

Derry City and Strabane District Council

Open Minutes of the Governance and Strategic Planning Committee held in the Council Chamber, Guildhall on Tuesday 28 November 2017 at 4.00 pm

Present: - Councillor Fleming (in the Chair), Aldermen Hussey, Kerrigan, Ramsey and Thompson; Councillors Cooper, Donnelly, C Kelly, McKeever, McKnight, McMahon, Robinson and Tierney.

Non-Committee Members:- Alderman Devenney and Councillor Tierney

In Attendance:- Chief Executive (Mr John Kelpie), Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer (Ms E Cavanagh), Business Support and Change Manager (Mrs R Craig), Lead Finance Officer (Mr A Dallas), Head of Environment (Mr Conor Canning) and Committee Services Assistant (Mrs T Johnstone).

GSP169/17 Notice and Summons for Meeting

The Chief Executive read the Notice and Summons for the Meeting.

GSP170/17 Member attendance and apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Boyle.

GSP171/17 Declarations of Members' interests

There were no declarations of Members Interests.

Open for Decision

GSP172/19 Deputation to Discuss the Proposed Cuts by the NIFRS at Northland Fire Station and Crescent Link Fire Station.

The Chair welcomed Mr Boyd and Mr Quinn, Union Officials of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigades Union (NIFBU) and invited them to make their presentation.

Mr Quinn delivered the presentation regarding the proposed budget cuts to the fire service and highlighted the following:

- NIFRS have 917 full-time firefighters, 998 retained and 12 volunteer firefighters. There are also 58 regional emergency fire control centre staff and 260 support staff.
- The Chief Fire and Rescue Officer requested £74.4m for the 2017/18 budget.
- Department of Health (DoH) only funded £72.2m.
- Fire Brigades Union lobby and press campaign helped to get an extra £700k in November 2017.
- NIFRS is one of the higher performing FRS's in the UK with a cost per head of population of £38.90 against the UK average of £41.40, which means that fire and rescue cover is provided for each person in Northern Ireland for £0.75 per week or £0.11 per day.
- Eighty three percent of the NIFRS revenue spend is on wages and salaries.
- Reduction in budget would have a catastrophic impact on emergency services with a reduction in numbers of firefighters.
- No upgrades available in Strabane, Dungannon and Downpatrick.
- Non primary crewing of appliances.
- Reduction in training.
- Specialist high rise appliance in Derry/Londonderry no longer immediately available with a 50 percent reduction in crew members for the specialist rescue appliance.
- Forty percent reduction of full-time cover in Antrim Fire Station.
- Reduction in the number of supervisory officers critical to firefighter safety.
- Reduction in the number of safety critical training days for part-time firefighters which would hold major health and safety implications.
- Lack of recruitment – insufficient numbers of full-time personnel to upgrade operational response high risk stations such as Downpatrick, Dungannon and Strabane.

Mr Quinn then called on Members for their support and to lobby the Chief Fire and Rescue Officer, the Fire Board and other political leaders within the community, asking them to reverse the cuts and seek further funding from the Department of Health.

Members expressed their shock and concern at the cuts to the Fire Service budget and offered their full support to the Fire Brigade Union in their proposal to have the decision reversed. They expressed their

appreciation and respect for the staff within the service. Members then raised the following points:

- Concern that the budget cuts had been recognised as a risk, yet were still implemented.
- The implications that the Fire Service could not carry out the necessary risk assessments to ensure complete safety due to the reduction in staff.
- An official with a knowledge and understanding of the Fire Service should be responsible for decision making.
- Invite the Chief Fire Officer to speak to Members regarding the budget cuts and the implications involved.
- Risk not only to the general public but also to firefighters.
- Enquired what engagement the Fire Brigades Union have had with the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Health.
- Totally unacceptable that the NIFRS were being treated in such a way.
- The Service should be given the required £2.2m to enable them to fulfil the service throughout our communities.
- The decrease in recruitment, particularly for retained firefighters would have a detrimental impact especially in the Castlederg area.
- Staff at Castlederg Fire Station suffered low morale – an impact on the lack of recruitment for the area.
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service operated on both sides of the border which must also be considered.
- Stated that people from the west were once again being treated as second class citizens.
- Enquired if the same emphasis was being put on Eastern Command.
- Had the decision to reduce the budget been rural proofed as the implementation of the cuts would have a ripple effect throughout the entire rural communities and beyond.
- The need to be mindful of the fact that it could not be predicted when or where a fire could start and appliances and staff should be made available for such an occurrence.
- Lives would be lost if proper funding was not put in place.
- Referred to Altnagelvin Area Hospital where a number of fires had taken place, particularly within the past 6 years.
- Major fire at the hospital in 2012 which involved 50 firefighters and 11 appliances.

- A report had highlighted that staff and patients at Altnagelvin faced a very significant risk of injury or death due to inadequate fire precautions being implemented.
- Every effort to be made to have the high rise appliance reinstated within the City.
- Thirty high rise buildings in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area that require a high rise appliance in case of a fire or emergency.
- Services regarding the safety of human life should have the necessary funding made available to them.
- Expressed concern that the second largest city in Northern Ireland had a reduction in fire appliances.
- Called for Elected Representatives in all 11 Councils throughout Northern Ireland to support the Fire Brigades Union in opposing the budget cuts.

Mr Quinn thanked Members for their words of support and responded to their comments as follows:

- There was a 20 percent reduction in night time firefighters and a 25 percent reduction in available appliances which was a concern, particularly the loss of the high rise appliance.
- Did not consider the budget cuts to have been 'rural proofed' and stated that Crescent Link Fire Station had opened in 1990 with no service prior to that. There was also no service in Fermanagh and Tyrone with Strabane and Dungannon pending.
- NIFRS require investment to spread full-time cover across all the communities and offer training opportunities for young people to encourage them to join the Fire Service.
- Without the proper investment from the Department of Health for recruitment and appliances, it would be more costly in the long term due to an increase in people becoming injured, damaged buildings, loss of business and economic deprivation.
- If airport fire cover was based on demand there would not be any fire stations at airports, however it is a risk that should be considered and not based on demand.
- Fire Service were also involved as an emergency responders.
- Pilot scheme in Lurgan where firefighters were on call to respond to cardiac arrests.
- Nearest ambulance cover for Lurgan was Belfast.
- With a Fire Station in the area but no ambulance station it made sense to use trained people to provide cover until the arrival of the professionals.

- NIFRS provide a better level of cover across communities for the same value and money.
- NIFRS had been providing cover to East Donegal over the past 60 years.
- If NIFRS recruit 56 more people by March they would still be short of approximately 100 firefighters.

Mr Boyd informed Members that to recruit 56 new firefighters had taken two years of negotiations with the Fire Service and the Department of Health. He stated that the recruitment process commenced in January 2017 with the new recruits due to begin employment in November. However, the Department had informed them they could not guarantee further recruitment funding. He stated that the delay in starting the new recruits had an overall impact as part of the agreement was the retention of the appliance at Northland Fire Station with the primary crew. He reported that the Chief Fire Officer had stated that if funding was available, the appliance at Northland would continue to be primary crewed.

Mr Boyd referred to retained recruitment and stated that there had been three recruitment drives over the past three years, however it had been exceptionally difficult to attract people to apply for those positions. He stated that the fee for a retained firefighter was £0.49 per hour with a requirement to be available for 100-120 hours per week which was not a great incentive. He reported that fire calls were paid per hour however, with a reduction in fire calls there was no money to be made. He added that the service was struggling to recruit retained firefighters, particularly in the Castlederg, Strabane and Limavady areas.

Mr Boyd then referred to risks at airports and expressed concern that statistics rather than a risk assessment had been used to make the decision to no longer primary crew an appliance. He stated that this would increase the risk to people who lived in that particular area and also the safe systems of work that firefighters must put in place to carry out their job safely. He added that there was always a risk which was increased with the lack of a primary crewed appliance.

Mr Quinn informed Members that there had been an initial meeting with the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Health which had proved difficult. He stated that the Fire Brigades Union had made a strong and articulate case, however, it was not considered by the Permanent Secretary. He added that the Union had written to the

Permanent Secretary asking for a further meeting to discuss the cut to the budget, however he has refused their request.

Alderman Hussey affirmed that the Fire Brigades Union had gathered support from Members across the Chamber. He referred to the concerns regarding the reduction of the high rise appliance and stated that he felt that the core issue was the lack of retained recruitment within the Fire Service which was a concern for the entire area and had been for some time. He stated that he realised the pressure that the Fire and Rescue Service was under and offered his full support to them.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their presentation and stated that there was universal appreciation for the Fire Service and they had gained the full support of Members.

Chairperson's Business

GSP173/17 Condemnation of Arson Attack

The Chair expressed his condemnation at the cowardly and criminal attack on colleague and fellow Member, Councillor Brian Tierney and his family at the weekend. He stated that the arson attack on Councillor Tierney's car was totally unacceptable and that he was a very conscientious and hard-working Councillor.

Aldermen Hussey, Devenney and Thompson with Councillors McKnight, Reilly and Robinson concurred with the remarks made by the Chair. They expressed their shock at the arson attack and gave their full support to Councillor Tierney and his family. They stated that Councillor Tierney's response had been an inspiration to them all.

Councillor Tierney thanked the Members and everyone who had contacted him and his family to offer support. He stated that he represented everyone in his District Electoral Area (DEA) as well as those that contact him from other DEA's and different political viewpoints. He always attempted to help them all and offer them support. He stated that there was no justification to attack someone's property in an attempt to intimidate them and their family. He expressed his thanks to the Party Leader of the SDLP and to everyone who had visited his home to support his family whilst he had been travelling from Belfast at the time of the attack. He stated that the overwhelming support had spurred him on and that he had returned to

work and was very proud to attend the opening of the play park at Ballyarnett Country Park. He added that in the words of his own party president, 'he's not going away.'

Open for Decision

GSP174/17 Confirmation of the Open Minutes of the Governance and Strategic Planning Committee held on 7 November 2017

The open minutes of Meeting held on 7 November 2017 (GSP152/17-GSP166/17) were confirmed and signed by the chairperson.

On a matter of accuracy, Alderman Devenney stated that he was not recorded as attending the meeting.

It was agreed that the Minutes would be amended accordingly.

Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

GSP175/17 Six Monthly Progress Report – Strategic Planning and Support Units Delivery Plan

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report a copy of which had been previously circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to seek Members' comments in relation to progress against the Strategic Planning and Support Units Delivery Plan for 2017/18.

Councillor Cooper stated that the item on the European Capital of Culture should be updated within the report due to changes since the report had been written. He referred to the major impacts that could arise from the reduction to the rates support grant and enquired if a meeting had been arranged with Senior Civil Servants to reverse the process. He asked that Members receive an update on the matter as soon as possible.

The Lead Finance Officer, reported that two letters had been issued to the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Communities in relation to the impacts of the reduction in the rates support grant. He stated that the letters had requested engagement with Elected Members. He stated that the Permanent Secretary who

had initially refused the engagement on the budget uncertainty has been sent a more robust request. He added that a full report would be available on receipt of any responses

The Committee

Recommended that (i) the Committee note the contents of the 6 monthly progress report and (ii) update Members on any responses to correspondence sent to the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Communities.

GSP176/17 Capital Projects Approval – Clooney Greenway – Lands Acquisition

The Lead Finance Officer presented the above report a copy of which had been previously circulated. He advised that the purpose of this report was to seek Members' approval for allocation of capital funding in the sum of £61,400 towards Clooney Greenway lands acquisition.

Councillor Reilly thanked the Lead Finance Officer and the team for all the work carried out to get to this stage of the project. He stated that the securing of the land meant there was a potential for businesses to develop along the Greenway and the river. He referred to a recent meeting he had attended with the Greenway group and stated that the previous steering group project had no budget in place. He stated that a budget had now been legislated for the project and hoped that the relevant departments received the required funding to enable completion of the project. He stated that it had been indicated that the Chief Executive had written to the Department for Communities and asked if any response received could be circulated to Members.

Alderman Thompson thanked the team for their hard work which had resulted in a number of meetings to ascertain funding for the project. He expressed concern at the Education Authority's request for £60,000 to acquire land from them considering that other landowners had requested a nominal fee. He stated that the budget for the project needed to be a priority in order to have completion by September 2018.

The Chief Executive stated that the Senior Officer Team would be meeting with the Senior Officer Team of the Department for Communities in the coming week to ascertain the current budgetary

situation with regard to a number of projects including Clooney Greenway. He suggested that a wider update paper be brought to the Environment and Regeneration Committee which would set out timeframes and look at any issues or concerns with the overall progress on the project.

Councillor Tierney proposed, Seconded by Councillor McKeever, that any correspondence and response received from the Department for Communities be circulated to Members.

The Committee

Recommended that Authority is approved to; (i) accept LPS premiums for lands acquisitions as outlined above; (ii) make budget provisions in the sum of £61,400 to meet this expenditure and (iii) that any correspondence to and responses from the Department for Communities is circulated to Members.

GSP177/17 Closure of Omagh Electoral Office

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had been previously circulated. She stated that the purpose of the report was to advise Members of correspondence received from NIPSA and to seek Member's comments in relation to this correspondence.

Councillor McMahon paid tribute to the staff at the Electoral Office in Kelvin Road, Omagh. He stated that Mr Fox and his team had a great working relationship not only with political parties but to all who had visited the office. He stated that the emphasis was on online registration and expressed concern that parts of Fermanagh and Tyrone still did not have adequate broadband provision. He supported the recommendation to write to the Chief Electoral Officer and the Permanent Secretary requesting that they reverse the decision to close the Electoral Office at Omagh.

Alderman Hussey concurred with the previous speaker's comments and referred to point 4.2 in the report which stated: *'In the event that there is relocation of electoral services from Omagh to the local electoral office in the city, there may be a positive impact on the sustainability of local*

services'. He stated that it was not local services to the West Tyrone constituency section of this District Council. He stated that the service provided by the Omagh Electoral Office was exemplary and to lose that was a complete travesty.

Councillor Reilly echoed the remarks previously made and expressed concern that local democracy was being taken away from the people. He stated that centralising the service would make it more difficult to obtain information needed to exercise the right to vote.

The Committee

Recommended **that Members recommend that correspondence is forwarded to the Chief Electoral Officer, the Northern Ireland Office and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland seeking a postponement of any decision and requesting that the necessary funds are secured to provide the continued provision of electoral services in Omagh.**

The Meeting terminated at 5.25 pm