

**Minutes of the Staffordshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel Meeting held on 15
February 2021**

Present: Stephen Sweeney (Chairman)

Lesley Adams
Ann Edgeller
Brian Edwards

Tony Holmes
Helena Maxfield
Alan Pearson

Also in attendance: Matthew Ellis, Glynn Dixon, David Greensmith, Sue Finney (Observer representing the ETAP).

Apologies: Paul Darby, Simon Gaskin, Keith Walker and Ashley Yeates

PART ONE

9. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

10. Questions to the PFCC from Members of the Public

No questions were submitted in time for this meeting.

11. Proposed Fire and Rescue Budget and Precept 2021/22

The Commissioner introduced his report which set out the proposed budget and precept proposals for the Fire and Rescue Authority for 2021/22.

The Panel received a presentation from the Chief Finance Officer, which was considered along with the Fire Revenue Budget Report (including the MTFs and Precept).

It was reported that the Settlement Funding for 2021/22 was £14.571million made up of; Revenue Support Grant (RSG) which had been set at £4.777million; Local Business Rates revenue of £3.735million and Business Top up of £6.059million. It was noted that the RSG had reduced by £9million since 2012.

The total budget requirement for the service was £42,404million. The Commissioner was proposing to part fund the balance from Council Tax funding of £27.406 million and proposed an increase of 1.99% per annum (£1.54 pa per Band D property). The Commissioner informed the Panel that this figure was below the permitted limit of 2%.

Referring to Appendix 1 of the report, it was explained that the Pay costs had reduced, mainly due to the Joint Emergency Transport (JET) staff transferring from the Fire Service to Police employment which had reduced the budget by £600,000. The Supplies and services cost had increased due to proposed investment into IT (Office 365 and 'Fire watch').

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) showed a gap of £1.7 million identified for 2022/23 which would increase to £2.9million by 2025/26. The gap was based on the assumption that the level of RSG would continue to reduce beyond 2021/22 pre-empting the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review and the impact of the results of the Fair Funding Review. The MTFS also assumed additional pension costs resulting from the Sargeant/McCloud pension remedy and the impact of the 2020 Firefighters Pension Scheme valuation. A 5% increase in employment contributions had therefore been included in the MTFS from 2022/23.

The Panel also considered the following documents:

- The **Treasury Management Strategy** for 2021/22 which set out proposals for the management of the Fire Authorities cash flows, borrowing and investments and the risks of a changing interest rate on borrowings and investments and the risks of a potential loss of invested funds.
- The **Reserves Strategy update** paper considered the overall level of reserves held by the Authority at 31 March 2020. The paper focused on two key areas of reserves that impacted on the future financial strategy. These were the General Reserve balance forecast as at 31 March was £1.9million and Earmarked (specific) Reserves, to meet future or predicted requirements balance at 31 March 2021 was forecast to be £6.8million. Overall, the level of Earmarked reserves had reduced by over £2million during the last four years and was forecast to reduce to approximately £4.1million by 2025/26.
- The Fire Authorities **Capital Strategy and Capital Programme 2021/22 to 2023/24** (Including Minimum Revenue Provision Policy).

Following a question on the collection funds and Appendix 4 and 5 of the main Budget and Precept report, it was explained that the Council Tax surplus /deficit Appendix would normally show a surplus but due to the pandemic, there was a deficit of £602,258 due to the impact of collection fund. Appendix 5, the tax base by authority table, would normally showed an increase in tax base but again due to the pandemic and more people receiving Council Tax support during the year, this had reduced by 1.17%. The Chief Finance Officer felt that the Local Tax Support Grant would support the reduction at the moment but there was concern over future years.

Members of the Panel asked for more detail on the Sargeant and McCloud case which had been mentioned in the report and presentation, and the impact on the pension fund. It was explained that the Public Sector Pension reform in 2014/15 had led to age discrimination in some cases. These had been reviewed and some were now being transferred back to their legacy scheme. This had a financial impact on the service and potentially meant that employees could retire earlier, which was leading to workforce planning problems. The Panel were concerned that this would have long term implications and challenges for the service.

The Panel were informed that utilities and special service charges, which included additional services which could be purchased from the Fire Authority e.g. fire investigation interviews, were reviewed annually.

Work to the Abbots Bromley Community Fire Station was due to start soon. This was to provide facilities for female staff and ensure the station was fit for purpose.

The Panel noted that the Settlement was for one year only in view of Government's Spending Review and felt that this was a challenging financial position which made future planning difficult. The current Covid-19 pandemic had had a significant impact on the tax base and deficits on collection funds from 2020/21.

The Panel adjourned to consider their response to the Commissioners budget and precept proposals. Upon reconvening, the Panel unanimously:

RESOLVED:

- a. That the report be noted.
- b. The total 2021/22 net revenue budget requirement of £41.977million and funding based on the Final Local Government Financial Settlement, including business rates information, be noted.
- c. That the proposed budget and Precept increase of 1.99% (£1.54 per annum, per household (Band D)) be supported and the Commissioner be notified accordingly.
- d. That the Council Tax base decrease to 348,733 properties, equivalent to a decrease of 1.2% and the Council Tax collection fund delivering a deficit of £67,100 and the option to spread the £102,000 per annum deficit attributable to Covid-19 over 3 years be noted.
- e. The MTFs summary financials and MTFs assumptions as detailed in the report, be noted.
- f. That the budget gap of £2.9million by 2025/26, driven by the assumptions around reduced levels of Revenue Support Grant, in addition to cost pressures which includes ongoing pay pressure and increased Firefighters Pension costs be noted.
- g. That the proposed three-year Capital Investment Programme and the Capital Strategy and Capital Programme Paper be noted.
- h. That the outcome of the Staffordshire Commissioner's budget consultation document which included a survey to ascertain the opinion of the residents of Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent with regard to the local precept be noted.
- i. That the proposed fees and charges for 2021/22 be noted.
- j. That the Statement from the Director of Finance / S151 Officer on the robustness of the Budget and adequacy of the proposed financial reserves be noted.

12. Fire and Rescue Service Safety Plan 2020-2024 Update Report

The report provided the Panel with an update on the delivery of the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service Safety Plan (SP), Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP).

Following the transfer of governance from the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Authority to the Staffordshire Commissioner, a new Safety Plan 2020-2024 was developed which was published in August 2020.

The Safety Plan was designed to underpin the Staffordshire Commissioners Fire and Rescue Plan and four priorities for the Service were determined following consultation across Staffordshire in 2020.

The four priorities that the Service was delivering against were:

- Prevention and Early Intervention
- Protecting Staffordshire and its people
- Public Confidence
- Service Reform

Detail on the priorities and the progress to date was contained in the report.

It was explained that the Princes Trust work had stopped during the pandemic but there were plans to start again when it was safe to do so. Similarly, the Cadets scheme would also be reinstated.

The Safe and Well visits had been reduced during 2020 and the service was being provided through a revised approach using either telephone advice only; telephone advice and smoke alarms dropped off at the door for the occupier to fit; and for residents with an immediate threat to life telephone advice and a full safe and week physical visit.

The Panel asked why Road Traffic Incidents was a key performance indicator. It was explained that this was work mainly done through the Safer Roads Partnership and mainly involved making vehicles or the areas safe after accidents.

Along with the Safety Plan, the Commissioner presented an inspection letter from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The Inspection was carried out between the 19 and 30 October 2020.

In the report it was noted that staff absence had increased by 63% from April to June 2020. Members asked for more information on staff absences during 2020 for both Fire and Police services and if the absence had been due to Covid-19.

The Panel asked how many high-rise blocks of flats were in Staffordshire and what the situation was regarding cladding. The Commissioner agreed to provide the information to the panel but confirmed that there was no ACM cladding in Staffordshire. Sprinkler systems in flats were the priority and work was taking place with the relevant Local Authorities to address this.

The Panel and the Commissioner expressed their sincere thanks to the Fire and Rescue Service for all their work during the pandemic, particularly the work with the vaccination programme.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the delivery of the Safety Plan 2020 – 2024 and the Covid19 inspection report be noted.

- b) That information on staff absences during 2020 for both Fire and Police services and the reason absence be forwarded to the Panel.
- c) Information on the number of high-rise blocks of flats in Staffordshire and the situation regarding cladding be forwarded to the Panel.
- d) The Chairman, on behalf of the Panel write to the Fire and Rescue Service expressing their sincere thanks for all their work during the pandemic.

13. Covid-19 Inspection: Staff Fire and Rescue Service

The inspection report was considered under the previous item (Safety Pan).

14. Questions to the PFCC by Panel Members

There were no questions asked under this heading.

15. Dates of Future Meetings and Work Programme

The reserved date of 22 February was no longer need for a meeting and would be cancelled.

RESOLVED – That the dates future meetings be noted.

Chairman