

AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was held on 22 October 2008.

PRESENT: Councillor Brunton (Chair), Councillors J A Walker, Dunne, Elder, C Hobson, Williams.

OFFICIALS: P Clark and S Harker.

**** APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillor McIntyre.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Item/Nature of Interest
Councillor Williams	Personal/Non Prejudicial	Agenda Item 4 – Member of Cleveland Combined Fire Authority

****MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel held on 6 October 2008 were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

RELOCATION OF FIRE EMERGENCY CONTROL ROOM

The Senior Scrutiny Support Officer submitted a draft Final Report in relation to the Panel's assessment and proposals on issues associated with the rationalisation of the Fire Emergency Control Room affecting Middlesbrough.

An exploratory meeting had been held to provide a greater understanding of the rationalisation and relocation of the Fire Emergency Control Rooms to Belmont in Durham. Members of Middlesbrough Council who sat on the Fire Authority had attended that meeting.

Rationalisation commenced in 2004 when the Government appointed an independent company to manage this national initiative. In response to issues associated with 11 September 2001 and the need to improve efficiency, the proposal was to establish nine Fire Emergency Control Rooms, which would be the communication hub for all Emergency Fire communications, as opposed to the present forty-nine. The investment and technology to be introduced into the new system and control rooms would improve the service for local people. Greater use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and improved training and development would have a positive impact on the services provided.

The Fire Brigade, Trade Unions and the Cleveland Emergency Planning Committee had all expressed concerns regarding rationalisation. Representatives from Cleveland, Durham, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear had indicated resistance to the proposal but had been informed that it would be introduced. Concerns focussed primarily on the potential loss of local knowledge. However, whilst there was potentially an expected reduction in staff of 43%, improvements in technology would provide a much more efficient service. The existing control room at Hartlepool required substantial investment which was not currently available and therefore if the service was to become more effective there was little alternative than to accede to the Government's proposal.

The Panel was concerned that the rationalisation of the Fire Emergency Control Rooms had been raised with the Fire Authority since 2004 for implementation in 2009 and that concerns had been raised by the Fire Brigade and Trade Unions but this had not been conveyed to the Council. The Panel had not found any evidence that either the Fire Authority or the independent company responsible for managing the rationalisation, had consulted with local authorities, or indeed any other organisation, on the proposals.

The minutes of Fire Authority meetings were circulated to Council Members for information on a regular basis. However, there was not a covering note to indicate whether Members needed to pay particular attention to any issues in the minutes. Members sitting on the Fire Authority had not specifically brought this particular issue to the attention of the Council. However, it was noted that there was no formal requirement or identified procedure for ensuring Member awareness from Middlesbrough Members who sit on the Fire Authority, to either Executive or full Council.

The Panel agreed that the proposed change to the Emergency Fire Control Rooms was significant and the move from Hartlepool to Durham brought with it several concerns for Middlesbrough. The Panel appreciated that it was unlikely that there was any real alternative to the relocation and the Council had no direct control over the introduction of the new Fire Emergency Control Rooms. The Government was investing £100 million into the rationalisation of control rooms and had given assurances that the introduction of new technology would bring improvements in efficiency and effectiveness. The Panel recognised that it had a key role to play in ensuring both the Council as a service, and Members, were appraised of all significant proposals which could affect the Middlesbrough area and its communities. However, as a result of the information provided, the Panel was reassured that the new Fire Emergency Control Room would provide a much more efficient and better equipped service.

AGREED that the:

1. following recommendations be included in the Panel's final report:
 - (i) That a procedure is introduced which ensures Members who sit on outside bodies such as the Fire Authority, have the opportunity to alert the Council or the Executive to significant issues which emerge and are available to answer questions at full Council.
 - (ii) That Members appointed to outside bodies are informed that they are expected to keep their host authority alerted to significant issues which affect the residents of Middlesbrough or its environment.
2. report be approved and referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Board for consideration.