

REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE - 27 January 2014

30 MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – PRESENTATION

The Chair referred to the Notice of Motion 'Cuts to Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service', which had been considered by the Committee on 17 September 2013 (minute 15 refers). The Committee had advised the Council that it fully supported the Notice of Motion and, arising from the meeting, the Committee had invited the Chief Fire Officer to attend, in order to highlight the potential impact of the Government proposals on the residents of Wirral.

The Chief Fire Officer, Dan Stephens gave a brief presentation to detail for the Committee the scale of the cuts faced by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority. CSR 10 had resulted in cuts of nearly twice the national average (£20m out of a £70m budget) and had resulted in a reduction of 270 posts (180 fire-fighters and 90 support staff). There had also been a 33% reduction in appliances (down to 28 from 42). The CSR 13 in year savings target was £6.5m in 2015/2016, rising to £9.1m in 2016/2017. The presentation outlined the operational response methodology, which aimed to maintain average response times and he set out the least worst operational options, which included crewing changes, station mergers, days only crewing and station closures.

In conclusion, he stated that mergers were preferable to changes to duty systems, days only crewing and closures. However, mergers would still involve the closure of stations and were dependent upon working with Council officers to identify and secure suitable sites. Although work was ongoing, realistically, it would be up to two years before any merged stations became fully operational, assuming also that necessary funding was secured.

In response to questions from Members, the Chief Fire Officer outlined the reasons for the budget cut in Merseyside being nearly twice the national average, essentially being linked to an ongoing reduction in high risk industry and dock activity since the 1950s coupled with a corresponding population decrease, making the service expensive per head of population. He indicated that for the service to stand still an increase in the precept of 37% would be required.

In response to concerns expressed by Members in relation to response times being adversely affected by the operational changes associated with mergers, he indicated that the identification of suitable sites was essential and that a detailed consultation process would be undertaken. He referred also to the impact of the cuts on preventative work undertaken. Although much had been mitigated by the high levels of efficiency and hard work of staff, he emphasised that the options being considered were the 'least worst' and that none would improve safety or enhance the service provision.

On a motion by Councillor S Foulkes, seconded by Councillor Kathy Hodson, it was:

Resolved –

- (1) That the Chief Fire Officer be thanked for his presentation.**
- (2) That the concerns expressed by Members be fed back to the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority, as part of the overall consultation exercise.**
- (3) That the Cabinet be requested to support any lobby for additional funding for the Fire and Rescue Service**