

CLEVELAND FIRE AUTHORITY

MINUTES OF ORDINARY MEETING

14 FEBRUARY 2025



PRESENT:

CHAIR

Cllr David Coupe – Middlesbrough Council

HARTLEPOOL BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cllrs Gary Allen

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Cllrs John Kabuye, Naweed Hussain, Dennis McCabe

REDCAR & CLEVELAND BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cllrs Peter Chaney, Steve Kay, Mary Ovens

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cllrs Jim Beall, Stefan Houghton, Andrew Sherris, Mick Stoker

AUTHORISED OFFICERS

Chief Fire Officer, Legal Adviser & Monitoring Officer, Treasurer,

Assistant Chief Fire Officer - Strategic Planning & Resources

Assistant Chief Fire Officer - Community Protection

FORVIS MAZARS

James Collins – Audit Director

BRIGADE OFFICERS

Area Manager – Emergency Response

Area Manager – Prevention, Protection and Engagement

APOLOGIES:

Councillors Bob Buchan, Ben Clayton – Hartlepool Borough Council

Councillor Sufi Mubeen – Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

83. DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS INTEREST

It was noted no Declarations of Interest were submitted to the meeting.

84. MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of proceedings of the Ordinary Meeting of 6 December 2024 be confirmed.

85. MINUTES OF MEETINGS

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the Executive Committee on 24 January 2025 be confirmed.

86. COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED BY THE CHAIR

No communications were received by the Chair.

87. REPORTS OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

87.1 Review of Scale of Charges 2025/26

The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) presented the Authority's Scale of Charges which had been fully reviewed for 2025/26 for implementation from 1 April 2025. The review was undertaken in agreement with the Treasurer and entailed a 4% uplift to all pay-related elements to reflect the medium term financial strategy forecast pay award and a 3.5% uplift to all non-pay items based on the November 2024 CPI figure.

The CFO confirmed that the Scale of Charges had been approved in line with the delegation scheme and will be published on the Brigade website by 31 March 2025.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the Scale of Charges for 2025/26 to be implemented with effect of 1 April 2025.

87.2 Information Pack

87.2.1 Campaigns

No Notice Tactical Exercise Nightflare – 29 January 2025

The CFO informed Members that the Brigade had recently undertaken its first ever fully resourced no-notice high rise tactical exercise at Spencerbeck House in Middlesbrough which involved police, ambulance, the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and local authorities.

He thanked everyone involved in arranging the exercise, which also involved emergency services colleagues from County Durham and Darlington and North Yorkshire as well as 70 role players from Middlesbrough College.

Members asked how the public had been informed about the event and what the cost was to the Brigade. The CFO confirmed that the Brigade's social media channels had issued notice about the exercise from 8pm on the evening. Nearby communities had been leafleted about the exercise prior to the event taking place. He confirmed that the main cost for the Brigade was from bringing in on-call firefighters and in the planning and preparation. However, he confirmed that the key value was the assurance given to all parties involved and the areas of learning highlighted from the exercise.

The CFO informed Members that only two other fire and rescue services had undertaken a no-notice exercise and agreed that valuable learning would be shared with the region, as well as brought to the Authority at a future meeting.

Awareness Day

Councillor Peter Chaney passed on thanks to crews from Grangetown and to the Brigade's Matthew Lister for providing a road safety talk at Teesville Academy on Friday 7 February with a focus on the dangers of parked cars blocking appliances attending incidents.

Child trapped in Parcel Locker

The Area Manager for Prevention, Protection and Engagement provided details of an incident which occurred at Aldi, Redcar on Sunday 9th February and involved an 11-year-old boy being trapped in an airtight locker for around 30 minutes before he was released. The CFO praised the quick response and problem solving of the crews involved and confirmed that the prevention team was working with manufacturers of the lockers and national colleagues to share the learning.

RESOLVED – that the information pack be noted.

87.3 HMICFRS Inspection 2023-25 (verbal update)

The CFO informed Members that the Brigade's Draft HMICFRS report had been received on 12 February 2025. Members agreed to discuss this item further in closed session (Min. No. 93.1 refers).

87.4 Service Plan 2025/26

The ACFO Strategic Planning & Resources (ACFO-SPR) provided Members with a verbal update on the work underway to streamline the Brigade's internal operating plan (IOP) ahead of presenting the priorities for inclusion in the Service Plan 2025/26.

She confirmed that the 350+ actions in the current IOP had been reduced to 63 actions to take forward to deliver the final iteration of the Brigade's four-year Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) covering 2022-2026. This would be presented to Members at the meeting on 28 March 2025 for approval.

The CFO welcomed this streamlined approach which made it clearer for staff to understand their workload and easier for the Authority to scrutinise the progress.

RESOLVED - that the verbal update be noted.

87.5 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2026-2030

The ACFO-SPR provided Members with a verbal update of the planning work underway for the Brigade's next CRMP which will cover the four-year period from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2030.

Members received an infographic of how the priorities will sit under five key themes: Prevention, Protection, Response, People and Resources with associated plans for each area. The annual Service Plan will be replaced with a four-year delivery plan which will give the flexibility to adapt to any new workload pressures that may emerge locally or nationally.

The ACFO-SPR confirmed that this new format had been shared with the Brigade with positive feedback and it was key to have staff buy-in throughout to ensure the plan remains accessible and relevant.

Members supported the planning work to date and welcomed the flexibility to change the number and names of pillars as necessary as the plan evolves.

RESOLVED – that the verbal update be noted.

88. JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER AND TREASURER

88.1 Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2027/28 (including 2025/26 Budget and Council Tax Setting)

Members received the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 - 2027/28 and detailed proposals for the 2025/26 budget and council tax setting, which had been considered by the Executive Committee on 24 January 2025.

88.1 Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2027/28 (including 2025/26 Budget and Council Tax Setting) cont.

The report covered the following key areas:

- Changes in recurring resources
- Impact of previous budget reductions
- National Pay awards and inflation
- Provisional 2025/26 Local Government Finance Settlement
- Core Spending Power Increases
- Impact of provisional settlement on standalone FRAs Core Spending Power
- Funding for Employers National Insurance Increase
- Asset Management Plan
- Reserves Review
- Robustness Advice

The Treasurer reported that the 2025/26 Final Local Government Finance Settlement was published late January and tabled the supporting statutory budget and council tax calculations at Appendices E and F respectively.

He outlined the key changes announced in the settlement which impacted the Authority which included: Revenue Support Grant and Top-up Grant increased in line with September CPI (£0.233m); Funding Grant Removed (-£0.294m); Services Grant Removed (-£0.065m); and forecast increase in business rates (£0.102m). This totals a forecast net decrease in resources (excluding Council Tax) of £0.024m.

The Treasurer reported that Cleveland, as a stand-alone Fire Authority, has a Core Spending Power increase for 2025/26 of 2.7% which is based on the government's assumption that authorities will use the available council tax flexibility of the £5 Band D limit. For Cleveland adopting the £5 Council Tax limit in 2025/26 will secure a recurring additional income of £0.813m which avoids having to make additional cuts to services to balance the budget.

The Treasurer outlined the following updated measures proposed to address the gross 2025/26 Budget Deficit of £2.522m:

- £0.813m Council Tax
- £0.294m Budget Support Reserves Fund
- £0.266m Tax Base Growth
- £1.067m Savings
- £0.082m Final Local Resources

The Treasurer stated that using the Budget Support Fund defers a deficit from 2025/26 to 2026/27 with updated planning forecasts showing a deficit for 2026/27 and 2027/28 of between £0.599m and £1.675m, dependent on national pay awards, inflation and changes to the funding system from 2026/27.

Councillor Kay asked whether it was possible to look for further efficiencies rather than accept the £5 council tax limit. The CFO confirmed that he had already identified £1m efficiencies and anything above that would need to come from the front line – which would be the equivalent of removing the on-call service to East Cleveland. The Treasurer added that not accepting the £5 council tax limit and deferring the deficit would set the Authority up for further financial problems in 2026/27 and 2027/28 and it was important to make incremental decisions every tax year.

88.1 Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2027/28 (including 2025/26 Budget and Council Tax Setting) cont.

Councillor Owens noted that the Authority's financial position had been precarious for many years with little opportunity to build-up reserves. She added that the £5 council tax increase equated to only pennies per week and going lower than this would store problems up for the future. Councillor Beal re-iterated these comments and proposed that Members support the £5 increase in the precept.

The Legal Adviser and Monitoring Officer (LAMO) informed Members that in line with best practice a vote would be recorded on the budget decision. Votes were cast and Members unanimously supported the recommendations from the Executive Committee, which had been updated to reflect the latest information tabled at Appendices E and F.

RESOLVED:-

(i) That as recommended by the Executive Committee on 24 January 2025, Members:-

- 1. Noted that the provisional Core Spending Power (CSP) increase for FRAs of 2.8% (2.7% for the Authority) is less than half the national CSP increase of 6%, which reflects the prioritisation of social care within the overall settlement.**
- 2. Noted that the provisional 2025/25 CSP increase for FRAs is wholly predicated on all FRAs using the £5 Council Tax referendum limit (details paragraph 4.14 and Appendix A).**
- 3. Noted that the provisional settlement details the proposed formula for allocating funding for increased employers National Insurance costs may disadvantage FRAs. The current funding assumption is the grant will fund 50% of these costs, with the remaining 50% (£0.250m) falling on the existing budget and therefore increasing the forecast 2025/26 budget deficit.**
- 4. Noted the forecast deficit scenarios for 2025/26 to 2027/28 detailed in paragraph 5.5 show a forecast deficit between £0.599m and £2.254m depending on the level of Council Tax for these years.**
- 5. Noted that the robustness advice detailed in section 8 and approved the recommendation to fund the gross 2025/26 budget deficit from the following combination of measures:**

	Value	%age of gross deficit
Budget savings	£1.067m	42%
£5 Band D Council Tax increase	£0.813m	32%
Use of Budget Support Fund	£0.294m	12%
Tax Base Growth	£0.266m	11%
Sub Total	£2.440m	97%
Increase in Local Resources (as per Appendix E)	£0.082m	3%
Total	£2.522m	100%

88.1 Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2027/28 (including 2025/26 Budget and Council Tax Setting) cont.

6. Noted that the use of the Budget Support Fund in 2025/26 of £0.376m defers this deficit to 2026/27 and means that a forecast deficit of between £0.599m and £1.675m will need to be addressed in 2026/27 and 2027/28.
7. Noted that approving recommendation (6) will result in approximately 216,000 households (82%) having to pay a weekly increase of 9p or less, as highlighted in the following table:

2024/25		2025/26							
Annual Council Tax	Property Band	Annual Council Tax	Weekly Council Tax		Annual increase	Weekly increase (pence)		Number of households (approx.)	% households
£59.64	A	£62.97	£1.21		£3.33	6p		119,000	45.1%
£69.58	B	£73.47	£1.41		£3.89	7p		49,300	18.7%
£79.52	C	£83.96	£1.61		£4.44	9p		48,100	18.3%
£89.46	D	£94.46	£1.82		£5.00	10p		24,600	9.3%
£109.34	E	£115.45	£2.22		£6.11	11p		14,000	5.3%
£129.22	F	£136.44	£2.62		£7.22	14p		5,400	2.1%
£149.10	G	£157.43	£3.03		£8.33	15p		2,900	1.1%
£178.92	H	£188.92	£3.63		£10.00	20p		300	0.1%
								263,600	100.0%

8. Noted that if the recommended £5 Band D Council tax increase was not approved recurring income will be lower and replacement budget cuts will need to be implemented. Owing to the timetable for setting the 2025/26 budget these additional budget cuts would need to be approved at the Authority meeting on 28th March 2025. The implementation timetable for savings in 2025/26 will depend on the level of consultation required for additional saving proposals.
 9. Approved the Asset Management Plan detailed in Appendix B, which updates the existing approved plan.
 10. Noted the Reserves Review detailed in section 7, which underpins the robustness strategy and ensures the Authority maintains appropriate one-off resources to manage existing commitments phased over more than one financial year and provide some financial flexibility to manage ongoing financial uncertainties.
- (II) Members noted that the final 2025/26 Local Government Finance Settlement was issued in late January 2025 and approved the final statutory budget calculations as detailed at Appendix E and the Council Tax Calculations at Appendix F, which were tabled at the meeting.

88.1 Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2027/28 (including 2025/26 Budget and Council Tax Setting) cont.

Following the meeting a small increase in the overall Council Tax base was confirmed, which increased this from 165,757.6 Band D equated properties to 165,762.8. As a consequence Council Tax income creased by £491 from £15,657,462 to £15,657,953. This additional income will reduce use of the Budget Support Fund from £294,000 to £293,509. The Fire Authority is asked to note this position.

89. REPORT OF THE TREASURER

89.1 The Financial Report 2023/24 and Audit Completion Report

The Treasurer reported that the Draft Financial Reports had been published on the Authority's website on 31 May 2024 and presented to the Audit & Governance Committee for scrutiny on 28 June 2024.

He noted that the statutory audit deadline was 30 September 2024 but owing to a national backlog the government had extended this providing a backstop date of 28 February 2025 for the completion of all 2023/24 accounts.

The Audit Director tabled the Audit Completion Report (Appendix B) which covered: Executive Summary; Status of Audit; Audit Approach; Significant Findings: Internal Control Conclusions; Summary of Misstatements, and Value for Money. He thanked the Authority and Hartlepool Borough Council for their support to Forvis Mazars and confirmed that the Audit was substantially complete. He gave Members assurances that there were not expected to be any changes to the Authority's useable reserves that would impact the medium term financial planning.

Councillor Ovens acknowledged improvement on the timelines compared to previous years and thanked all officers involved for working closely to keep the Audit on track. The Treasurer noted that delays receiving assurances from Teesside Pension Fund auditors should be reduced with Forvis Mazars in place as their new auditors.

The Audit Director confirmed that the Auditors Annual Report would be presented to the Audit and Governance Committee on 21 February 2025 and would contain commentary on the Authority's arrangements.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) That the 2023/24 Financial Report attached at Appendix A be approved.**
- (ii) That the Audit Completion Report at Appendix B be noted.**
- (iii) That Members noted that the Management Letter of Representation will be issued once the audit has concluded.**

90. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) (VARIATION ORDER) 2006

RESOLVED - "That Under Section 100(A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business, on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part 1 Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, namely information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority) holding that information and namely information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority."

91. CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

That the Confidential Minutes of the meeting on 6 December 2024 be confirmed.

92. CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF MEETINGS

That the Confidential Minutes of the Executive Committee on 24 January 2025 be confirmed.

93. CONFIDENTIAL REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

93.1 HMICFRS Inspection 2023-25

The CFO provided Members with a confidential update regarding the Brigade's recently published draft third round inspection report (referred to closed session as per Min.No. 87.3).

**COUNCILLOR DAVID COUPE
CHAIR**