-2030

- 5.1 The Fire Authority considered a report seeking approval for the Prevention & Protection Strategy 2025-2030. Whilst this strategy was not out of date it was timely to revise it based on the publication of the second Grenfell Tower report; both Grenfell Tower reports instigated changes within the protection department, and it was key to set these out clearly. The Fire Authority approved the Prevention & Protection Strategy 2025-2030 and noted that regular reports on the delivery of the strategy would be presented to the Scrutiny & Audit Panel.

6 2023/24 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE OUTCOME REPORT

- 6.1 The Fire Authority were presented with the annual performance results for 2023/24, year-end results demonstrated improved performance across a number of areas with 13 indicators achieving their targets, five being within the agreed tolerance and four falling outside of the agreed tolerance. The number of accidental dwelling fires had plateaued in recent years, this represented good performance in the context of the number of homes increasing without fires doing so at the same speed. In 2023/24 the Community Safety teams and operational crews had undertaken 9075 Home Safety Visits (HSV), exceeding the target of 9000. 91.2% of these HSVs were to vulnerable members of the community. Sickness absence remained a priority for the Service and performance had decreased against previous year with 10.8 shifts lost against 10.2 in 2022/23.
- 6.2 Members were informed that 47.5% of our total incidents in 2023/24 were to false alarms, and of these a third were due to automatic fire detector systems this was an increase against the previous year. In 2023 the Authority had agreed to not respond to all low risk commercial premises with automatic fire alarms and during 2023/24 task force had been stood up to implement these changes. As a result, the Service was already seeing a substantial reduction in the number of these incidents being attended and it was anticipated that this would continue throughout the year. Appendix 2 to this report contained the 'Every Contact Counts' document and Members were asked to share it with their residents and their constituent authorities.

6.3 Members asked if work was being done with repeat offenders regarding automatic fire alarm call outs, they were informed that there was a “top ten” list who were written to on a monthly basis and targeted by local crews, there was also a focus on careline premises where appropriate. Members felt there was a lot to celebrate within the report and asked whether the reduction in accidental dwelling fires aligned with prevention work and education schemes. 60% of accidental dwelling fires originated in kitchens and there was a huge amount of preventative work related to this but a relationship was hard to determine with any certainty. HSVs were undertaken based on highest risk areas and there was some evidence that this prevention activity was working. There was some concern regarding apparent increases in some geographical areas, but it was accepted that presentation of these figures as a percentage could make things look worse than they really were, the increases that were queried represented very small numbers indeed. The Fire Authority considered and noted the performance results and progress towards achieving the services purpose and commitments as contained in Appendix 1 of the report.

7 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEMES CONSULTATION ON PROPOSED CHANGES FOR 2025/26

7.1 The Fire Authority considered a report requesting agreement to the Authority’s response to consultations by local billing authorities on proposed changes to their Local Council Tax Reduction Schemes (LCTRS) for 2025/26. Billing authorities were required to review their LCTRS annually and to consult publicly on proposed changes, precepting authorities with statutory consultees in this process but the decision to set or change an LCTRS rested solely with each billing authority.

7.2 Eastbourne Borough Council (EBC) was consulting on changes to their LCTRS for 2025/26 and confirmation was awaited from the other five billing authorities as to whether they planned to consult on any changes to theirs. The report set out the financial impact of the proposed changes and recommended an Authority response to the consultation. Changes proposed by EBC aligned them with the position of the four other Districts and Boroughs who had a maximum discount of 100%. Brighton & Hove City Council currently had a maximum discount of 82%. The draft response included in the report was consistent with that provided to Rother District Council this time last year. Members noted the proposed changes to LCTRSs and approved the Authority’s consultation response as set out paragraph 2.7 of the report.

**COUNCILLOR AMANDA EVANS
CHAIR OF EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY**

5 September 2024