

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority
held at the Shropshire Education and Conference Centre,
Shrewsbury,
on Wednesday, 13 February 2008 at 2.00 pm**

Present

Councillors Lt Col Allen, Box, Major Coles, Mrs Greenaway, Groom, Hartin, Mrs Holyoak (Vice-Chair), Hurst-Knight, Dr Jones, Mason, Mellings, Minnery, Picken and West (Chair)

Before business commenced the Chair made a retirement presentation to Mike Howe, former Retained Station Manager from Market Drayton, who had retired from the Service on 31 December. The Chair also made reference to the MBE, which Mr Howe was to receive in May for services to the community.

Members then observed a minute's silence in memory of a long-serving Fire Authority Member, Derrick Hill of Much Wenlock, who had died in December.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Davies, Dr Drummond and Eade.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes

Members received the minutes of the Fire Authority meeting, held on 19 December 2007.

Resolved that the minutes of the Fire Authority meeting, held on 19 December 2007, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record

4 Public Questions

No questions, statements or petitions had been received from members of the public.

5 Strategy and Resources Committee

The Fire Authority received the minutes of the Strategy and Resources Committee meeting, held on 24 January 2008, and considered the recommendations at item 9c.

Resolved that the Fire Authority note the minutes of the Strategy and Resources Committee meeting, held on 24 January 2008, and agree the recommendations at item 9c

6 Consultation on Orders and Regulations relating to the Conduct of Local Authority Members in England

The Department for Communities and Local Government was currently consulting in respect of the new regulations and orders, which would flow from the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. Many of the regulations and orders related to new provisions, which would be dealt with by Standards Committee. This report sought the Fire Authority's agreement to the proposed consultation response attached as an appendix.

Having considered the proposed response to the consultation, Members

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) Agree the proposed response; and
- b) Delegate authority to the Clerk and Monitoring Officer to finalise and submit its response to the Department for Communities and Local Government

7 Lead Member Reporting Dates

Members considered a schedule, giving proposed dates for Lead Members to present their annual reports to the Authority.

Resolved that the Fire Authority agree the proposed dates for Lead Members to present their annual reports to the Authority

8 Monitoring of the Revenue Budget, including Prudential Indicators

This report formed part of the regular monitoring process undertaken throughout the year. It detailed the latest position on the revenue budget, recommending action where necessary, and also monitored the Fire Authority's Prudential Indicators.

The Principal Accountant brought Members' attention to paragraph 4 of the report, which showed that net underspend and overspend were broadly in balance. She confirmed that the Chair had agreed, under delegated powers, the request for the provision of thermal imaging cameras to ensure availability on each appliance, the cost of which was £27,000.

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) Note the progress on the revenue budget;
- b) Approve the virements, set out in paragraph 4; and
- c) Note the Fire Authority's position against its Prudential Indicators

Prior to presenting reports 9 and 10 the Treasurer requested Members to consider them together before making any decisions.

9 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Budget Recommendations 2008/09

This report brought together the recommendations of the Strategy and Resources Committee of 24 January 2008, which had been incorporated into report 10 on the precept, to be considered next on the agenda. In addition the outcome of the consultation process was reported.

The Treasurer brought Members' attention to the recommendation of the Strategy and Resources Committee that the precept be increased by 3.9%, rather than the 3.75% originally discussed. This would place the Fire Authority in a better position to deal with the potential deficit for 2010/11 and thereafter, as there would be an increase in resources coming through to the Authority.

10 Revenue Budget: 2008/09 Precept

This report sought Fire Authority approval to:

- A budget for 2008/09;
- Council Tax levels for 2008/09; and
- Precepts on billing authorities and related matters.

The Authority was required to issue a precept before 1 March 2008 and it was necessary for all of the items in the "Recommendations" section of the report to be taken together. For ease of reference the key elements of the budget had been set out in appendices to the report.

The Treasurer explained that this report gave effect to the recommendations contained in report 9, in a form prescribed by the Government. He then circulated a draft of the Fire Authority's 2008/09 Council Tax leaflet. He advised that Shropshire County Council had approached officers to ask whether the Fire Authority would, in future years, enter into a joint leaflet with the Council and he asked for Members' comments on this issue.

Members then discussed the content of both reports and a summary of the main points of their debate is provided below.

9 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Budget Recommendations 2008/09

Councillor Mrs Holyoak, as Vice-Chair of the Committee, advised that the Strategy and Resources Committee had given thorough consideration to recommending a 3.9% increase in the precept. Furthermore, the public consultation exercise had endorsed this approach.

Other Members agreed that a 3.9% increase provided some leeway to reduce the budget deficit in 2010/11. It was, however, important that the deficit be kept under review and further efficiencies found, whilst maximising investment in the Service. There was consensus that the Fire Service was well regarded in the community and that the public was not averse to spending a little more in light of the value for money provided.

Councillor Mrs Holyoak proposed, Councillor Minnery seconded, and it was

Resolved unanimously that the Fire Authority:

- a) Accept the recommendations of its Strategy and Resources Committee in order to set its capital, reserves and provisions and revenue budgets together with its precept for 2008/09;
- b) Note the revisions to the statement on the robustness of the budget and adequacy of the reserves; and
- c) Accept the key principles to incorporate in the updated Medium Term Financial Plan

10 Revenue Budget: 2008/09 Precept

Having looked at the draft Fire Authority's 2008/09 Council Tax leaflet, Members considered whether or not, in future years, the Authority should produce a joint leaflet with Shropshire County Council. They agreed that this needed to be considered carefully at a later stage, particularly as a separate leaflet was a good vehicle for the Authority to promote fire safety messages. Furthermore, it was felt that there should be consistency across the area covered by the Fire Authority, which included Borough of Telford & Wrekin.

Councillor Mrs Holyoak proposed, Councillor Minnery seconded, and it was

Resolved unanimously that the Fire Authority:

- a) Approve that a net budget requirement be set at £20,034,156 (calculated in accordance with the provisions of Section 43(4) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992);

- b) Approve a total precept of £12,326,332 to be levied on the billing authorities;
- c) Approve a Council Tax resulting in a basic amount of Council Tax at Band D calculated in accordance with the provisions of the 1992 Act (Section 44) of £78.39;
- d) Approve, under Section 40(2) of the 1992 Act:
 - a. The amount of Council Tax calculated for each category of dwelling in each billing authority's area, as follows:

Band	2008/09 Council Tax £ p
A	52.26
B	60.97
C	69.68
D	78.39
E	95.81
F	113.23
G	130.65
H	156.78

- b. The amount calculated (in accordance with Section 48 of the 1992 Act) as payable by billing authorities for 2008/09, as follows:

Council	Precept £
Bridgnorth District Council	1,605,755
North Shropshire District Council	1,699,780
Oswestry Borough Council	1,038,377
Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council	2,731,458
South Shropshire District Council	1,317,023
Borough of Telford & Wrekin Council	3,933,939
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	12,326,332

- e) Approve that the Treasurer:
 - i Issue the necessary precepts and information to the billing authorities in accordance with the provisions of Chapter IV of Part 1 of the 1992 Act and be authorised to make any amendment to the above to reflect the final approved budget, after consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Fire Authority; and
 - ii Be authorised to make payments required from, and to, reserves and provisions within the approved budget strategy and within

the Authority's Financial Rules, in conjunction with the Chair and Vice-Chair;

- f) Approve the revenue budget and pensions account illustrated in Appendix A to the report, for budgetary control in accordance with approved standing orders;
- g) Approve the Best Value Accounting – Code of Practice Provisional Revenue Account at Appendix B to the report; and
- h) Approve the schedule of reserves and provisions at Appendix C to the report

11 Annual Review of Charges – Special Services

This report presented proposed increases in charges made for special services.

Resolved that the Fire Authority approve that the proposed charges for special services be applied from 1 April 2008

12 FiReControl Local Authority Controlled Company Members' Agreement

This report updated Members on the Local Authority Controlled Company Members' Agreement, discussed at the last Fire Authority meeting.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that a considerable amount of work had been done to find the most equitable cost-apportionment model. This indicated that cost apportionment should be based on call volumes. The five authorities in the Region did not, however, currently record their data in the same way. They were, therefore, working towards achieving convergence within three years of the Regional Control Centre's becoming operational. He confirmed that any decisions regarding funding must be agreed by all five authorities, so the Fire Authority could veto any proposal, which it found unacceptable.

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) Note the contents of the report;
- b) Agree in principle to the Members' Agreement and cost apportionment on a population basis; and
- c) Delegate authority to the Clerk to the Authority to sign the Agreement, once amended as suggested in the letter from the Regional Project Director of the FiReControl Project, dated 24 January 2008

13 Fire and Rescue Performance Assessment 2007 Outcomes

This report advised Members of the achievements of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority in the most recent Performance Assessment, conducted by the Audit Commission during 2007.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that national reporting and benchmarking indicated that this Fire Authority was the second best in the country and the best in the Region. He highlighted, however, the Government's statement that, an authority, which did not achieve level three of the Equality Standard for Local Government would be unlikely in the next phase of assessments to be assessed at level 4 'improving strongly' in its Direction of Travel assessment. It was necessary in any event to undertake the work required to achieve level three of the Equality Standard, as it included measures to protect the most 'at risk' groups in the community.

The Chief Fire Officer also pointed out that to have any chance of achieving the highest level in the forthcoming Use of Resources assessment the Fire Authority would probably need to increase the size and capacity of its Finance Team.

It was unlikely, however, that this could be done in time, as the assessments would commence in August. As far as application for Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) re-categorisation was concerned he did not feel that it was worth putting in the resources to do so, particularly as CPA would soon be replaced with Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Members agreed that the results were excellent and congratulated all staff for their contribution. At Councillor Box's request the Chief Fire Officer undertook to send out a Newsletter to all employees, thanking them, on behalf of the Fire Authority, for their work in achieving such excellent results. Members also agreed that it was not worth applying for re-categorisation.

It was, therefore, proposed by Councillor Box, seconded by Councillor Mrs Holyoak and

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) Note the contents of the report and of the Audit Commission's analysis of the national results;
- b) Note the results of benchmarking Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority results both nationally and regionally;
- c) Note the concerns and issues raised by officers with regard to the Fire and Rescue Performance Assessment for 2008; and
- d) Not apply for Comprehensive Performance Assessment re-categorisation

14 Auditor's Report on the Best Value Performance Plan 2007/08

This report drew Members' attention to the Auditor's Report on the Fire Authority's Best Value Performance Plan 2007/08.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer referred Members to the final page of the Auditor's Report and, in particular sections 6 and 7. He pointed out that there was an error in section 6, as there was indeed reference in the Performance Plan to the Fire Authority's having adopted the Code of Practice in its approach to workforce matters and contracting. This had been raised with the Auditor, who had since amended the report accordingly.

Resolved that the Fire Authority note the Auditor's Report

15 Fire Authority Corporate Plan 2008/09

This report sought Member approval of the proposed Fire Authority Corporate Plan 2008/09, which, on 1 April 2008, would replace the existing Best Value Performance Plan 2007/08. The Corporate Plan would be supplemented by an Annual Report 2007/08, which would be brought before Members in June 2008 for consideration and approval.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer tabled a document, which provided a visual overview of how the Corporate Plan would work (a copy is attached to the signed minutes). This document would be produced as a poster for staff, showing them at a glance how they contributed to the corporate aims and objectives of the Fire Authority. It would also be available on the website with links to all of the documents mentioned.

In response to a question from Members the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained what the 'other emergencies', referred to in proposed objectives 3 and 6, were. Although too lengthy to set out in the objectives, officers would provide a description of them on the website.

Councillor Groom felt that there should be a corporate objective for the Fire Authority to pursue those who attacked its staff. The Authority might also take the lead on this issue, liaising with the Police, communities and other fire authorities to keep it at the top of the public agenda. The Chief Fire Officer replied that the problem in Shropshire was not as significant as in other areas.

The worst period in Shropshire tended to be around the fifth of November each year. Officers anticipated the problem, liaising with the Police, briefing firefighters and placing cameras on appliances. To date none of Shropshire's staff had been injured or its appliances damaged. It did not, therefore, seem appropriate for Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority to take the lead on this issue. Officers would, however, include this important safety issue as an additional improvement priority.

Subject to the foregoing, it was

Resolved that the Fire Authority:

- a) Note changes to previous legislation, which required the publication of an annual Best Value Performance Plan;
- b) Approve the contents of the proposed Corporate Plan (as appended to the report);
- c) Delegate authority to the Strategy and Resources Committee to consider and agree:
 - (i) Performance Targets for 2008/09;
 - (ii) Other supplementary information to be included within the Corporate Plan; and
 - (iii) Final layout and publication of the Corporate Plan; and
- d) Receive, in June, the proposed Annual Report 2007/08

Councillor Mellings left the meeting room at this point.

16 Cultural Audit Benchmarking Results

This report informed Members about the recently received Cultural Audit national benchmarking report from Opinion Research Services.

Councillor Holyoak, as Chair of the Human Resources Committee, stated how pleased the Committee had been at the outcome of the benchmarking exercise. The results were excellent and the Service had good reason to be proud of itself.

Councillor Mellings returned to the meeting room at this point.

Resolved that the Fire Authority note the contents of the report

17 Health and Safety Executive Improvement Notice Served on Warwickshire County Council

This report informed Members about the Health and Safety Executive Improvement Notice served on Warwickshire County Council, acting as Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority, following the tragic incident at Atherston-on-Stour.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that officers could not guarantee that an Improvement Notice would never be served on Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority. He did, however, emphasise the steps taken to protect the Authority and, more importantly, its firefighters and to prevent such a tragedy happening in Shropshire.

Councillor Major Coles questioned what was happening with the investigation. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer replied that it was ongoing and developments would be reported to Members as they occurred. A discussion also took place about the involvement of the Chief Fire Officers Association in providing guidance and the conflict of interests, which could arise as a result.

The Chair referred to a major training exercise, which he had attended the previous weekend as an observer. It had highlighted to him the difficulties faced by firefighters and shown areas of good practice and where improvements might be made. Further such exercises were planned and he encouraged other Members to attend. Officers undertook to invite Members, when the details were known.

Finally, the Chair informed Members that an Incident Command vehicle would be parked outside the building after the meeting to demonstrate the risk information, to which crews throughout Shropshire had access, when attending an incident.

Resolved that the Fire Authority note the contents of the report

18 Relaunch of Website

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that the Fire Authority's website had now been relaunched. It had a number of additional features and was much faster to search.

A number of Members had previously accessed the new website and were impressed with it. They congratulated the Web Services Officer on her achievement.

Resolved that the Fire Authority note the Relaunch of the website

The meeting closed at 3.30 pm

Chair.....

Date.....