



DEVON & SOMERSET FIRE & RESCUE AUTHORITY

REPORT REFERENCE NO.	DSFRA/10/25
MEETING	DEVON & SOMERSET FIRE & RESCUE AUTHORITY
DATE OF MEETING	16 DECEMBER 2010
SUBJECT OF REPORT	DEVON AND SOMERSET FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2011/12 TO 2013/14
LEAD OFFICER	Chief Fire Officer
RECOMMENDATIONS	<p>(a) <i>that the separation of the budget and corporate plan approval process for 2011/12 be approved;</i></p> <p>(b) <i>that the Community Safety and Corporate Planning Committee be delegated authority to approve, at its meeting on 13 January 2011, the draft Corporate Plan 2011/12 to 2013/14 for consultation and the associated consultation plan, with the outcome of the consultation to be considered at the Authority meeting in May 2011; and</i></p> <p>(c) <i>that, on the basis of this report and information to be provided at the meeting the Authority determines the approach for consulting non-domestic rate payers on the 2011/12 precept.</i></p>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	This report sets out the requirements underpinning the production of the Draft Corporate Plan and precept consultation. The report recommends an approach for approving the Draft Corporate Plan 2011/12 to 2013/14 that accommodates the exceptional circumstances surrounding the government grant announcement and anticipated public sector spending cuts. The report also considers the need to undertake precept consultation with non-domestic rate payers.
RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS	Consultation costs will be met from the existing Corporate Planning budget
EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT	An initial assessment has not revealed any issues so significant as to require a full EIA
APPENDICES	Nil.

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS	Nil.
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1. **BACKGROUND**

1.1 The Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority (DSFRA) has the following requirements within its annual planning cycle:

- Produce a publicly available Integrated Risk Management Plan covering at least a three year time span which reflects effective consultation during its development and at all review stages with representatives of all sections of the community and stakeholders. (*The Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2008-11 refers*);
- Consult non-domestic rate payers or their representatives on the authority's proposals for expenditure (including capital expenditure) before it issues the first precept to be issued by it for the financial year. (*The Local Government Finance Act 1992 refers*); and
- Set its precept by 28 February preceding the financial year.

2. **IMPACT OF THE TIMING OF THE GOVERNMENT GRANT ANNOUNCEMENT**

2.1 The Authority ordinarily approves the draft Corporate Plan for consultation along with a consultation on the proposed level of precept in the Autumn preceding the financial year in which the budget and activity are to be set.

2.2 This year, the Government will not have announced the specific level of government grant that will be provided to the Authority at the time of drafting the papers for this meeting. However, it is anticipated that the details will be made available in time for the meeting and a verbal update will be given by the Chief Fire Officer at that time.

2.3 As such, it is not possible to specify the nature of possible changes until the magnitude of the grant reduction is known.

2.4 Whilst the size of the central government reduction to the Fire Service budget as a whole is known (25% grant reduction, back loaded over four years), specific details for individual Fire & Rescue Authority's are not expected to be known until the week beginning the 13 December 2010. The application of the Fire Formula grant may see a higher or lower percentage grant reduction for this Authority.

2.5 It is therefore deemed prudent to delay the decision on what activity should be incorporated in the plan until the government has made a decision regarding the level of government grant.

2.6 This delay presents a dilemma as there is not a 12 week consultation period between the approval by the Authority to consult on 16 December 2010 and the approval of the budget and corporate plan on 16 February 2011.

2.7 The need to consult is provided in the Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) Guidance Note 2 which also explains that '...the scope of the consultation you undertake will be proportionate to the nature and extent of any changes proposed.'

2.8 In addition to the above documents the HM Government Code of Practice released in July 2008 sets out the consultation code of practice for Central Government and suggest Local Authorities adopt the same standards. The code states, 'consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.'

- 2.9 Complying with the timeframes associated with good practice regarding public consultation means that there is a need to separate the approval of the 2011/12 budget and the corresponding corporate plan.

3. PROCESS FOR APPROVING THE DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN

- 3.1 It is proposed that the approval for consultation to commence on the draft plan be delegated to the Community Safety and Corporate Planning Committee. The next meeting of which is on 13 January 2011. This meeting will be after the announcement of the grant reduction level for Authority and will allow an informed consultation to commence.
- 3.2 The committee would also be asked to approve the corresponding stakeholder consultation plan.
- 3.3 Following the public consultation, the corporate plan would be considered by the full Authority as is normally the case. The earliest that this would be considered is at the May meeting.
- 3.4 The impact of approving the Draft Corporate Plan on 13 January 2011 is that the final plan would not be agreed until after 1 April 2011 due to the consultation period and necessary time for analysing and reporting the results.
- 3.5 The risk associated with not meeting this date is low as Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Circular 09/2004: *Guidance On Best Value And Performance Improvement For Fire And Rescue Authorities In England* states that best practice is for business/corporate plans to be combined with the Performance Plan and IRMP action plan into a single document published by the IRMP implementation date of 1 April.
- 3.6 However this documentation recognises that internal approval processes may make this difficult and the primary objective must be for the IRMP to be mainstreamed into business/corporate planning arrangements as far as is practical.
- 3.7 It should be noted that the departure from usual practice in this respect is solely as a result of the significant changes in levels of grant allocation and the associated timing of the grant allocation announcement, both of which are in the gift of Central Government.

4. PRECEPT CONSULTATION

- 4.1 The decision regarding council tax precept levels and/or accepting the associated specific Central Government grant is a matter that will be considered by the Authority at its budget setting meeting in February.
- 4.2 However, there is a statutory requirement to consult non-domestic rate payers on the level of council tax that they would be prepared to pay. A telephone survey takes place each January.
- 4.3 A good practice principle is to ensure that the level of consultation is proportionate to the likely level of precept.
- 4.4 A contract was awarded last year to undertake the precept survey and included the option to repeat the survey. The cost of conducting the survey for 400 people (the level of consultation used last year) is £3,300.

4.5 This sample size could be reduced further and may result in a possible reduction in costs. In considering this, however, it should also be noted that confidence in the results reduces as the sample size decreases and therefore negatively impacts on the reliability and value of the results obtained.

LEE HOWELL
Chief Fire Officer