

FIRE AUTHORITY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

MINUTES OF A MEETING

24 JANUARY 2006

2.00 PM

PRESENT: Mr W F Gillespie OBE TD MBA JP DL FCIQB FSCA,
Chairman presiding
Mrs M Black
Mrs B Gilliland
Mr J Beattie MCIPD
Mr J Campbell BA MBA FAIA FCIS FInstAM FCMI
Mr K Harper MIFireE
Mr G A Hatch TFA
Mr J Hughes
Mr J F McKeever
Mr R Pollock
Mr J Ross FCA ATII

APOLOGIES: Mrs S Dixon
Mrs A M McAleenan
Mr P Bradley CBE MA
Mr O Molloy LLB

IN ATTENDANCE: Chief Fire Officer
Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Community Development)
Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Technical Development)
Director of Human Resources
Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs
Board Administrative Secretary

1 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 22 November 2005, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, on the motion of Mr Ross, seconded by Mr Pollock.

Arising out of the Minutes:

Wholetime Recruitment

The Chairman requested an update on progress with respect to Wholetime recruitment.

The Director of Human Resources explained to Members that the Wholetime recruitment exercise was in its final stages and highlighted that the Service was on target for an intake of Trainees to commence on 1 March 2006.

The Chairman welcomed the progress which had been achieved.

At this point,
Mrs Black entered the Meeting

Discipline Appeal Hearing

The Chairman enquired whether a date had been set for the Discipline Appeal Hearing.

The Director of Human Resources informed Members that a date had been agreed and the Hearing was scheduled to take place on 2 March 2006.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members of a further case which would require to be heard by the Discipline Committee. **It was agreed that the Director of Human Resources would liaise with Mr Bradley, Chairman of the Discipline Committee, to set a date for the Hearing.**

2005/2006 Capital Allocation

The Chairman reminded Members that he had forwarded a letter to the Deputy Secretary at DHSSPS highlighting the Authority's concerns in relation to the Capital allocation.

The Chief Fire Officer informed Members that, on 8 January 2006, he had received confirmation from the Department indicating that an additional £3million had been secured for the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service with the proviso that all of the money would be spent by the end of March. He outlined key projects which could now be taken forward and assured Members that he was content that the additional funding would be spent.

The Chairman welcomed the allocation of additional capital funding and expressed his appreciation to the Chief Fire Officer and the Director of Finance & Performance Management for all their work in helping to secure that funding.

Update on Economic Appraisals – Cars and Vans

The Chairman sought an update with respect to the Economic Appraisal for Cars and Vans.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Wright referred to the update which he had given to Members at the November Meeting of the Authority and explained that NIFRS Officers had updated phase 2 of the Economic Appraisal relating to the Community Development/non-operational fleet and re-submitted the document to the Department. He informed Members that a response from the Department was still awaited although verbal feedback had been positive.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Wright also informed Members that phase 3 of the Business Case – Procurement Options – was progressing well.

Educationalist

The Chairman enquired as to whether a decision had been taken regarding the post of Educationalist within Community Development.

The Chief Fire Officer informed Members that NIFRS officers were still in negotiations with the Department regarding next year's funding allocation and explained that no decision would be taken until a clear indication was given regarding the financial position for next year.

Mr Harper, Chairman of the Safety Committee, explained to Members that the Safety Committee felt strongly about the core role the Educationalist had fulfilled previously and its role in the future given the emphasis on Community Development. He stated that the Committee strongly recommended that the post be filled.

The Chairman acknowledged that the filling of the Educationalist post was a priority and stated that the issue would be kept on the Agenda.

2 MINUTES OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on 10 January 2006, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record and the recommendations contained therein adopted by the Authority, on the motion of Mr Ross, seconded by Mr Campbell.

The Chairman of the Audit Committee, Mr Ross, gave Members a brief overview of the key issues from the Meeting. He highlighted in particular the internal assessment of NIFRS controls and procedures conducted by the Director of Finance & Performance Management in the context of the Jack Report. He assured Members that the internal assessment had confirmed that there were neither major gaps identified nor any major issues highlighted with the exception of shortages in resources. He pointed out that interim measures had been put in place to address the lack of availability of professional staff. He also informed Members that Mr D Lynn from the Northern Ireland Audit Office had strongly recommended that NIFRS endeavour to secure additional resources to strengthen its Finance Department.

Mr Ross referred to the Audit of Accounts and explained that the Northern Ireland Audit Office had taken the decision to contract out the 2005/06 Audit. Mr Ross expressed his disappointment regarding this decision given the good working relationship which had been built-up between the Authority and the Audit Office but acknowledged that the decision to outsource the audit demonstrated that the Audit Office had sufficient confidence in the Authority's financial management processes and procedures.

Referring to the comments regarding the recommendation for additional staff, the Chief Fire Officer stated that a number of Departments were under pressure but that budgetary constraints were hindering substantive progress. He stated that resourcing within the Finance Department would also be considered once Officers were aware of the funding allocation for next year.

During discussion on various issues pertaining to staffing, both uniformed and non-uniformed, the Chairman assured Members that their comments would be noted but also emphasised that the Authority had to comply with the onerous restrictions being placed on its finances.

3 NATIONAL JOINT COUNCIL MATTERS

Report on Meetings

Referring to meetings of the National Joint Council for Principal Officers held on 16 December and 10 January, the Chairman gave Members an update with respect to the ongoing negotiations to settle Principal Officers' salary for 2006. Members noted that a further meeting was scheduled to take place on 22 February 2006.

The Chairman referred to meetings of the Employers' Side which had taken place on 17 and 24 January and gave Members an update on progress with respect to Regional Control Rooms, Continuing Professional Development and particularly with respect to Pensions. He reminded Members of the Government's proposals for the Firefighters' Pension Scheme and explained that, whilst the Employers' Side recognised the case for a new Scheme for new entrants, they were against the proposed changes for members of the existing Scheme. It was unfair for their conditions and pension expectations to be unilaterally altered and not protected in the same way as other Emergency Services. The Authority Members unanimously endorsed this view and supported the Employers' Side on this issue.

The Chairman answered Members' questions relating to various aspects of the issues being discussed at national level.

4 CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

Attendance at Functions

The Chairman informed Members of the various functions which he had attended during December.

Chairman's Lunch

The Chairman informed Members of a lunch which he had hosted on 11 January 2006.

Seminar

The Chairman informed Members of a seminar he had attended which had been facilitated by the Chief Executives' Forum.

New Legislation

The Chairman gave Members an update on progress with respect to the new Legislation. He explained to Members that they may still be in post by June and maybe July depending on the progress made by the Department.

A list of Provisional dates for Meetings of the Authority and its Committees from February to July 2006 was circulated for the information of Members.

NIFRS Band

In response to a request from the Chairman, Mr Pollock updated Members on the progress of the NIFRS Band. He explained that the Committee was currently trying to promote the Band and asked Members to advise himself or the Chief Fire Officer of any events at which the Band could possibly be involved.

The Chairman thanked Mr Pollock and the Band Committee for all their work.

5 CHIEF FIRE OFFICER'S REPORT

The Chief Fire Officer gave Members a brief overview of his Report which was noted.

The Chief Fire Officer informed Members that over the Christmas period NIFRS had attended a number of incidents but had a reasonably quiet holiday period. He gave Members a brief overview of one particular incident of note which Firefighters had attended in Newtownabbey. The incident had received widespread publicity and all of the agencies in the area had worked together to ensure that disruption had been kept to a minimum.

Referring to the Environment Minister's recent announcement that the number of people killed on Northern Ireland's roads in 2005 had been 136, the lowest death toll since 1952, the Chief Fire Officer stated that all agencies agreed that the figure was still too high. He stated that improving road safety for road users was a major inter-agency strategy and assured Members that NIFRS was playing its full part. He further stated that NIFRS would continue to promote road safety at every opportunity.

The Chief Fire Officer and Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs answered Members' questions on various aspects of the information presented.

ADDITIONAL ITEM OF BUSINESS

The Chairman referred to the Minutes of the Safety Committee Meeting held on 8 December and sought Members' approval to take the Minutes as an additional item of Business.

The Authority, on the motion of Mr Harper, seconded by Mr Pollock, unanimously agreed to consider this additional item of Business.

MINUTES OF THE SAFETY COMMITTEE

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Safety Committee held on 8 December 2005, were circulated at the Meeting. After an interval to allow Members to read the Minutes, they were taken as read and signed as a true record and the recommendations contained therein adopted by the Authority, on the motion of Mr Harper, seconded by Mr Pollock.

Mr Harper, Chairman of the Safety Committee, gave Members a brief overview of the key issues from the Meeting. He referred to the number of vacant posts within Community Development and stated that the Committee had been monitoring the matter and had explained that the Committee had expressed concern regarding the timeframe in respect of some of the vacancies given the emphasis being placed on Community Development. He pointed out that the Committee had urged Assistant Chief Fire Officer Craig to endeavour to fill the vacant posts.

Referring to the Effectiveness Awards which had been received at the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising Annual Effectiveness Awards, Mr Harper explained to Members that the Awards had demonstrated how successful NIFRS' campaign had been.

At this point,
Mr McKeever left the Meeting

6 FINANCIAL MATTERS

Monthly Management Accounts

Members noted the Monthly Management Accounts for the period ending 31 December 2005.

Mr Ross gave Members a brief overview of the Accounts and drew Members' attention to the notes attached to same. Referring to the ongoing difficulties with the funding model adopted by the Department, Mr Ross explained that with the introduction of the revised Financial Memorandum the Authority would now draw down funding on a monthly basis. He stated that this change was in accordance with Best Practice and should alleviate the previous difficulties.

7 HUMAN RESOURCE MATTERS

Sickness Statistics

Members noted the Sickness Statistics for the months of November and December 2005 which had been circulated for information. The Director of Human Resources gave Members a brief overview of the Statistics.

The Director of Human Resources also gave Members a brief update on progress with respect to various aspects of Attendance Management.

In response to a question from Mr Harper regarding progress with respect to the Occupational Health Scheme, the Chief Fire Officer explained that the Scheme was a further key priority for the Organisation which was dependant on funding.

8 RELEVANT CORRESPONDENCE

There was no relevant correspondence.

9 SEALING OF DOCUMENTS

Members approved the undernoted documents for sealing:

Fire Authority for Northern Ireland with –

Northgate Information Solutions – Maintenance of Communications Network Equipment;

Revive Healthcare Training – Provision of First Aid at Work and First Aid Refresher Training Courses;

Barron McCann Technologies Limited – Procurement of New Bacstel – IP Electronic Solution;

Bow Street Mall Limited – Deed of Surrender of Lease; and

Bow Street Mall Limited – Grant of Easement.

10 MEETINGS OF THE AUTHORITY AND ITS COMMITTEES, ETC

Members noted a list of Meetings of the Authority and its Committees for the month of February 2006.

It was noted that, at the request of Mr Bradley, Chairman of the Strategy, Planning & Resources Committee, the Meeting scheduled to take place on 14 February would now be held at 11.00 am on Tuesday, 28 February 2006.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 3.30 PM
