

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF AN ADDITIONAL MEETING

17 NOVEMBER 2014

4.15 PM

PRESENT: Dr J McKee, Chairman presiding
Mr C Kerr, Interim Chief Fire Officer
Mr J Barbour
Cllr M Carr
Mr A Hanna
Mr K Henning
Ald Mrs G Rice
Mr G Smyth
Mr T Wright

APOLOGIES: Cllr D Barbour

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Wallace, Interim Chief Executive
Mr D Ashford, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Community Protection)
Mr J Allen, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Operational Support)
Mrs L Cuddy, Director of Planning, Performance & Governance
Mrs J Kelly, Director of Finance
Mr D Moore, Director of Human Resources
Mrs C McNally, Head of Corporate Communications
Ms I Hill, Board Administrative Secretary
Mr J Millar, DHSSPS Observer
Mr S Boyd, FBU Observer
Mr D Nichol, FBU Observer
Mr D Rooney, FBU Observer

Item 1: Apologies

Apologies were noted.

Item 2: Declaration of Interests

The Chairman 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 apparent conflicts of interest.

Item 3: Budget

The Chairman acknowledged that the additional Board Meeting had been convened at relatively short notice and noted the significant amount of work completed by the Corporate Management Team in preparation for the Meeting. He explained that the Interim Chief Executive would lead Members through the budget options in the context of the correspondence received from DHSSPS asking NIFRS to develop scenario plans for potential budget cuts of 5%, 10% and 15%.

The Interim Chief Executive noted that NIFRS is currently working through a 2.5% budget reduction in-year and has now been asked to scenario plan for potential 5%, 10% and 15% budget reductions in 2015/16. He referred to the presentation delivered at the Workshop immediately prior to the Board Meeting and explained that the preliminary assessment was set in the context of the ongoing work relating to the 2.5% budget reduction. He highlighted that NIFRS has already effected significant organisational change and is moving in a new direction with the budget position having accelerated the process for change. He stated that a 15% budget cut would have a serious adverse impact across the Organisation.

The Interim Chief Executive explained that the Board were being asked to consider what principles and parameters the Corporate Management Team should work to in developing efficiency proposals. He further explained that the Preliminary Assessment presentation highlighted examples of options which can/cannot be done and also how these could be taken forward.

Referring to the timeframes for responding to DHSSPS, the Interim Chief Executive informed Members that an initial response to DHSSPS was required by 17 November 2014, with a more detailed final draft to be with DHSSPS by 5 December 2014. He stated that a response regarding NIFRS' preliminary assessment would hopefully be forwarded the next day but with respect to the detailed proposals he explained that he was of the view that any detailed options should not be forwarded until considered by the Board firstly for approval or otherwise.

The Chairman stated that he and Board colleagues would be unhappy if options/proposals were forwarded without having been brought to the Board.

Mrs Rice concurred stating that seeking Board approval was good governance. She referred to the proposals and stressed the importance of any proposals for efficiencies being safe for the Organisation, its personnel and the public. She also stressed the necessity for the Board to have an opportunity to consider the details of all proposals and expressed concern regarding DHSSPS timeframes for response especially given the potential impact on the Organisation.

The Interim Chief Executive outlined the approach taken by the Corporate Management Team in developing the proposals explaining that the Team was trying to build long-term, sustainable solutions. He emphasised the need for the Board's views regarding the options as it was fundamental in how NIFRS will move forward. He noted that there will be a need to build subsequently on any proposals/options and highlighted the potential impact of further developing such proposals on personnel to deliver and on good working relationships whilst not neglecting NIFRS' statutory responsibilities.

The Director of Human Resources noted that the Board had received a detailed presentation relating to a preliminary assessment of the budget reduction scenarios at the Workshop prior to the Board Meeting, however, he delivered the presentation again outlining the salient aspects.

Members noted that budget reductions of 10% or 15% cannot be made in one year without the potential consequence of redundancies, Station closures, removal of fire appliances and either no spend or greatly reduced spending on training, community safety, PPE, etc. Members were informed that for all 3 budget reduction scenarios NIFRS will not be able to sustain its current approach to service delivery and no aspect of the Service will remain the same.

Members were informed that to achieve safely these significant budget reductions NIFRS would need to take a longer term, planned and strategic approach, therefore, the Corporate Management Team had included an Option 4 which was a 3-year plan to allow for a change programme to reshape fundamentally NIFRS' service delivery model achieving significant budget reductions while ensuring key risks to the public and to Firefighters are effectively managed.

During a full discussion, Members raised the following points:

- that it is essential that NIFRS continues to meet its statutory responsibilities;
- expressed concern regarding the implications of cuts of 10% or 15% and the timeframes envisaged;
- stressed the need to point out strongly that a one-year reduction of either 10% or 15% will have a significant negative impact on NIFRS' ability to provide a service that meets the needs of the community of NI and result in unacceptably high levels of risk to public safety and Firefighter safety;
- expressed concern regarding potential compulsory redundancies and the associated financial implications; noting that employers within the UK Fire & Rescue Service have never been placed in a position of contemplating compulsory redundancies and that any move in this direction could inevitably be met with industrial action. The Interim Chief Fire Officer outlined his concerns at the implication of industrial unrest;
- the need to consider the potential of having to negotiate the removal of non-statutory responsibilities;
- suggested the need to agree a media strategy;
- supported the Corporate Management Team's proposal at Option 4.

The Members commended the Corporate Management Team for all their work.

Following further discussion, Members agreed the principles/criteria which the Corporate Management Team should use when developing budget proposals and assessing options for change.

Members requested that a strongly worded response be forwarded to DHSSPS providing a high level summary of the preliminary assessment and its impact on the Service. Members requested that the response to also indicate that NIFRS will not be providing detailed proposals until same have been considered by the Board at its December Meeting.

The Board, on the motion of Mrs Rice, seconded by Mr Wright, also agreed that the Chairman forward a letter to DHSSPS pointing out the significant negative impact of a one-year budget reduction of either 10% or 15% and that the Preliminary Assessment Presentation be delivered to DHSSPS.

Members agreed that the Corporate Management Team further develop a 3-year plan for consideration at the December Board Meeting.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 4.40 PM
