

Revenue Budget and Capital Programme – Budget Recommendations 2007/08

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

For further information about this report please contact Keith Dixon, Treasurer on 01743 260202.

1 Purpose of Report

This report brings together the recommendations of the Strategy and Resources Committee of 25 January 2007, which have been incorporated into the report on the precept, to be considered later on the agenda for this meeting. In addition, the outcome of the consultation process is reported and summarised.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to accept the recommendation of its Committee in order to set its budgets, projections and precept for 2007/08.

3 Background

The Strategy and Resources Committee was charged with developing a final revenue budget package for consideration by the Fire Authority, taking account of public consultation and delivering a precept increase of 4%. The Committee met on 25 January 2007 and considered the report attached to the minutes earlier in the agenda. They also heard details of public consultation and views of the public. The formal report of Opinion Research Services Ltd is attached at Appendix A.



4 Committee Decisions

The Committee's decisions, set out in the minutes reported earlier in the meeting, can be summarised as follows:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
EXPENDITURE	£ 000	£ 000	£ 000
i Budget approved for consultation by the Fire Authority in December	19,079	20,101	20,983
ii Deletion of Information Officer post	30 -	27 -	27 -
iii Contribution from reserves	47 -	-	-
iv Reductions in expenditure identified by officers following remit of Fire Authority:			
• Capital programme	7 -	29 -	65 -
• Management of overtime	11 -	11 -	11 -
• Retained call-outs	5 -	5 -	5 -
• Efficiencies to be identified	9 -	10 -	10 -
	<u>18,970</u>	<u>20,019</u>	<u>20,865</u>
RESOURCES			
v Grant	7,195 -	7,477 -	7,664 -
vi Collection Fund surplus	82 -	69 -	69 -
vii Amount from Council Tax	11,693 -	12,473 -	13,132 -
	<u>18,970 -</u>	<u>20,019 -</u>	<u>20,865 -</u>

Precept	Amount	Band D Base	Precept	% Increase
2006/07	£11,249,000	154,908.17	£72.62	+4.5%
2007/08	£11,693,000	156,160.34	£74.88	+3.1%
2008/09	£12,473,000	157,424.43	£79.23	+5.8%
2009/10	£13,132,000	158,699.56	£82.75	+4.4%

A revised analysis of the reasons for the precept changes is set out in Appendix B.



5 Assurance Statement on the Robustness of Budget and Adequacy of Financial Reserves

The Strategy and Resources Committee received a report on the Assurance Statements, which the Treasurer is required to make by the Local Government Act 2003. This is attached to the minutes of the Committee.

The statement that the budget is robust and the financial reserves are adequate needs to be reviewed in the light of the Committee's decisions. The revenue budget for 2007/08 remains robust because the changes agreed by the Committee are all deliverable.

The adequacy of the financial reserves is confirmed by the recommendation to establish the Retained Review Project reserve at £190,000.

The Capital Reserve will be increased by £96,000, i.e. £47,000 less than the £143,000 envisaged in the Committee papers. There is a shortfall in 2009/10 between what could be funded by the reserve and the amount available in the reserve, and the issue of prudential borrowing will need to be considered as part of longer-term financial planning.

6 Future Years

The budget deals with a three year period and (as can be seen from paragraph 4 above) 2008/09 and 2009/10 are potentially difficult years, although this does depend on a number of assumptions, notably:

- i Pay and price increases;
- ii The level of growth and efficiency items;
- iii The 2008/09 to 2010/11 Comprehensive Spending Review, grant settlement and distribution;
- iv Collection fund surpluses / deficits;
- v Growth in the Band D tax base; and
- vi Capping rules.

The Fire Authority is committed to producing an updated Medium Term Financial Plan and an outline approach to the contents of the Plan will be reported to the Strategy and Resources Committee in March.

7 Consultation

The Fire Authority has always consulted with the public and stakeholders as part of its budget setting process. It does this through:

- a) Publishing its budget meetings, decisions and reports on its website;
- b) Commissioning public meetings through Opinion Research Services Ltd, whose written report is attached;
- c) Meeting with stakeholders. Although some 400 invitations were issued, the meeting itself was not well attended;
- d) Meeting with other public bodies, notably the Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC).



These consultations have been incorporated into the budget process, and the Fire Authority is asked to consider the points raised in Appendix A in setting its final budget and precept.

8 Financial Implications

The financial implications are as set out in the report.

9 Legal Comment

The Fire Authority must comply with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2003 which relates to finance. In particular, parts 1 and 2 of this Act with relate to Capital Finance and Accounts and Financial Administration.

10 Equality Impact Assessment

This report has been assessed to ensure that any effect it might have would not result in discriminatory practice or differential impact upon specific groups.

Having considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Personnel 5 Part 2), Officers have concluded that the recommendation made within this report does not introduce or modify any policy, procedure or function within the organisation and an Initial Equality Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required.

11 Appendices

Appendix A Opinion Research Services report on Public Consultation

Appendix B Analysis of Expenditure Increases and Effect on Precept

12 Background Papers

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority:

Strategy and Resources Committee Meeting 25 January 2007 - Minutes and Reports



Implications of all of the following have been considered and, where they are significant (i.e. marked with an asterisk), the implications are detailed within the report itself.

Balanced Score Card		Integrated Risk Management Planning	
Business Continuity Planning		Legal	*
Capacity		Member Involvement	
Civil Contingencies Act		National Framework	
Comprehensive Performance Assessment		Operational Assurance	
Efficiency Savings		Retained	
Environmental		Risk and Insurance	
Financial	*	Staff	
Fire Control/Fire Link		Strategic Planning	*
Information Communications and Technology		West Midlands Regional Management Board	
Freedom of Information / Data Protection / Environmental Information		Initial Equality Impact Assessment	*



SHROPSHIRE AND WREKIN FIRE AUTHORITY

Report of Consultation on the Precept 2007/08



Opinion Research Services

SHROPSHIRE AND WREKIN FIRE AUTHORITY

Precept 2007/08

Report of Public Consultation

Opinion Research Services
The Strand
Swansea
SA1 1AF

Tel: (01792) 535300
Fax: (01792) 535301
E-mail: info@ors.org.uk



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PROJECT TEAM

Project Design and Management

Kelly Lock

Scrutiny Panel Facilitation

Kelly Lock

Rhian Richards

Report Author

Kelly Lock

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority in conducting the research reported here – not only because respondents shared their views readily on the proposals being put forward by the Authority, but also because the study was undertaken in order to inform the future development of Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service.

We thank the Authority for commissioning the project as part of an ongoing programme of consultation. We particularly thank those involved in preparing, presenting and clarifying information during the sessions, namely Alan Taylor, Chief Fire Officer; Keith Dixon, Fire Authority Treasurer; Nigel Hartin, Chair of the Fire Authority; Councillor Dave Morgan, Vice-Chair of the Fire Authority; Andrew Kelsey, Resources Manager and Joanne Codey, Principal Accountant. Their input was essential to achieving an informed debate.

We are grateful to all those who took part in the interesting meetings and shared their views with us. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

At all stages of the project, *ORS'* status as an independent organisation consulting the public and stakeholders as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about the Authority's development.

We hope that ORS has been instrumental in forging a link between the Scrutiny Panel members and their Fire and Rescue Service, and that the information in this report accurately reflects participants' views and priorities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

This is not a particularly long report and the detail is important in expressing the tone of the discussions – so readers are invited to examine the main body of the report for an in-depth discussion. However, it is probably also helpful to include a summary of the main outcomes – though such a concise account inevitably over-simplifies and risks accentuating the negative at the expense of the positive.

1.2 Methodology

The following report details the outcomes from the following:

- Two Scrutiny Panels with members of the public in Shrewsbury and Ludlow

Broadly, the issues discussed were:

- Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority's Budget 2007/08
- Capital Expenditure
- Efficiencies and Savings
- Service Developments

The two meetings were qualitative forms of consultation. While the findings cannot be certified as statistically representative of all people in Shropshire, the meetings included a wide range of people and allowed them to think as well as talk. While summarising the main themes and highlighting the key points, this report seeks to be faithful to what was said. The opinions expressed were not always unanimous, but we have endeavoured to reflect both the majority view and, where useful, the diversity of views.

1.3 Main Findings

Revenue budget 2007-08

- All participants felt that the **rise in Council Tax** to fund Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority's budget increase is reasonable, justified and about right.
- Many participants felt that they would be prepared to accept a 4.35% increase given that the FRS is a priority service; there was a sense amongst several sub-groups that the Authority should not be too concerned with keeping the rise to 4%. Others disagreed, feeling that every effort should be made to keep the increase at 4% as this ensures that the Authority looks for savings that it may not have otherwise identified.

- All groups agreed that the Fire Authority should not attempt to go below an increase of 4% by delaying the implementation of the changes at Tweedale fire station.
- Participants expressed disconcertion that previous and current Fire and Rescue Service funding has led to Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority (SWFA) having the **second highest precept** of all Combined Fire Authorities. However, the reasons for why this is the case were accepted and understood by the vast majority of participants and, in light of this, they thought it reasonable that SWFA charges what it does in order to provide a necessary service.
- The post floor effect **Fire Formula Spending Share** was seen as unfair by some. However, a considerable number of participants understood the reason for Shropshire's reduced percentage share and were satisfied that Government is attempting to redress the funding imbalance. Further, participants were pleased that the rise is at least *higher than inflation!*
- All groups were of the view that the Fire Authority represents excellent **value for money**. Participants felt that they receive an excellent service for the amount they pay through their Council Tax.
- SWFA was **highly praised** as an Authority and for the way it is exercising financial control within existing budgetary constraints.

Capital Expenditure

- The proposed capital expenditure was thought to represent good **value for money**; participants generally endorsed the items of expenditure and the amount of money being spent.
- Panellists were particularly satisfied with the focus on improving **equipment, vehicles and buildings**.
- In terms of **specific areas of spend**, a considerable number of participants were pleased with all, with the following being particularly noted:
 - Improved training for retained staff
 - Road traffic collision equipment for Ford Rangers
 - Telford Central improvements
 - Installation of fire alarms at fire stations
 - Improved technology and communications
- The following **concerns** were expressed regarding capital expenditure:
 - The perceived high cost of...
 - Installing fire alarms at fire stations

- Garaging for the Ford Ranger at Oswestry
- Telford Central improvements
- The use of improved technology and communications for *pure spin*
- Participants noted that they rely on and **trust** the Fire Authority to give them accurate financial figures and to make wise decisions with regard to capital spend. They also accepted that the capital expenditure costs are not finalised and trusted that they will be kept down as much as possible.

Efficiencies and Savings

- The **efficiencies and savings** put forward by the Fire Authority were deemed highly appropriate.
- Participants were pleased that **areas of potential saving** are being explored and questioned whether there are others.
- **Hydrant maintenance contract reduction**
 - This was, on the whole, supported *provided service and maintenance is not affected.*
 - There was some concern at Ludlow that *the cheapest price can result in the cheapest job and we don't want hydrants that don't work!*
- **Rental income (ambulance at Market Drayton)**
 - This was endorsed as *great thinking* that could, if possible be extended to other areas.
 - A minority questioned the £9,000 rental; they viewed this as low and recommended an annual review of the figure.
- **Personal Protective Equipment (re-issue of fire kit)**
 - The re-issue of fire kit was strongly supported; participants questioned why this has not been done before now.
- **Re-deployment rather than ill-health retirement**
 - This was again generally seen as an excellent idea in that *it is keeping knowledge within the service and values the greatest resource – the people!*
- **Wholetime Recruit Training (change of provider)**
 - The change in training provider was supported, providing the quality of training is maintained.
 - As with the re-issue of fire kit, some were surprised that this has not happened earlier.

- **Retained Support Officer appointments**
 - The appointment of Retained Support Officers was, in itself, generally supported.
 - There was some disagreement regarding the saving associated with offering these as firefighter posts rather than as promotion. Some were of the view that it is *good to use ordinary firefighters as this cuts costs*, whereas others were concerned that morale may be impaired by the lack of opportunity for promotion.

Service Developments

- **Integrated Risk Management Planning (four additional Watch Managers for Tweedale)**
 - This proposal was strongly approved as *providing better cover for people's safety and an efficient use of resources*.
- **Road Safety Strategy**
 - This was heavily endorsed; any strategy designed to reduce the number and severity of RTCs in Shropshire was deemed eminently desirable by all participants.
- **Data Quality Officer**
 - The employment of a Data Quality Officer was endorsed by most participants, given that the Audit Commission has highlighted data quality as an area for improvement.
 - There was a sense that the Officer will greatly assist in providing data to inform the future development of the Service.
 - Some participants supported this position on condition that the Officer is not merely used for propaganda purposes.
- **Older People's Officer**
 - Providing it is kept under review to ensure an ongoing cost benefit, the Older People's Officer was generally backed.
 - One group at Ludlow were undecided about this post being funded by the Fire Authority; they felt that it should possibly stay as a County Council responsibility under Social Services.
 - Another Ludlow group believed that the post-holder should not be restricted to working only with older people; it was suggested that the FRS should have a post for all vulnerable people.

- **Human Resources (equality and reasonable adjustment budget)**
 - All were in favour of a budget for reasonable adjustment in that it *makes best use of the valuable resource of trained people.*
 - Most agreed that having a budget for equality is *in today's world...a necessary allocation.* However, this was somewhat reluctantly accepted by some participants who felt that *this money may be better spread across the other four areas [of service development] and common sense used to cope with this.*
- Overall, the majority of participants were in agreement with the proposed spending on service developments. They were particularly pleased with the proposals pertaining to Tweedale, the Road Safety Strategy and, at Ludlow, the employment of a Data Quality Officer.
- As regards reservations, one group at Shrewsbury had qualms about the Data Quality Officer and felt that *the Audit Commission should justify the need to employ staff to answer their PIs.* Another at Ludlow *possibly* disagreed with the Older People's Officer *as this could be done through another agency.*

CONSULTATION PROCESS

2.1 The Commission

On the basis of its experience, ORS was commissioned by Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority (SWFA) to facilitate and report two public scrutiny panels during January 2007.

It was agreed that ORS would work in collaboration with Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to facilitate the meetings and prepare a report of the discussions, covering the arguments and points made as well as the conclusions. SFRS encouraged ORS to facilitate the meetings and prepare this report independently.

2.2 The Meetings

Two forums were held with members of the public in Shrewsbury and Ludlow – the make-up of which can be seen in the table below. Participants were broadly representative of their local communities and, encouragingly, represented a wide spectrum of ages and social-economic status:

Panel	Attendees	Constituents
Shrewsbury	15	7 females, 8 males
Ludlow	11	6 females, 5 males

All participants who attended the IRMP 2007/08 Scrutiny Panels in October 2006 were invited to attend a follow-up consultation session on Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority's Precept 2007/08. About two-thirds of these participants had attended similar forums during the previous two years (again at ORS' invitation), and about a third were new recruits in October 2006. Although a couple could not attend due to other commitments, the vast majority returned to take part in this, either their second or sixth session.

2.3 Conduct of Meetings

Both meetings went well in the sense of providing substantial information for the participants to understand, question and debate the issues fully. In order to make the meetings as informed as possible for the participants, SFRS prepared and delivered a detailed Powerpoint presentation on the various aspects of the 2007/08 Precept, covering:

- SWFA's proposed Revenue Budget 2007/08
- Capital Expenditure

- Efficiencies and Savings
- Service Developments

The groups were then given the opportunity to ask questions and seek points of clarification, before dividing into small groups and considering the Precept in some detail. Finally, there was a plenary session where the groups' findings were fed-back to attendees.

2.4 Informed Opinion

The meetings began with a detailed and very informative presentation by SFRS to provide respondents with a substantial context of information within which they could understand and consider the Fire Authority's Precept 2007/08. This approach was used for two main reasons:

- Members of the public are typically poorly informed about how the fire service operates and is managed, particularly financially. This was especially relevant due to the number of relatively new participants at each public panel.
- The challenge was not to ask people's general impressions of the Fire and Rescue Service but to debate very particular issues pertaining to the Precept 2007/08 – so the meetings needed to focus on them and the reasons for them.

Hence, a considerable amount of information was needed before participants could debate the main specific areas in turn.

For these reasons, the consultation process should be considered as 'testing' the acceptability of SWFA's Precept 2007/08 – by presenting its various components clearly for discussion.

2.5. Inclusiveness and Representativeness

SFRS' consultation programme has been detailed, systematic and inclusive – by providing significant numbers of people with detailed information about its Precept in order to foster open debate. Given that no public body can guarantee a particular level of response to its consultation initiatives, the foremost tests of success are fairness and inclusiveness – were all sections of the community given sufficient information and could they comment readily? In this case, the answer to that question is *Yes*.

Although, the outcomes of such meetings cannot be certified as statistically representative of staff and public opinion, the public meetings reported here certainly gave a very diverse range of people, drawn from differing areas of Shropshire, the opportunity to 'test' the proposals in detailed discussions. The participants were diverse in terms of gender, age, social,

economic and professional status, housing tenure and many other criteria. Therefore we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meetings (as reported below) are soundly indicative of how Shropshire public opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

In summary, then, the meetings are reliable and authoritative as examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse informed people reacting to SFRS' financial proposals.

2.3 The Report

Essentially, the report reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about SWFA's Precept 2007/08. Some verbatim quotations (*italics*) are used – not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

The next section of this report has been structured so as to address each of the above areas in some detail. The views of both panels have been amalgamated under the four headings – although significant differences in their views have been drawn out.

CONSULTATION FINDINGS

3.1 Introduction

Using qualitative consultation in the form of Scrutiny Panels enabled ORS to encourage the open-ended exchange of ideas and understand the meaning and intensity of people's views. Whilst summarising the main themes and highlighting the key points, this report seeks to be faithful to what participants said. The opinions expressed were not always unanimous, but we have endeavoured to reflect both the majority view and, where useful, the diversity of views.

Each Scrutiny Panel group was asked to address a series of questions, which were intended to focus their thinking but not necessarily constrain them. The 'worksheets' outlined some of the most relevant information to aid the panel in their thinking. Approximately 15-20 minutes was spent on each topic so the sessions needed to be very focused. The outputs from these sessions are reported below.

3.2 Revenue Budget 2007-08

The Council Tax Rise

All sub-groups at both Shrewsbury and Ludlow were of the view that the rise in Council Tax to fund Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority's budget increase is reasonable, justified and about right; they were particularly impressed that the rise has been kept within acceptable boundaries given the 'floor effect' associated with the Fire Formula Spending Share:

Having heard all the points we think that this is a good budget

Should not compromise improved standards and ongoing improvements

The calculations justify the rise

It is about right...not wasting money and using it where it is needed

Many participants stated that they would be prepared to accept a 4.35% increase given that the FRS is a priority service. Indeed, there was a sense amongst several sub-groups that the Authority should not be too concerned with keeping the rise to 4%:

4.35% is only an extra £40,000 and it covers improvements

If the Service asks for too little it may backfire if Central Government cuts public spending in the future

Others, however, disagreed; they felt that every effort should be made to keep the increase at 4% as this ensures that the Authority looks for savings that it may not otherwise have identified. Examples given to illustrate this point were the savings associated with the re-issue of fire kit and the re-deployment of staff (as opposed to ill-health retirement). It was argued that SWFA may not have considered these options had it not been asked to strive for a smaller budget increase.

All groups agreed that the Fire Authority should not attempt to go below an increase of 4% by delaying the implementation of the changes at Tweedale fire station. The general sense was that the changes are necessary to improve fire safety in the Telford area and should be put into effect as soon as possible. One group particularly emphasised the fact that additional staff will be required from April if this summer ends up being as hot as the previous, resulting in a higher than average number of grass fires:

Additional staff at Tweedale would increase fire safety and this should not be compromised

The staff will be needed...especially if we have a hot summer again

The staff will need time to be trained and if the money is available in this budget, use it

Further, that reducing the increase could result in budgetary complications for future years was considered to be another reason for why the Authority should not aim for anything below 4%:

Start [the changes] now and not complicate things for next year

Not happy with a reduction on 4%...this could have repercussions for following years

Would affect service quality and next year's increase will not have to be so large

To try to reduce to 3.2% could make problems in the following year

The Precept

Participants again (as in previous years) expressed disconcertion that previous and current Fire and Rescue Service funding has led to Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority (SWFA) having the **second highest precept** of all Combined Fire Authorities:

[It] is not justified...it would be better if the figure was closer to the national average

However, the reasons for this were accepted and understood by the vast majority of participants:

Higher concentrations of population increases risk and it seems reasonable that 'urban' areas will receive a higher grant than those more rural in nature

The way the figures are worked out, particularly the Government funding regime, leaves the Fire Authority without overall control

As such, and given the constraints within which it has to work, the vast majority though it reasonable that SWFA charges what it does in order to provide a necessary service.

The Fire Formula Spending Share

The post floor effect Fire Formula Spending Share was seen as unfair by some:

If [the] grant increase of 3.73% is after the Government re-distribution it is still totally unfair

The share isn't fair because the Service is having to ask for an increase in Council Tax despite giving value for money

Didn't take into account the sparsity factor in this area

We feel that Shropshire is again under-funded which puts lives at risk

It was particularly argued at Ludlow that terrorist activity could be perpetrated outside London - in Birmingham for example - which could have an impact on SFRS as they would be called upon to assist in such an event:

That could affect this area

Money is allocated to London that should be redistributed to areas that have been under-funded

However, despite the above misgivings, it would be fair to say that a considerable number of participants understood the reason for the reduced Fire Formula Spending Share percentage and were satisfied that Government is at least attempting to redress the funding imbalance. This will, in their view, take time:

We would like more from Government but recognise that it will take time to redress the balance

It is unfair but the adjustment made is sufficient

Further, participants were pleased that the percentage rise is at least *higher than inflation!*

Value for Money

It is encouraging to report that all groups described the Fire Authority as representing excellent value for money, particularly *given the small grant from Government*. Participants were certainly of the view that they receive an excellent service for the amount they pay through their Council Tax:

At the amount of money paid a week per household we think it is marvellous

SWFA was also, once again, highly praised as an Authority and for the way it is exercising financial control within existing budgetary constraints:

Performance indicators indicate an efficient service delivery and one that compares favourably with other FRSs in the country

Delivering a good service with limited resources

The Service is using money wisely and making improvements with a small budget increase

Good management and financial control allows for inadequacies in the league tables

It is trying to make savings without affecting the service provided

SWFA can justify how money is spent

3.3 Capital Expenditure

The proposed capital expenditure was thought to represent good value for money; participants generally endorsed the items of expenditure and the amount of money being spent:

From the information supplied these items seem to be the right things to spend money on

Right things to spend money on...very acceptable

[The Fire Authority has] to invest in progress to retain the efficiency we have got to date

Can't cut corners too much as safety is an issue

The spending is justified to make necessary improvements

Panellists were particularly satisfied with the focus on improving equipment, vehicles, buildings and training:

Well-maintained equipment, vehicles and buildings are essential

Well-maintained vehicles, buildings and training are always necessary

Neglect on vehicles and buildings can increase expenditure over a period

In terms of specific areas of spend, a considerable number of participants were pleased with all. Particular mention was given to the following as proposals that will greatly improve the service provided by Shropshire and Wrekin FRS:

- Improved training for retained staff
 - *The FRS is employing more people and training them to higher standard*
- Road Traffic Collision Equipment for Ford Rangers
- Telford Central improvements
 - E.g. moving sleeping areas to a lower floor
- Installation of fire alarms at fire stations
- Improved technology and communications

However, there were concerns. Some questioned what they perceived to be the high cost of the installation of fire alarms at fire stations, whereas others felt the amount of money to be spent on garaging for the Ford Ranger at Oswestry to be somewhat elevated (although they did understand the difficulties associated with the location). Further, although accepting that Telford fire station is in need of development, one group at Ludlow felt that the costs could be lower (although they acknowledged that they did not have enough information on the proposed improvements to make a firm judgement).

Finally, one group at Shrewsbury, although in favour of improved technology and communications, did not agree with its use for *pure spin*. In other words, such advances should not only be used to *tell the world how great you are* and to look back at successes, but also to look forward and see where improvements can be made.

Encouragingly, participants noted that they rely on and trust the Fire Authority to give them accurate financial figures and to make wise decisions with regard to capital spend. They also accepted that the capital expenditure costs are not yet finalised and trusted that they will be kept down as much as possible:

We feel we can trust Fire Authority to spend money wisely and make savings where possible

We rely on management giving us the figures

3.4 Efficiencies and Savings

As with the proposed capital expenditure, the efficiencies and savings put forward by the Fire Authority in the Precept 2007/08 were deemed highly appropriate:

Represent very good value for money

They are relevant to the FRS

All seem good savings without compromising service delivery

These are all good ideas

Indeed, participants were pleased that areas of potential saving are being explored and questioned whether there are others. Further, although the savings were acknowledged to be small in relation to the overall budget of £19 million, they were agreed to be welcome:

Any saving is appropriate

We are pleased that areas of potential saving are being explored

The specific areas of efficiency and saving are expanded upon below:

Hydrant maintenance (contract reduction)

This was, on the whole, supported *provided service and maintenance is not affected:*

[It's a] saving with no loss of service delivery

Saving £20,000 per annum is good providing service and maintenance is not affected

Well done for finding a cheaper service provider!

Nevertheless, there was some concern at Ludlow that *the cheapest price can result in the cheapest job and we don't want hydrants that don't work!*

Rental income (ambulance at Market Drayton)

The collection of rental income from the housing of an ambulance at Market Drayton fire station was endorsed as *great thinking* and, if there are possibilities for extending this situation to other areas, panellists were of the view that *these should be taken:*

Good for Fire Service and Ambulance Service

Money can be used in other departments

A minority questioned the £9,000 rental; they viewed this as low and recommended an annual review of the figure:

Is this enough and who pays for the maintenance of the building?

Personal Protective Equipment (re-issue of fire kit)

The re-issue of fire kit was strongly supported and participants questioned why this has not been done before now:

Very good...it's wasteful to throw away good, serviceable, little used kit

Makes complete sense to recycle

Recycle:re-use...we like it!

Re-deployment rather than ill-health retirement

This was again seen as an excellent idea in that *it is keeping knowledge within the service and values the greatest resource – the people!*

Sensible use of manpower and existing skills/expertise

However, for some, the idea was supported on condition that *re-deployment is to do a necessary job rather than just 'finding a job' for someone.*

Wholetime Recruit Training (change of provider)

The changes to wholetime recruit training - that is, having the training take place closer to home - were endorsed, providing the quality of training is maintained. Again, as with the re-issue of fire kit, some were surprised that this had not happened earlier:

Very good provided there is no reduction in training levels

Makes sense having it closer to home

Represents a saving of time and money

Sensible to use closer facilities

It is a good idea and saves money without reducing performance

Hidden benefits to the family of staff involved

Retained Support Officer appointments

The appointment of Retained Support Officers was, in itself, supported; the posts were thought to be worth establishing *especially if it increases retained applicants or helps to keep retained staff.* Further, that the *officers offer expertise* was thought to be another positive reason for such appointments.

However, there was some disagreement regarding the savings associated with offering the appointments as firefighter posts rather than as promotion. Some were of the view that it is *good to use ordinary firefighters as this cuts costs*, whereas concern was expressed at Shrewsbury that morale may be impaired by the lack of opportunity for promotion.

3.5 Service Developments

Integrated Risk Management Planning (Four Additional Watch Managers for Tweedale)

This proposal was strongly approved as *providing better cover for people's safety* and as *an efficient use of resources.*

Improves service delivery and ensures vehicles and staff are deployed where they can respond more quickly

It is essential to the development of Tweeddale

Much better fire cover for Telford...a valuable improvement in service provision

Road Safety Strategy

The Road Safety Strategy was strongly approved, although a minority questioned whether the FRS should be funding this long-term (as opposed to the Police). Any strategy designed to reduce the number and severity of RTCs in Shropshire was deemed eminently desirable by all participants:

Properly equipped vehicles save lives...all means to reducing accidents is always worthwhile

Any provision in accident prevention is desirable

Makes sense to work in partnership with other bodies to reduce accidents

Important to build the trust and respect of youngsters

A good advancement...it should help reduce accidents

More awareness is needed for young drivers to help save lives

Can never stress the message enough, especially to young people

Data Quality Officer

The employment of a Data Quality Officer was endorsed by most participants, given that the Audit Commission has highlighted data quality as an area for improvement. Further, there was a sense that the Officer will greatly assist in providing data that will inform the future development of the Service:

Needed to resolve identified problems in this area

As better data is being demanded by the Auditors then it is essential to have this, particularly as it will give better information to enable service improvement as well as obtaining funds from Government

We think good information is vital especially if it helps planning for future services

Some participants supported the position on condition that the Officer is not merely used for propaganda purposes. Although agreeing that it is essential to measure performance in order to improve on identified weak areas, they were *not in favour of funding spin...the information should be used to look forward rather than tell everyone how great you are!*

Older People's Officer

Providing it is kept under review to ensure an ongoing cost benefit, the funding of an Older People's Officer was generally backed. Older people have been identified as a vulnerable

group in terms of fire risk and an Officer would, it was felt, be of benefit in driving down this risk:

Good idea as it has been seen to be a high-risk area

Again a good choice for a post that should have a positive effect on accident reduction

One sub-group at Ludlow was undecided about this post being funded by the Fire Authority. Although they could see the benefit of having such a resource, they felt that it *possibly should stay as County Council responsibility under Social Services*. Further, another Ludlow group was of the view that the post-holder should not be restricted to working only with older people; it was suggested that the FRS should have a post for vulnerable people as a whole:

We support an increase in the budget for vulnerable people as the Council has withdrawn funding

Human Resources (equality and reasonable adjustment budget)

The inclusion of equality and reasonable adjustment in the budget seemed reasonable to most participants. Indeed, all were in favour of the latter in that it *makes best use of the valuable resource of trained people*.

Most agreed that having a budget specifically for equality is *in today's world...a necessary allocation*:

Due to the amount of new legislation it's important that someone is ensuring the Service is complying

However, this was a bone of contention for some panellists; although they accepted it as required by legislation, this acceptance was reluctant in some cases and there was a sense that *this money may be better spread across the other four areas [of service development] and common sense used to cope with this*.

Overall, the majority of participants were in agreement with the proposed spending on service developments:

They are good value for money as £280,000 is not a high cost to save lives or even property

Sensible use of resources and money

Well thought out and will help save lives through better road safety and Tweedale upgrade

As the last quote above illustrates, panellists were particularly pleased with the proposals pertaining to Tweedale and the Road Safety Strategy. Further, at Ludlow there was considerable satisfaction with the employment of a Data Quality Officer as *this was highlighted as a problem*.

As regards reservations, one sub-group at Shrewsbury had qualms about the Data Quality Officer and felt that *the Audit*

Commission should justify the need to employ staff to answer their PIs. Indeed, this issue led this group to describe the service developments as like the Curates egg...good in parts! Finally, a Ludlow group possibly disagreed with the Older People's Officer as this could be done through another agency.

Analysis of Expenditure Increases and Effect on Precept

Ref		2007/08		2008/09		2009/10	
		Expenditure £ 000	Precept £	Expenditure £ 000	Precept £	Expenditure £ 000	Precept £
i	Previous Year's Precept	11,249	72.62	11,693	74.88	12,473	79.23
ii	Pay and Prices	598	3.86	626	4.01	608	3.86
iii	Service Developments	250	1.61	-	-	-	-
iv	Retained Review	-	-	98	0.63	98	0.62
v	Efficiencies	100 -	0.64 -	60 -	0.38 -	36	0.23
vi	Amending Report (2006/07)	170 -	1.10 -	-	-	-	-
vii	Capital and Leasing	89	0.57	106	0.68	80	0.51
viii	Pension Changes	107	0.69	136	0.87	10	0.06
ix	Reserves	47 -	0.30 -	147	0.94	-	-
x	Other (net)	24 -	0.15 -	9	0.05	14	0.09
		<u>703</u>	<u>4.54</u>	<u>1,062</u>	<u>6.80</u>	<u>846</u>	<u>5.37</u>
xi	Grant	259 -	1.67 -	282 -	1.81 -	187 -	1.19 -
xii	Tax Base Increase	-	0.61 -	-	0.64 -	-	0.66 -
xiii	Total Precept Income	<u>11,693</u>	<u>74.88</u>	<u>12,473</u>	<u>79.23</u>	<u>13,132</u>	<u>82.75</u>

Notes

- i Previous Year Net cost of service met from the precept, i.e. after grant and collection fund surplus.
- vi Amending Report £170,000 had to be accounted as spending in 2006/07, although it was grant clawed back from 2004/05 and 2005/06.
- ix Reserves Reflects £100,000 taken from reserves to offset the loss of grant as Transition Funding is clawed back in 2006/07 and 2007/08, plus the £47,000 support for the revenue budget in 2007/08.
- x Grant Increase in 2008/09 reflects hope that £100,000 will be added back once Transition Funding is recovered.
- xii Tax Base Increase This is the benefit to Council Tax payers over their previous bill, to reflect the fact that there are more Band D properties.

