

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Minutes of the extraordinary meeting of North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority held on Tuesday 2 December 2014 at Conwy Business Centre, Llandudno Junction. Meeting commenced at 10.00am.

PRESENT

Councillor

M LI Davies (Chair)
P R Lewis (Deputy Chair)
L W Davies
R Davies
A I Dunbar
B Dunn
R J Dutton OBE
A Evans
J G Evans
C Hughes
R O Jones
G Lowe
H McGuill
P Owen
R E Parry
M A Reece
W P Shotton
D Simmons
J R Skelland
A Tansley
D Taylor
W O Thomas
G G Williams
R Wright

Representing

Denbighshire County Council
Conwy County Borough Council
Anglesey County Council
Denbighshire County Council
Flintshire County Council
Flintshire County Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Anglesey County Council
Gwynedd Council
Anglesey County Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Flintshire County Council
Denbighshire County Council
Conwy County Borough Council
Flintshire County Council
Flintshire County Council
Denbighshire County Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Conwy County Borough Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Flintshire County Council
Gwynedd Council
Gwynedd Council

Also present:

S A Smith (Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive); K W Finch (Treasurer to the Authority); G Owens (Deputy Clerk and Monitoring Officer); D Docx (Deputy Chief Fire Officer); R Simmons and R Fairhead (Assistant Chief Fire Officers); G W Griffiths (Training and Development Manager); G Brandrick (Senior Fire Safety Manager); S Millington (Area Manager); K Roberts (Senior Operations Manager); L Roberts (Senior Control and Business Continuity Manager); S Morris (Corporate Planning Manager); T Williams (Corporate Communications Manager); S Forrest (Accountant, Treasurer's Department, Conwy County Borough Council); A Davies (Member Liaison Officer) and S Jones (Member Liaison Assistant).

APOLOGIES

Councillor

D A MacRae
D J Miles

Representing

Conwy County Borough Council
Conwy County Borough Council

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

1.1 There were no declarations of interest.

2 URGENT MATTERS

2.1 There were no urgent matters.

At this point, the Chair explained that the order of the agenda would be changed and that agenda items 5, 6 and 7 would be discussed first. These three reports had been requested by the Executive Panel at its meeting on 27 October 2014. Having considered the information in these reports, Members would then be asked to consider agenda item 4 prior to making recommendations based on all information received. The decisions made will be the basis of the draft budget for 2015-16 presented for approval at the meeting on 15 December 2014.

3 RESPONSE TO NON-STATUTORY INCIDENTS

3.1 ACFO Fairhead presented the report which gave members information about the potential implications of ceasing to respond to incidents that fall outside the statutory functions of the Fire and Rescue Authority. Non-statutory functions include water rescue, rope/line rescue and large animal rescue. The information provided was around the number of these types of incidents attended since 2012/13, cost and the risks associated with ceasing these services. The Service currently provides resources and trained personnel to deal with these incidents and the costs associated are met from the Authority's revenue and capital budgets.

3.2 Members recognised the risks involved in ceasing any of the three services including public dissatisfaction, political pressure and challenge from the representative bodies. Although ceasing to provide the water rescue service would save in the region of £75,000 per annum, Members acknowledged that this service is deemed to be the most important and high profile of the three categories. The Service has invested in purpose-built water incident appliances and provides specialist training to ensure firefighters are prepared and able to deal with water rescue incidents.

3.3 It was noted that the rope/line rescue service is duplicated by alternative providers such as mountain rescue teams and HM Coastguard cliff rescue teams. The specialist large animal rescues incidents are generally attended by the RSPCA and could be further supported by a vet if required. The savings from ceasing these services would be around £16,000 and is more of a symbolic decision.

3.4 Members discussed various issues including recovering costs through insurance and charging for services. The CFO explained that charging for serious life saving work especially in terms of water rescues would be difficult to do and would reflect badly on the Service.

- 3.5 Cllr Wright expressed concern at the possibility of ceasing any of the three services and felt that savings should be made elsewhere. The Deputy Clerk explained that the Executive Panel had requested further information on the implications of ceasing these services and that the Authority was obliged to look at non-statutory duties as otherwise it would potentially be looking to minimise its statutory duties before non-statutory activity.
- 3.6 In response to a member's question about the equipment provided by the Welsh Government and the Authority's own capital investment in equipment, it was clarified that the Welsh Government does not believe that the fire and rescue authorities should have a statutory duty to undertake water rescues. The Authority's capital investment has enabled a more professional and workable water rescue service to be delivered.
- 3.7 In terms of reducing the training for these specialist skills it was confirmed that this would not be possible as there is a national mandatory standard that the firefighters must achieve and regular training is important to maintain their accreditation and skills.
- 3.8 The Chair brought the discussion to a close and explained that the recommendations would be considered once all reports had been discussed.

4 ATTENDANCE AT AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

- 4.1 ACFO Fairhead led members through the report which gave information on the potential implications of introducing a more robust policy for responding to 999 calls initiated by automatic fire alarms (AFA). The report provided information about the AFA calls received over the past three financial years including the cost of attending an AFA and the total number of fires notified via the actuation of an AFA system.
- 4.2 In an average year, NWFRS typically receives over 2,000 AFA calls and research has shown that 96%-97% of these fire alarm actuations are false alarms and not due to fire incidents at the premises. Members recognised that there were many issues of concern with the AFA systems and that sending an emergency response to a false alarm is costly and reduces availability of operational crews for genuine emergencies.
- 4.3 Members again felt that there should be a charging policy for repeat offenders with badly maintained systems but the CFO explained that there is case law that would prevent the Authority from charging for attendance at AFAs.
- 4.4 In order to reduce attendance at AFA calls the Service would develop a framework for control room staff to robustly question calls received due to AFAs and would only send a crew when they have verbal confirmation that there is a fire. However, it is recognised that a different risk criteria would be required to acknowledge the different types of premises, for example sheltered housing and commercial sites.
- 4.5 The Chair brought the discussion to a close and again explained that the recommendations would be considered once all reports had been discussed.

5 FURTHER REDUCTION OF OPERATIONAL OFFICER POSTS PROVIDING 24 HOUR COVER

- 5.1 ACFO Fairhead presented the report which requested additional information on the potential implications of reducing the number of operational officer posts in NWFRS.
- 5.2 The Service operates the nationally recognised Incident Command System (ICS) which defines the levels of command required to support safe and effective systems of work at operational incidents. Currently, there are 32 middle manager posts within the Service and it is the Chief Fire Officer's advice that although there are risks and fundamental issues for the Authority it would be possible to reduce the officer cadre from 32 to 28.
- 5.3 In response to Cllr's Shotton suggestion that the middle managers be reduced to 26 posts, the CFO explained that any reduction below 28 would create an unacceptable risk to the Authority and to the safety of operational personnel involved at incidents. The CFO explained that although the ICS refers to them as 'middle managers' they are actually officers who are fully skilled and trained to take command at major fire incidents and operate a 24/7 system 365 days per year. In addition to this they have day jobs within the Service and should the Authority decide to reduce the posts then this would cause capacity issues elsewhere in the Service.
- 5.4 It was also noted that having considered the retirement profile of the existing officer cadre it was unlikely that any reduction could be made without having to consider compulsory redundancy and members were reminded that the Authority has no existing voluntary or compulsory redundancy scheme for this staff group.
- 5.5 The Chair brought the discussion to a close and again explained that the recommendations would be considered once all reports had been discussed.

6 FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY BUDGET 2015-16

- 6.1 The Chief Fire Officer introduced the report which updated members as to the progress made in developing the Fire and Rescue Authority's draft budget for 2015-16.
- 6.2 The CFO reminded Members that the Authority was in its fourth year of a frozen budget and detailed the reductions made to date. Since the last Authority meeting, the WG has announced that it is reducing the community safety grant, 52% reduction in revenue and 50% reduction in capital. This will impact the prevention work including home fire safety checks (HFSCs), Phoenix and arson reduction work.

6.3 Briefing sessions have been held for all local authorities in North Wales which outlined the FRA's position in terms of budget and its improvement objectives for the future. The consultation document had been published and 179 responses had been received to date with 80% in favour of maintaining services and increasing the levy. To date, responses had been received from two local authorities, namely, Wrexham CBC and Flintshire CC. Wrexham CBC's response was appended to the report and the Deputy Clerk read out Flintshire's response which was as follows:

'The Council shares the concerns of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority to protect both the preventative and responsive services as far as possible. The Council requests the Fire Authority to review further the scope for efficiency savings and reductions in non-statutory services expenditure, and to be open to financial scrutiny and challenge in maximising value for money and the reduction of overhead costs whilst providing the same or better level of protection to the residents of Flintshire, to offset any increase in the levy to be met by the constituent North Wales councils.'

6.4 In addition to the medium term budget strategy the Authority had to address immediate unavoidable budget pressures for 2015-16 which is in the region of £750,000. Therefore the Executive Panel members at the meeting on 27 October had requested further information about the non statutory duties, AFAs and operational officer posts to be discussed at this extraordinary meeting. Further information had also been requested about Atal Tân, however, since then the trustees had decided to wind up the charity at the end of March 2015 therefore there will be no need to fund it in the next financial year.

6.5 At this point, the Deputy Clerk reminded all Members that they are expected to act in the best interests of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority when considering budget issues. Whilst accepting the advice, Cllr Skelland felt that it was difficult to forget his role as a councillor and agreed with the letter from Wrexham CBC's Leader that a frozen budget would be the preferred option as councils are having to deal with greater cuts than the FRA. Whilst recognising the predicament for councils, the CFO asked members to think of the fire and rescue service as being part of their council's public services and consider how to prioritise the fire and rescue service in relation to all services provided by local government to the public. The CFO also indicated that the preferred starting point would be no increase in levy, but that officers would endeavour to reduce any levy to the minimum amount possible.

6.6 The Chair thanked the Deputy Clerk for the reminder and the Members for their contributions and moved to the recommendations contained in the reports.

6.7 **RESOLVED to**

(i) note the risks around setting a balanced budget for 2015-16;

(ii) confirm that the 2015-16 budget should be constructed on the basis of the current level of service provision;

- (iii) **accept the recommendations of the Executive Panel that if necessary, the levy should be increased, up to the equivalent of £1 per head of the population;**
- (iv) **confirm that the following savings options should be implemented in 2015-16 with feedback to the Authority in 12 months' time on the impact of implementing these options:**
- reduction of revenue impact on capital expenditure because of the timing of construction work £87k
 - cease non-statutory services Atal Tân £35k
 - cease non-statutory services Rope rescue and large animal rescue £16k
 - reduced attendance at automatic fire alarms £25k
 - further reduce operational middle managers posts £250k
- (v) **on that basis recommend the Authority's draft budget for 2015-16.**

Councillors A I Dunbar, P W Shotton and M A Reece asked that their vote against resolutions 7 (ii), (iii) and (v) be recorded.