

MINUTE EXTRACT

POLICY AND PERFORMANCE REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

2 DECEMBER 2015

24 NOTICE OF MOTION - PROPOSAL FOR A FIRE STATION ON GREEN BELT LAND IN SAUGHALL MASSIE

Reference Minute No 11 (15 September, 2015), Members further considered the issues raised by the Motion put before the Council on 6 July 2015 (proposed by Councillor Chris Blakeley and seconded by Councillor Bruce Berry): That

“Council acknowledges the overwhelming public opposition to the proposal by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) for a fire station on green belt land in Saughall Massie, as demonstrated by:

- The 200 people who attended a public meeting arranged by MFRS, and a further 270 who were unable to gain admission to the venue.
- The opposition of the Saughall Massie Village Area Conservation Society and the Wirral Society.
- The 970 people who have, so far, signed a petition against the proposal.

Council impresses upon Cabinet:

- (1) To maintain protection of Wirral’s Green Belt, as set by agreed policies and stop inappropriate development.
- (2) Not to gift, sell or lease the land concerned in Saughall Massie, because of the value it has for the community.”
- (3) To ask officers to continue to work co-operatively with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service in identifying and facilitating a more suitable brown field site for operational purposes and to maintain the amenity of the local people.”

That Motion had been rejected by the Committee at its meeting on 15 September 2015 but the Committee had not decided on its recommendation to the Council on the issues the Motion had raised.

A Member informed the Committee that as a result of the important issues raised by Councillor Blakeley when presenting his Motion and the subsequent debate on the item, the Committee’s Chair had requested that a Senior Officer from the Fire Service, with knowledge of the site selection process, be invited to attend the meeting in order to answer any questions.

Consequently, Mr Dan Stephens, Chief Fire Officer, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service was in attendance at the meeting.

Members questioned Mr Stephens on site selection for the proposed new Fire Station, requesting information on the circumstances behind the proposal to site a Fire Station on Green Belt land at Saughall Massie and availability of other possible locations not in the Green Belt.

Mr Stephens informed the Committee of the requirement to make significant budget savings in 2015/16, and explained how closures of existing fire stations and sharing/re-siting of services in other areas of Merseyside had been implemented to achieve this. At this point, the Chair quelled an interruption from the public gallery that had questioned the relevance of this information.

A Member noted that it was important to understand the context and pressures that had brought about this proposal.

Mr Stephens went on to inform the Committee of the mid-point location of the proposed site (equidistant between the current Upton Fire Station and West Kirby Fire Station). He explained that a 12 week consultation exercise had taken place across the affected areas earlier in the year, he also provided information on operational matters i.e. response times summarising the statistical analysis, and issues faced by the Fire Service regarding the initial site selection – Greasby Library (brownfield site), and acknowledged that as a result the only sites that met the requirements of a combined Fire Station that would achieve the required response times were located in the Green Belt. He explained that the matter would ultimately be decided by via submission of an application to the Council's Planning Committee. Mr Stephens informed that a number of alternative sites had been under consideration, but as the Fire Service did not have any compulsory purchase powers, any site would have to be purchased / leased with the permission of the owner.

Members questioned the Chief Fire Officer on a range of matters specifically related to the selection of the site in Saughall Massie, public objections to the planned location and the scope and outcome of the consultation process. The Committee noted the difficult position faced by the MFRS in terms of its budget, having lost 38% of its Revenue Support Grant i.e. £26million from an initial figure of £70million. It was noted that the most cost effective option available to the Fire Service in terms of location would arise from obtaining the land which was currently in the ownership of the Council.

A Member pointed out that the original Motion consisted of three elements – protection of the Green Belt, not to gift land, and to look for alternative sites. These were the issues upon which the Committee should report.

The Chair pointed out that it was the duty of the Committee to obtain as much information on the matter as was feasible before making its recommendation to the Council.

A Member pointed out that in the long run, whatever the site, the primary objective remained 'to save lives', and as such response times were a key factor to be taken into account.

A Member informed that whether the Committee agreed that a Saughall Massie site was appropriate or inappropriate, development in the Green Belt **was** ultimately subject to Planning Law and the Council's own Development Plan and by agreeing the Motion, the Committee could in effect block this essential service, and the debate to find a solution would have to continue.

The Head of Regeneration and Planning clarified that, at present, the use of Green Belt land for the building of a Fire Station under the Development Plan was classed as inappropriate development - unless special circumstances could prove otherwise – this could include technical data and information regarding the consideration of other sites. The matter would have to be considered by the Planning Committee in planning policy terms.

Discussion took place regarding the appropriateness of the site at Greasby Library and the complex reasons for its removal as an option for consideration. The Chief Fire Officer provided additional information about approaches to private land owners in the area, and how given the lack of response and refusal to engage in dialogue these site options had also been discounted.

At this point in the debate,

The following Motion was moved.

Proposed by: Councillor Matthew Patrick

Seconded by: Councillor Chris Spriggs

“The Council acknowledges that the devastating cuts to Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority put the Authority in an incredibly difficult situation.

Whilst the Council expresses strong disapproval of the Conservative Government's decision to cut 38% from the Fire Authority's grant, it acknowledges that there is a lack of time to force the Fire Service to find alternatives.

Council impresses upon the Cabinet to:

Support Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority in its obligations to balance the budget and ensure that a decision is not unnecessarily delayed.

The Council also recognises that the Planning Committee will be responsible for the planning aspect. It further recognises that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will also have to agree with the development's appropriateness.”

A vote was taken:

For: 8

Against: 5

The Motion was therefore carried.

At this point, the Chair quelled an interruption from the public gallery relating to a Member's right to speak further on the original Motion (which had already been exercised at the previous meeting).

Resolved:

That the COUNCIL BE ADVISED that this Committee supports the Motion:

“The Council acknowledges that the devastating cuts to Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority put the Authority in an incredibly difficult situation.

Whilst the Council expresses strong disapproval of the Conservative Government's decision to cut 38% from the Fire Authority's grant, it acknowledges that there is a lack of time to force the Fire Service to find alternatives.

Council impresses upon the Cabinet to:

Support Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority in its obligations to balance the budget and ensure that a decision is not unnecessarily delayed.

The Council also recognises that the Planning Committee will be responsible for the planning aspect. It further recognises that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will also have to agree with the development's appropriateness.”