**HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL MEETING 21ST October 2014**

**UPDATE ON ISSUES RELATING TO HEREFORDSHIRE AND WORCESTERSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

**1. Background**

1.1 At its last meeting, Council resolved that a letter be sent expressing concerns at proposed reductions in fire cover to every member of the above authority, and that the letter urged the authority to consider holding a referendum if the level of funding required to provide adequate cover was likely to lead to an increase in the precept which might be deemed excessive by the Secretary of State. That letter was sent, (all members of the Council have been sent a copy by email) and the Chairman of the Authority, Councillor Derek Prodger from Worcestershire County Council replied. The tenor of the reply was that the Authority was aware of the strong feeling in Hereford around fire cover and every effort to maintain the number of appliances would be made.

1.2 The Town Clerk attended the subsequent meeting of the Authority where Councillor Kenyon moved his proposals regarding the community risk management plan. This is the working document which explains in detail the way in which the Fire and Rescue Service will operate within the budget it has determined. It is not the budget itself, but the outworking of that budget in terms of allocation of engines to stations, crew numbers and the balance of full time, day crews and retained crews.

1.3 The purpose of this report is to update members on the discussions that took place and the scope for any further activity by this Council if we wish to continue to try and influence the level of fire cover in the city.

1.4 The present level of cover for Hereford is two fire engines with a planned crew of five fire fighters each on whole time working. This is a shift system providing full time staff on duty to crew both engines at all times. This is supported by one retained duty system engine, that is a team of staff available on call from home or work to provide an additional response when needed.

**2. Discussion at the Meeting**

2.1 The original plan for Hereford was one engine on full time working as described above, supported by one on the retained duty system. This was the arrangement both day and night. Both engines would have a crew of five fire fighters.

2.2 The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) put a number of options forward, favouring option two. The debate related to options two three, so to avoid unnecessary detail this report will focus only on those.

2.3 Option two would provide one full time engine, one additional engine during the day with a crew of permanent staff working a day shift only, and one retained duty engine for support. At night the day crewed engine would be crewed by a second retained duty crew. The number of appliances does not change, it is the crewing arrangement. Option Tow has other implications for stations across the two counties which are outside the remit of the City Council and is financially viable only if the standard crew is reduced to four fire fighters. The CFO stated that is was his professional view that four person crewing was proven to be safe.

2.4 Option Three would make one significant change. The first engine would be full time and crewed by four full time staff. The second engine would also be full time, crewed by a team working what is know as “Day Crew Plus”. The third engine would a retained duty on call service as at present and in option two. The concept of “Day Duty Plus” is new to the fire service and the CFO explained that he cannot at present introduce it as it does not exist within the package of shift terms that make up the fire fighters’ conditions of service. Such an arrangement would require agreement with the Fire Brigades Union to permit a variation to national conditions of service within Herefordshire and Worcestershire and a suitable number of volunteers willing to work the new system. The implication is that the day crew could be retained at short notice to work a 24 hour shift as a full time crew normally would, thus increasing eh fire cove in the city to two fire engines with two four person full time crews whenever needed.

2.5 It was moved to go for option three now and this was heavily defeated.

2.6 A second resolution was moved to go for option two with a review of option three to see if it could become viable in six months. This was subsequently changed to between six and twelve months to allow for the general election, the budget, the autumn financial statement in 2015 and the declaration by the Secretary of State of what is considered to be an excessive level of council tax increase. It should be noted that the Fire and Rescue authority is included in the capping of tax increases set for local authorities by the Secretary of State, it is only parish councils that have so far been exempted an a year by year basis. There is no guarantee that “excessive” will continue to mean 2%, indeed many would argue that by setting the level below the current rate of inflation the ordinary meaning of “excessive” has been eroded to the point that it has little real value. The future capped rate increase could be anything from the current 2% down to zero.

2.7 Bearing in mind all these uncertainties the Authority voted by an overwhelming majority to apply option two and re-consider option three on a six to twelve month timescale.

**3. Options for the City Council**

3.1 Option three is marginally more expensive than option two. The savings achieve by option two are £1.430m across the two counties, by option three that falls to £1.401m. Thus a new saving or a source of extra revenue equivalent to £29,000 across the two counties would need to be found for option three to have no detrimental impact on the finances of the authority. It is not possible on the information published by the Authority to say what the effect of the option three element applied solely within Hereford would be.

3.2 There is considerable opposition from the Fire Brigades Union to reducing the standard crew level to four. Options two and three both assume that reduction, and if the Council were to act to support the Authority in applying option three it would be on the basis of accepting that the four person crew becomes the standard.

3.3 The Council’s letter stated that we have no criticism to make of the use of retained fire fighters, but we queried whether part-time retained staff would be able to deal with specialised incidents such as chemical spills or the more complicated industrial fires that might arise. Retaining more full time staff either on 24 hour shift or day crew plus might provide a technically better level of response. It should be noted that not all retained staff are trained in specialised areas like river rescues.

**4. Recommendation**

**4.1 That the Council considers what response it feels it is now appropriate to make, having deferred a decision offering direct funding to the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire and Rescue Authority at its last meeting.**

Steve Kerry

Town Clerk