DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Special Meeting of **Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at the **County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Belmont Business Park, Durham, DH1 1TW** on **Thursday 13 November 2014** at **10.00 am**

Present:

Councillor D Boyes (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:
Councillors J Armstrong, S Forster, J Gray, M Hodgson, T Nearney and J Turnbull

Co-opted Members:
Mr J Welch

Co-opted Employees/Officers:
Mr S Errington, Deputy Chief Fire Officer

Also Present:
Chief Inspector C McGillivray (Durham Constabulary)

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton, J Cordon, D Hall, C Hampson, G Holland, J Maitland, N Martin, K Shaw, P Stradling, Mr A J Cooke and Chief Superintendent G Hall.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillors M Hodgson and J Turnbull declared an interest in Item 5 as Members of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority. Mr S Errington, Deputy Chief Fire Officer declared and interest in Item 5 as an Officer of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

4 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

Mr S Errington, Co-opted Member and Deputy Chief Fire Officer, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service had submitted a report, set out at Item 5, relating to the Fire Authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan 2015/16 to 2017/18.

5 Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2015/16 to 2017/18 - Consultation

The Chairman thanked the Chairman of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority, Councillor M Hodgson and Officers of the County Durham and Darlington Fire Rescue Service (CDDFRS) for their hospitality and asked Mr S Errington, Deputy Chief Fire Officer to present the Fire Authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2015/16 to 2017/18 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer thanked Members for the opportunity to present the IRMP 2015/16 to 2017/18 and noted that this was a new 3 year plan, not an update to the plan already in place. Members were reminded of the background to IRMPs set out in the Fire Services Act 2004. It was added that the Act also marked a shift in responsibility for Fire Services to not only include an emergency response to fires and accidents, also to provide work in relation to education, prevention and protection. Councillors noted that the IRMP was aligned to the CDDFRS' Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and that the austerity measures since 2010 had required measures put in place to protect the frontline emergency response, to ensure no reduction in the quality of the service and response times. The Committee noted that in the past the CDDFRS had been able to present a stable budget, with efficiencies and smart working practices compensating for reduced budgets. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that budgetary pressures were reaching the point at which CDDFRS' budget would start to show a deficit and there were two different approaches to future governance being put forward by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Members noted that the Conservative Party proposed that Fire Services would come under the responsibility of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and the Labour Party proposals to rationalise the number of separate Fire and Rescue Services and even possibly a national Fire Service similar to what is in place in Scotland. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer highlighted that, regardless of whichever party formed a Government after the next general election, the next IRMP period of 3 years would be a period of change.

The Committee was informed that the IRMP set out: how the CDDFRS serves the people of County Durham and the borough of Darlington; the key risks and challenges faced by the service; and how the service intends to allocate resources to meet the risks. It was explained that consultation process for the IRMP 2015/16 to 2017/18 began on 1 September and ran through until 1 December with the Durham County Council's (DCC) Overview and Scrutiny function being one of several bodies being asked for feedback, including: the Area Action Partnerships (AAPs); Town and Parish Councils and the wider general public via meetings held in Durham City and Darlington. Members noted that subsequent to information gathered from the consultation, the IRMP would inform the budget setting for CDDFRS in February 2015, to come into effect 1 April 2015.

Councillors learned that over the last 4 years, CDDFRS had found savings of £3.53 Million, from an original overall budget of around £33 Million, noting that the CDDFRS was already a lean Service. It was added that in 2010, prior to the last IRMP period, it was thought that there would be 4 year period of serious change and funding reductions, however, after which there would be a period of relatively financial stability. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer noted that this had proved not to be the case and that further savings in the same region of those already achieved would need to be found and in the context of the uncertain governance arrangements previously mentioned.

The Committee was reminded of areas where savings had been achieved by CDDFRS through restructuring and reorganisation of work, though it was highlighted that the main priority was to ensure that there was not an increased risk to the public when considering areas for reductions and reorganisation. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that there had been negotiations with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) that had resulted in shift changes across the Service increasing the available productive time. CDDFRS had also introduced a new crewing model at two stations that allowed for savings to be made, without compromising the emergency response being provided for the public. It was added that overall, savings had been made such that there had been no cuts in the number of fire stations or in essential equipment such as Fire Appliances. Members were given examples of how the CDDFRS had achieved savings including: how the Aerial Ladder Platform (ALP) was crewed; "day crewing" at Seaham and Newton Aycliffe and also how funding was secured, where possible, to help develop those overall savings.

Members were referred to savings in terms of the numbers of non-uniformed staff, with a reduction of 29%. It was added that the number of Whole-Time Staff had reduced by 19%, though this had been achieved by natural wastage. Councillors learned that an area that had led to a number of savings was that of collaboration in terms of the CDDFRS' estates programme with other organisations such as Durham Constabulary and the Ambulance Service, though noting that usually co-location would be at an existing CDDFRS site as they would have the necessary facilities to house Fire Appliances, with any additional office space required being relatively easy to construct. It was noted that this presented opportunities for capital receipts for those sites that are sold for the other agencies, and long term rent to be factored into budgets for the CDDFRS. Members noted that in terms of budget management, all budgets needed to be justified else they could be removed for a period to see if the removal had any hidden impact going forward.

Note: *Mr J Welch entered the meeting at 10.15am*

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reiterated that staffing levels were already lean and that while there were some Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in place the vast majority of "back office" posts were in-house and were of great value to the Service. Roles such as the mechanics were noted as being vital that the Fire Appliances and equipment were kept in operational use. Members were reminded that the CDDFRS were effectively "stand alone" and therefore all issues such as payroll, human resources had to be carried out within the Service. It was added that the CDDFRS was in the lowest 3 to 4 Fire Services in the country in terms of the ratio of non-uniformed staff to uniformed staff.

Councillors were informed that going forward through the IRMP period, the corresponding MTFP for the Service predicted that by the 2017/18 budget there would be a net expenditure of £31.036 Million. It was noted that with decreasing resources and increasing expenditure, there was an increasing deficit from 2015/16 onward. Members noted that savings had been identified of around £900,000 each year however, this was not sufficient to bridge the deficit left by the reduced funding. It was noted that the predictions were based on the Local Government Association (LGA) data; however reductions in funding could be greater than predicted. The Committee noted that pay rises too had to be factored into calculations and again, those estimates in respect of pay increases could be low estimates and that a 1% increase represented a £200,000 impact upon budgets. Councillors were informed that the assumption being made were for a 1.9% increase in Council Tax each year, remaining below the referendum limit of 2%, however, there was uncertainty in respect of any potential changes in terms of the referendum limits and what options therefore would be made available in the future.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that risks to the budget included:

- Local business rates retention, outside of the influence of CDDFRS rather for Local Authorities to influence through their work looking at economic growth.
- The Council Tax Benefits scheme, how this is sustained in County Durham, noting the County has the highest number of people in receipt of Council Tax Benefit.
- The ongoing issues of the cost of pensions noting in the past nationally, part-time staff were not eligible for the pension scheme and subsequent to an Employment Tribunal decision they were allowed to enter the scheme. It was added that original decision excluding part-time staff was taken by Government; however, it was left for Fire and Rescue Services to pick up the extra costs.

It was explained that the previous MTFP period predictions had proved to be within £100,000 of the final budgets, and therefore there was a degree of confidence in the work undertaken to predict over the next MTFP period, though it was accepted that there were a number of variables to take into account.

The Committee noted that "Proposal One" of the consultation document included seeking views on "sharing our (CDDFRS) buildings with the Police and Ambulance service". Members were informed this included at several locations: Barnard Castle (quad-service); Stanhope (Fire and Police); Crook (Fire and Police); and Sedgefield (Fire and Ambulance). In relation to Barnard Castle, it was explained that Government funding of £3.78 Million had been secured to build a new facility as the existing Fire, Police, Ambulance and Mountain Rescue (Teesdale and Weardale Search and Mountain Rescue Team) facilities in the town were no longer fit-for-purpose. It was explained that the benefits of co-location included: improved recruitment for firefighters in Barnard Castle; improved firefighting training facilities; improved inter-agency training and response; supports the development of co-responder scheme; allows greater sharing of local intelligence, improving community safety; and providing a greater financial sustainability of the emergency services in Barnard Castle. Members learned that it had been noted that the TWSMRT had a large proportion of their work in Durham City or along the East Coast, and accordingly there would be scope, with a small extension, to incorporate a facility within the new Sniperley Fire Station. The Committee noted timescales in connection with specific consultation regarding proposals for Barnard Castle, with activities on top of the overarching IRMP consultation, including events with the AAP, Town Council and a public event at the existing station and the timescales associated with the planning process.

Members were informed that "Proposal Two" related to "expanding the role of firefighters to include responding to specific medical emergencies", to support the role of the Ambulance Service. It was hoped that it would be possible to access other sources of funding to be able to provide further training for firefighters, noting they already had a high level of skill in dealing with trauma injuries. The Committee were given the example of the recent incident at Darlington where an individual suffered a heart attack and firefighters from the Darlington Station used their skills to render emergency care to the individual until the Ambulance Service arrived.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer noted that “Proposal Three” was for “revised crewing arrangements of the aerial ladder platform (ALP) appliance based at Darlington”. Councillors were informed that proposals were to change the crewing to be similar to that for the ALP at Durham, however, as there were no part-time staff at the Darlington Station, a suggestion was brought forward by the staff at Darlington to have a “on-call” system where there was a trained member of staff able to drive the ALP Appliance to an incident where a firefighter trained to operate the vehicle was already on-site. Members noted that there had been risk modelling undertaken in respect of response times and times were within the existing average response time of 20 minutes, noting this was different to the response times and targets associated with the main Fire Appliances.

The Committee noted that “Proposal Four” was in respect of “reducing the number of emergency response fire officers”, referring to staff at a certain level being required to attend serious incidents. Members noted CDDFRS one of the lowest numbers of these Officers in comparison to similar Fire Services in the Country and those Officers also have specialist roles such as: wildfire, hazmat and water management as well as their management “day jobs”.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that “Proposal Five” was in respect of “revising how we (CDDFRS) crew the first fire engine at Spennymoor Fire Station”, with proposals being to look at options working with Retained Duty System (RDS) staff and Whole-Time Staff. Members noted there would be work and consultation with staff, the FBU and the public to get all views on the issues.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer concluded by noting that the views and feedback of the Committee and individual Members themselves would be greatly appreciated and noted the appropriate links where feedback could be given.

The Chairman thanked the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and asked Members for their questions on the report.

Councillor J Armstrong asked whether there was any scope for “breaking the mould” in respect of the 1.9% Council Tax increases. Councillor M Hodgson, in her role as Chairman of the Fire Authority, noted that there had been consideration given to the issue, however, as currently a referendum was a requirement for any increase of 2% or more there was an associated risk should the result be a “no” and the cost of the referendum would be a huge dent in finances, estimated at £1.1 Million.

The Chairman asked whether there had been any further thoughts on expanding the “Day Crewing Plus”. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer noted that Day Crewing Plus fell outside of the national fire terms and conditions and therefore those participating were volunteers, and the numbers volunteering were sufficient to manage at the two existing stations. It was added that the way the system worked meant that those staff would get time back if they were called out to an operational incident after 19.00hrs, however this would mean less staff available to carry out the important education and preventative work. It was noted requirements of the Working Time Directive mean that it would only work effectively at quieter stations and therefore there were no plans to expand it beyond two stations.

The Chairman asked for further thoughts on the proposals of the Conservative Party and Labour Party for the future of the Fire Service. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that in respect of the proposals by the Labour Party, there would be the issue of Council Tax equalisation, as County Durham has the highest "Band D" rate, however, Cleveland as an example has one of the lowest.

It was added the cumulative effect of adding together the budget deficits could be a detriment to CDDFRS if the process was carried out as neighbouring Fire Services have proportionally larger deficits than CDDFRS. In Scotland a longer term view had been adopted and the business case for merger was based over a 20 year period.
In respect of the proposals by the Conservative Party, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer noted that there were some aspects that could be of an advantage in respect of local engagement and making decisions that were in the best interests of the County and the Police and Fire Service areas are currently co-terminus. It was added that there was the issue that the PCCs were elected on a policing mandate and therefore constitutionally there was an issue, and also there could be shifting priorities should the PCC change after an election. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer added that there was the question of whether being under the remit of the PCC would make any difference in being able to solve the budget issues and whether there could be scope to collaborate more with Durham Constabulary more without the need for the PCC to be involved in the governance aspect.

Members were given a tour of the Headquarters and noted the building had been originally constructed as a regional control centre and that there was a very high level of specification, with excellent self-sufficiency, resilience and a secure data centre. It was explained that the CDDFRS had secured funding from Government to adapt the building for use by as a Headquarters. It was noted there was scope to rent out space in the data centre, which could help offset funding reductions. The Committee also noted the new control room systems being adopted and the training facilities available to staff. Members also noted the investment in gym and canteen facilities, noting that opening up the gym facilities to non-uniformed staff had shown a benefit in terms of reduced sickness absence.

The Chairman thanked the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Chairman of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority on behalf of the Committee for their presentation and tour.

Resolved:

(i) That the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the information contained within the IRMP consultation for 2015/16 – 2017/18.

(ii) That feedback be provided to the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service from the Committee in respect of the IRMP 2015/16 – 2017/18.