

**NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY  
EXECUTIVE PANEL**

Minutes of the Executive Panel Meeting of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority held on 28 October 2013 at Fire and Rescue Headquarters, St Asaph. Meeting commenced at 2pm.

PRESENT

Cllr M LI Davies (Chair)	Denbighshire County Council
Cllr P R Lewis (Deputy Chair)	Conwy County Borough Council
Cllr L W Davies	Anglesey County Council
Cllr R Davies	Denbighshire County Council
Cllr A Evans	Wrexham County Borough Council
Cllr H McGuill	Flintshire County Council
Cllr P W Owen	Denbighshire County Council
Cllr W R Owen	Gwynedd Council
Cllr W T Owen	Gwynedd Council
Cllr R E Parry	Conwy County Borough Council
Cllr P Pemberton	Wrexham County Borough Council
Cllr A Tansley	Conwy County Borough Council

ALSO PRESENT:

S A Smith (Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive); G Owens (Deputy Clerk and Monitoring Officer); K Finch (Treasurer); D Docx (Deputy Chief Fire Officer); P Claydon, R Simmons and R Fairhead (Assistant Chief Fire Officers); G Brandrick (Senior Fire Safety Manager); G W Griffiths (Senior Development Manager); L Roberts (Senior Control and Business Continuity Manager); S Morris (Corporate Planning Manager); Rh Williams (Corporate Communications Officer); J Brown (Acting Finance Manager); A Davies (Member Liaison Officer).

Apologies:

Cllr B Dunn	Flintshire County Council
Cllr J M Evans	Anglesey County Council
P Claydon	Assistant Chief Fire Officer
K Roberts	Senior Operations Manager

The Chair asked Members to consider changing the order of the agenda and it was agreed that the Improvement Assessment letter would be discussed after matters arising.

At this juncture, the Chair reminded Members about the Phoenix celebration of achievement events. Members are invited to attend these events at their local stations and the Chair encouraged Members to attend to see the excellent work that is done with young people and also to support the Service's staff involved with the course.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

1.1 None.

2 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15 JULY 2013

2.1 The minutes of the last meeting were submitted for approval.

2.2 Cllr Pemberton asked for an amendment to be made to 8.6 as it did not reflect the comment he had made at the meeting.

2.2 **RESOLVED to approve the minutes subject to amending paragraph 8.6.**

3 MATTERS ARISING

3.1 There were no matters arising.

4 IMPROVEMENT ASSESSMENT LETTER

4.1 Lisa Williams from the Wales Audit Office was welcomed to the meeting and she presented the improvement assessment letter. This was the first report for the new audit year and considered the planning arrangements the organisation had put in place to determine its plans for 2013/14, the improvement objectives and how they had been set. Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009, the Auditor General is required to give two opinions – that the organisation has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance and that the organisation is complying with requirements to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. Ms Williams confirmed that the Auditor General was satisfied that the Authority had discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

4.2 Ms Williams drew Members' attention to the proposals suggested for improvement and in particular the second proposal 'explicitly show how the Equalities Act 2010 requirements have been considered in setting and monitoring improvement objectives by undertaking an Equalities Impact Assessment during 2013-14'. Ms Williams indicated that the Authority needs to ensure that a more detailed equality impact assessment covering the improvement objectives for 2013-14 is completed to ensure the Authority has given consideration to all the protected characteristics as stated in the Equalities Act.

4.3 Members were then invited to ask questions about the letter. Cllr P Lewis referred to paragraph 2 on page 3 of the letter about the Authority comparing itself to other organisations. Cllr Lewis asked which other organisations should the Authority compare itself to, and which areas should be compared; Cllr Lewis felt that the most important area for consideration is how the Authority has delivered its services to the public and that it would be difficult to compare this area of work to other organisations. Ms Williams replied that this was a challenge facing all the authorities in finding suitable authorities to seek out relevant comparisons and that it was a requirement of the Local Government (Wales) Measure that information was available for the public to be able to compare organisations. Ms Williams encouraged the Authority to look outside of Wales for a wider comparison on fire and rescue

issues and in terms of other specific activities these could be compared to local authorities and other public sector organisations. The Treasurer cautioned against comparing too much with authorities outside of Wales as their funding was different and could mean the comparisons were unsuitable.

- 4.4 The Chief Fire Officer commented that comparing performance could lead to benchmarking against other organisations and that it was also unclear as to how comparing could add value to the services delivered to the public. The CFO was concerned that officers could spend a lot of time on comparing information and that it would be of no particular value or use in the end and would not transfer into meaningful actions.
- 4.5 Cllr Lewis asked whether complaints would be one suitable topic for comparison. Ms Williams explained that the Measure was not specific about which areas should be compared and that the process was about providing a balanced view to the public for them to be able to compare services. Ms Williams suggested that this could form part of the Authority's public engagement work and a way of discussing the funding element in order for the public to see why there are differences.
- 4.6 The Chair thanked Ms Williams for her work and presentation and Members **RESOLVED to note the information provided.**

## 5 BUDGET OPTIONS

- 5.1 The Deputy Chief Fire Officer presented the report which updated Members on the progress made in developing the Fire and Rescue Authority's draft budget for 2014-15 ready for presentation to the Authority at its December meeting.
- 5.2 The provisional local government revenue and capital settlement for 2014-15 had been issued by the Welsh Government. Overall there will be an average reduction in funding to North Wales' councils of 3.6% in 2014-15 and 1.6% in 2015-16. The Treasurer's view was that the actual figure, having taken into consideration inflation and that certain budget items are ring-fenced, could be in the order of a 6.5% reduction.
- 5.3 Members were informed that the risks around constructing the budget are the prospect of a higher than anticipated pay award being granted and increased activity levels. There was also the possibility of reduction or removal of direct grants from the Welsh Government which currently contributed towards the Authority's preventative work. Members had previously concluded that there were no more significant savings to be found in the Authority's budget without making reductions in service provision.
- 5.4 The Treasurer reminded Members that they were representing the interests of the whole of North Wales and that officers required guidance on how to formulate a draft budget that would be acceptable to Authority Members at the December meeting. The Treasurer felt that councils across North Wales will expect the FRA to shadow the level of percentage reductions facing the non-protected parts of local authority budgets. The Treasurer also stated that finding an innovative solution for 2014-15 was beyond reasonable at this late stage in the financial year.

- 5.5 The DCFO advised Members that now the Wrexham joint fire and ambulance station project was progressing, the £800,000 creditor which had been in the revenue accounts for 2012-13 could be reversed; £100,000 had been set aside in case of increased interest rates and it was deemed that this would not be required in the near future and there was also a £100,000 in the general reserve, all of which would add to £1 million that could be used to underpin the budget for 2014-15, which would represent a reduction of 3%. The Treasurer felt that using £100,000 from general reserve to underpin a budget would be a risk.
- 5.6 The CFO stated that returning the £800,000 to the budget presented a solution that would put the Authority in a 3% reduction position. However, the CFO drew Members' attention to the fact that a 3% reduction in 2014-15 would mean having to find a further £1 million savings for 2015-16 in order to have a standstill budget, and this would be prior to considering any additional savings that would be required to meet pay and price inflation. The CFO explained that over the last three years, with good and careful budget management and the level of operation activity the Authority has been able to build up a reserve. He felt that this demonstrated that officers have been planning and considering different ways of providing the services in the most effective way without reducing provision. Members were also reminded of the on-going discussions between officers and FBU representatives looking at innovative ways of working which will cost less, however, this is unlikely to generate all the savings required.
- 5.7 Cllr Lewis acknowledged that members were representing the FRA rather than their own councils. However, from an independent viewpoint, Cllr Lewis felt that councils and FRAs had done all they could to make savings and were now facing difficult choices. His proposal therefore was that the £1 million be used to enable a standstill budget, on the basis that the good work of the NIC may incur further savings for the NWFRS that were yet to be identified and this may give the Authority more scope for the 2015-16 budget.
- 5.8 In response to Cllr McGuill's question about whether the cut of 28 firefighter posts referred to in the report would be redundancy or redeployment, the CFO confirmed that it would have to be redundancy. However, when the Authority decided to take away posts in the past, Members had made it clear that they did not wish to see any compulsory redundancies.
- 5.9 Having answered Members' questions, the Chair moved on to the recommendations contained in the report. In relation to recommendation (iii), the DCFO stated that there were a number of options available. Members could decide to put £1 million in the budget to underpin it as mentioned above, or another option would be to put aside that money and freeze the budget. The DCFO explained that provided there would be no increase in activity then the Authority could potentially manage within the parameters of a standstill position but should there be an increase in activity the £1 million would be available as a fallback position. Members felt that this would be the safer option.

## 5.10 MEMBERS RESOLVED to

- (i) **note the risks around setting a balanced budget for 2014-15;**
- (ii) **confirm that they wish to recommend to the Authority that the 2014-15 budget be constructed on the basis of the current level of service provision;**
- (iii) **recommend to the Authority that the budget should be frozen for a fourth year and that £1 million should be moved into a general reserve which could be used to cover any overspend which might arise through increased activity. It was noted that providing there was no increase in activity the Authority could manage within the parameters of a frozen budget. However, should there be an increase in activity then general reserves would be available as a fall-back position.**

## 6 PERFORMANCE MONITORING

6.1 The Corporate Planning Manager presented the report which provided performance monitoring information for the first half of the year from 1 April 2013 – 30 September 2013.

6.2 The following issues were noted:

- an increase in accidental fires in dwellings compared to the same period last year, and the figure is also higher than the three year average
- in terms of injuries from accidental fires in dwellings, 1 person had sustained serious injury during the six month period and 21 had suffered minor injuries
- it was pleasing to note that despite the increase in dwelling fires, the number of dwellings where fires occurred that were without a smoke alarm had reduced
- in terms of home fire safety checks the Service had exceeded its 25% target of having referrals being made by partner organisations
- there had been a reduction in road traffic collisions and other special service incidents.

6.3 The Corporate Planning Manager drew Members' attention to the importance of taking a longer term view of incident rates rather than focussing only on comparisons with the previous year because the previous year may have been exceptional. For example, the report showed that the total number of fires in the first half of last year had been exceptionally low, so the number in the first half of this year would almost inevitably be higher, even though that number was significantly lower than in previous years. Similarly, the number of special service incidents attended last year had been particularly high because of the flooding incidents, but the number this year was more consistent with previous years.

- 6.4 Cllr Lewis commented that it was a good report and that it was unfortunate that the figures for the first half of this year do not reflect the average figures over the three year period. Looking at the actual increases in numbers rather than percentages, Cllr Lewis felt that the numbers involved were so small that the report should show an amber colour for the minor increases rather than red as there were sound reasons behind the increases such as the weather conditions. It was acknowledged that reducing accidental fires in dwellings was a primary objective and therefore important to maintain its profile, however, Cllr Lewis suggested an additional column showing the three year average which would be more meaningful and would address the issue. The CFO commented that it was a good point and that officers could possibly consider a parallel traffic light system showing the three year average. The Treasurer suggested setting a tolerance level as to when the figures really do become a concern and should definitely show a red box.
- 6.5 In terms of special service incidents, Cllr McGuill felt that showing the figures alone did not give her, or the public, a flavour of the incidents and how long the firefighters had been on scene. For example, the flooding incidents would have meant the firefighters being on scene for hours but that this would only be recorded as a single incident. The CFO suggested that future reports include more detail about such particular incidents for members' information.
- 6.6 **RESOLVED to**
- (i) note the information provided;**
- (ii) include the following information in future performance monitoring reports:**
- **an additional traffic light column on the tables of performance showing the average figure over the last three year period;**
  - **specific incidents that have involved firefighters staying on scene for a number of hours.**

## 7 WREXHAM FIRE AND AMBULANCE PROJECT

- 7.1 Following the Authority's decision to continue with the project at its meeting on 16 September, the report gave Members an update on latest developments and also requested Members to choose a representative to attend the Project Board meetings.
- 7.2 The CFO informed Members of the reconfigured milestones within the programme and that a full business case would be submitted to Welsh Government by February 2014 and that the completion date for the build will be late September 2015.
- 7.3 The project board had reconsidered its terms of reference and had suggested a FRA member representation on the board to provide a degree of independence for project assurance. Members were advised not to nominate a member from Wrexham for declarations of interests' issues. Cllr P Lewis proposed Cllr H McGuill and this was seconded by Members.

7.4 **RESOLVED to**

(i) **note the contents of the report;**

(ii) **nominate Cllr H McGuill to represent the FRA on the project board.**

8 FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE PROJECT IN WALES

8.1 The CFO had previously informed Members about the three-phased project and gave Members an update. The first phase was collating information on the work of the three FRs in Wales and this is due to be signed off by the three CFOs shortly. The next phase will involve analysing and comparing the data which is expected to identify emerging themes, one of which will be governance and will involve the Minister looking at the shape and composition of the FRAs in Wales.

8.2 **RESOLVED to note the information provided.**

PART II - Pursuant to Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act, 1972, the press and public were asked to leave the meeting during consideration of the following item(s) of business because it is likely that there would be disclosed to them exempt information as defined in Paragraph(s) 12 to 18 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Only the following officers remained in the meeting for this agenda item: Chief Fire Officer, Deputy Clerk, Treasurer, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Assistant Chief Fire Officers, Members Liaison Officer and Translator.

9 INDUSTRIAL ACTION

9.1 The CFO updated Members about the latest developments with regard to industrial action by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) over pension reform. Originally this had been a dispute between the FBU and Government however, the national employers were now involved. Since the report had been issued, further strike dates had been announced, one scheduled for 1 November and another to take place on 4 November. Email correspondence from the CFO will continue to be sent to Members regarding the matter.

9.2 Thereafter, ACFO Richard Fairhead presented the report which provided Members with information regarding the preparation for, and the impact of, the industrial action which took place on 25 September.

9.3 It was noted that the Business Continuity Management Team had met on a regular basis and following the strike period, the team had met to discuss areas of good practice and to debrief each area of the plan. In response to a Member's question it was noted that the financial cost of the strike would be provided to an Authority meeting at a later date.

9.4 **RESOLVED to note the information provided.**