

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING

24 JANUARY 2012

11.00 AM

PRESENT: Dr J McKee, Chairman presiding
Mr P Craig, Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive
Cllr D Barbour
Cllr M Carr
Mrs S Grant
Mr A Hanna
Mr M Kerr
Ald Mrs G Rice

APOLOGIES: Mr J Barbour
Ald A Hatch
Mr C Mack
Mrs P Tally

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr C Kerr, Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Mr E Doyle, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Support Services)
Mr T McGonigal, Director of Finance & Performance
Management
Dr D Michail, Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs
Mrs M Hughes, Head of HR
Mr J Allen, Group Commander (Operations Risk Management)
Mr G Lowry, Assistant Group Commander
(South & East District)
Mr B Stanfield, Regional Chairperson, Fire Brigades' Union
Mrs I Hill, Board Administrative Secretary
Ms L Curran, DHSSPS

1 Apologies

Apologies were noted.

2 Declaration of Interests

The Chair sought clarification as to whether any Members of the Board wished to declare any potential conflict of interest with any of the Business Items on the Agenda. Members confirmed that there were no conflicts of interest.

At this point,
Mr Carr entered the Meeting

3 Business Planning Principles 2012-15

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer gave Members an update on progress with respect to the Resource Management Implementation Plan referring in particular to the Wholetime Resource Management Crewing Levels Framework which had been developed in agreement with the Fire Brigades' Union. Members noted that the Framework had been circulated with the papers for the Board Meeting for consideration.

With respect to the Wholetime Resource Management Crewing Levels Framework, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that, in order to provide operational assurance, the Framework had operational effect from 1 January 2012 as it provides enhanced global fire cover, increased Firefighter safety, increased levels of supervision, a reduction in overtime revenue costs and equality of opportunity for all operational personnel. He advised Members that the Framework would now be going forward for external consultation.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer informed Members that a revised Variable Crewing Framework to improve Retained availability and reduce overtime had been agreed with the Fire Brigades' Union. He introduced Assistant Group Commander G Lowry and Mr B Stanfield, Fire Brigades' Union, to the Meeting and explained that working in partnership had enabled consultation on the Framework at an early stage and expressed his appreciation for all their work.

Assistant Group Commander Lowry outlined to Members the drivers for change in respect of Resource Management particularly in terms of Wholetime Resources Management which resulted in the development, in conjunction with the Fire Brigades' Union, of a Crewing Levels Framework, along with a Variable Crewing Framework. He gave Members an overview of the options considered and the benefits of the new NI specific crewing model.

Mr Stanfield gave Members an assurance that the Fire Brigades' Union will work in partnership with NIFRS to deliver enhanced Firefighter safety and community safety. He reiterated why the Framework had been implemented with effect from 1 January 2012.

Mr Stanfield presented a summary of the consultation which had taken place with respect to the development of the Wholetime Resource Management Crewing Levels Framework and also the Variable Crewing Framework.

Members noted that NIFRS Variable Crewing Policy had been revised to improve Retained availability and reduce overtime; and will undergo a consultation exercise.

The Officers answered Members' questions regarding aspects of the information presented.

In response to a question from Mrs Rice, Mr Stanfield explained why NIFRS had not considered piloting the changes and emphasised that the changes were widely supported by personnel. With respect to the Variable Crewing Framework, he pointed out that the change of duty hours was considered more family friendly. He stated that NIFRS had also taken into consideration best practice within other FRSS and informed Members of an exercise which had been conducted by North Wales.

He also outlined the governance arrangements explaining that auditing would be conducted at Station, District and Area level. Members noted that the Framework would be reviewed at 6 months.

Mrs Rice acknowledged that the Resource Management Framework would assist NIFRS in providing a more efficient and effective service delivery and looked forward to the 6-month review and the assessment of savings.

The Chairman referred to the level of detail within the Framework document and to the concerns raised at Board level in terms of performance and welcomed the documentation which provided a sound way forward for NIFRS. He also recognised the role of the Fire Brigades' Union working in partnership with the Service.

The Chief Fire Officer expressed his appreciation to the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and all those involved for all their work in progressing change management within NIFRS, a major piece of work over the next 18 months.

At this point,
Assistant Group Commander Lowry and Mr Stanfield left the Meeting

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to the Business Planning principles and explained that various documents contributing to the development of NIFRS strategic objectives would be circulated for Members' information.

Referring to the draft NIFRS IRMP, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reminded Members that NIFRS had not produced a standalone IRMP since 2008/09. He stated that draft IRMP 2012-15 was NIFRS' first 3-year Plan.

A draft Summary of the Draft IRMP 2012-15 Consultation Exercise was circulated for the information of Members. Members were informed that a finalised Summary would be produced following conclusion of the consultation exercise on 25 January 2012. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that the Summary Report would give Members an awareness of the context of the finalised IRMP 2012-15 prior to being presented for approval at the next Service Delivery & Performance Committee Meeting and subsequently the Board for ratification.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer also explained that NIFRS strategic objectives will then be developed and issued to the Board for approval at its February Meeting. He assured Members that the Corporate Management Team was also aware of other strategic issues including recommendations emanating from the DID Review and NIAO Report.

Mrs Rice emphasised that the development of a Strategic Plan was a key priority for NIFRS and stressed the importance of ensuring that progress against the Plan was closely monitored. She pointed out the need for the Directors to drive the Plan forward and to ensure the provision of timely and relevant information.

The Chairman noted that progress on NIFRS Corporate Plan & Annual Business Plan was reviewed quarterly and reported to the relevant Board Committee. The Chief Fire also highlighted that the Corporate Management Team monitored progress on a monthly basis. He referred to discussions with the Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs in relation to the development of a Capital Projects Plan which would enhance monitoring arrangements.

Mrs Rice reiterated the need for the Board to also monitor progress against Action Plans. The Chief Fire Officer concurred reiterating that quarterly progress reports were presented and monitored closely by the relevant Board Committee. He assured Members that Action Plans would be closely monitored.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer gave Members a brief overview of the Operational Management Framework which provided an accountability structure for the monitoring of performance.

A copy of the draft NIAO Report Action Plan was circulated for the information of Members. The Action Plan details the recommendations in the NIAO Report and all relevant Directorates and Lead Officers have been allocated to each recommendation. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer outlined work which was currently underway to fully develop the Action Plan.

A Briefing Paper on the Strategic Review of Operational Management in NIFRS was also circulated to Members, along with a briefing note pertaining to the Warwickshire County Council case where a Health & Safety issue had led the Council to accepting liability for the accident. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that the operational safety needs of Firefighters is the single most important issue currently facing UK Fire & Rescue Services and was a key strategic issue for NIFRS.

Referring to Workforce Planning, a key issue for NIFRS, he gave Members an update on the current position highlighting that a 6-month Recruitment & Promotions Schedule had been developed and good progress was being made. He reminded Members that Retained availability was also a vulnerability within NIFRS.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the planning process will address NIFRS statutory obligations but may not address its aspirations, therefore, it was essential for the Plan to be agreed collectively.

The Chief Fire Officer assured Members would be kept informed of progress and that any changes to NIFRS objectives would be presented to the Board so that Members would be fully informed of the rationale for that change.

At this point,
Group Commander Allen left the Meeting

4 Finance Requirements 2012-15

The Director of Finance & Performance Management circulated a Discussion Paper regarding the 2012/13 Budget Bids. He gave Members a detailed overview of the information presented and highlighted that there was a difference of approximately £3.3m from budget bids to anticipated allocation. He stated that the budget bids needed to tie back to the Chief Fire Officer's CSR budget letter and this was a normal iterative process.

Referring to the Wholetime Staff budget of £39.2m, the Director of Finance & Performance Management explained to Members that the budget had been calculated using the 917 establishment figure and included projected staffing levels for next year. Members noted that no adjustment needed to be made in the budget for the 37 new Trainees who were due to commence training on 30 January 2012, nor any other new intakes planned later in 2012-13. It was also noted that no adjustment had been made for retirements during the year. Adjustment not required since budget set at full establishment level and slippage would fund a new intake.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management stated that the estimated Wholetime establishment average for 2012-13 is 903.5, with the addition of no further Trainees. He explained that 12 Trainees recruited in September 2012 will keep the overall establishment within agreed levels and result in a Wholetime establishment equivalent of 910.5. He pointed out this would give slippage in the budget of approximately £195k. Should no recruitment take place the Wholetime establishment equivalent would be 903.5 resulting in slippage of some £405k.

During discussion with regard to the Wholetime establishment figure of 917, the Chairman acknowledged the awareness of future projections but suggested the need to consider the actions being considered by PSNI. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that whilst PSNI were proposing the closing of actual Stations, staff were being redeployed. He confirmed that 917 was the establishment figure for Wholetime staff explaining that a key issue was staff not being in the "right place" and this was being addressed.

Mr Hatch questioned whether the 917 figure was still appropriate giving the Organisation was moving forward through the change management process. The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that the risk profile was changing and explained why the 917 establishment figure remained appropriate for NIFRS, adding that consideration also needed to be given to NIFRS' new statutory obligations. He stated that the FSEC methodology and other ongoing work would provide NIFRS with the rationale for retaining these establishment levels.

The Chief Fire Officer referred to the NIFRS bid of £81m and explained that the Corporate Management Team were working to identify the priorities and the aspirations. He reiterated that they were already considering establishment levels and the most effective means of utilising these resources. He pointed out that a significant amount of the budget was attributed to staffing.

Mr Kerr stated that the Service needs to be innovative and creative to work in a reduced budget. He referred to the proposed closure of Police Stations and closure of A & E Departments and suggested the need for consideration to be given to conducting a needs analysis in terms of NIFRS Stations. He explained that he was not advocating the closure of Stations but stressed the importance of the Service being able to demonstrate that it had considered all the options including Estates.

Discussion took place with respect to Mr Kerr's comments. The Chief Fire Officer assured Members that this was under consideration and reminded them that FSEC will help inform the process. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stressed that NIFRS was considering this in the context of meeting Emergency Response Standards as opposed to achieving savings.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management continued his overview of the 2012/13 Budget bids. He sought clarification as to whether Members agreed with the CSR budget letter.

The Chairman stated the need for further consideration to be given to the impacts of the options for reduction contained within the letter.

Mr Kerr highlighted that expenditure had been looked at in detail this year. He commented on the issue of contracts and the importance of ensuring these were closely monitored. He emphasised the need to take a critical look at expenditure over the current year and to draw comparisons.

Mrs Grant referred to the fundamental criticism which NIFRS had received regarding insufficient long-term financial planning and a lack of effective monitoring and stated that this needed to be addressed.

Referring to the budget profile for next year, Mr Kerr outlined the need for robust systems and procedures to be in place to ensure effective management of budgets by budget holders. The Officers assured Members that Senior Managers, including Area Commanders, were aware of their role in terms of financial management. The Director of Finance & Performance Management stated that, historically, Area Commanders managed their budgets well. He also stated that relevant training was provided for those with responsibility for managing budgets.

With respect to comments regarding Estates maintenance and associated budget profile, the Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs stated that there were procedures in place for the managing of defects, etc. He outlined the processes in place and explained the difficulty was administrative bureaucracy especially with regard to expenditure levels and the requirement for appraisals which constrained progress. He acknowledged that this also impacted on Finance and other staff.

Mrs Rice stated that this needed to be addressed as the levels of expenditure where appraisals are required were inappropriate and impacted on normal business.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to the points raised by Mr Kerr regarding the management of Area budgets and pointed out that Area Commanders have been acting-up into temporary positions and explained the difficulties associated with this arrangement. With respect to the new appointments, he assured Members that an induction and training package was currently being developed.

5 Impact

The Chief Fire Officer informed Members of the current position with respect to the CSR Budget letter explaining that NIFRS has been asked to demonstrate the impact of the £3m budget reduction.

He sought clarification that Members were content with the CSR letter and the range of options listed where NIFRS can deliver savings. He reminded Members that to implement some of the reductions will require policy changes and NIFRS will be required to conduct a full public consultation process. He acknowledged the difficulties with options but stated the need to respond to DHSSPS and to ensure that they are aware of the potential impacts.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management advised Members that by the end of the month DHSSPS will be expecting a draft budget for 2012/13.

With respect to the letter, Mr Hanna commented that the potential for under-spends and cost savings still remained. He informed the Meeting that he had recently participated on a Tender Evaluation Panel and expressed concerns regarding the constraints which NIFRS faced in terms of procurement processes. He explained the cost-savings programme in place with Health Estates to achieve value for money.

Referring back to the CSR budget letter, the Chief Fire Officer gave Members a detailed explanation of the options presented within the letter to achieve the £3m reduction and answered Members' questions on the implications. Members noted that the Minister had directed that the revenue reductions should not impact on frontline services and that this instruction had been taken into consideration where possible. Additionally cognisance had been taken of NIFRS statutory obligations while protecting and maintaining the Health & Safety of its personnel.

During further discussion, Mr Carr questioned the possibility of a revenue stream for NIFRS with regard to some of the services it provided, eg, fire safety visits. The Chief Fire Officer explained that currently NIFRS did not have a provision for income generation.

In light of the points raised regarding procurement procedures and the possibility of income generation, Members asked that the Chief Fire Officer raise with DHSSPS:

- opportunities to streamline procurement procedures;
- consideration of other procurement arrangements;
- revenue generation.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that the range of options contained within the letter demonstrated that NIFRS were seriously considering its budget position.

The Chairman suggested the need to consider the priority of the options listed. He reiterated the Minister's directions that reductions should not impact on frontline services and asked that a 'prioritised' list of options as per the CSR Budget letter be presented to the Board.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Fire Officer and Directors for the information which had been presented to the Board.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 1.15 PM
