

AGENDA ITEM: 6

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

18<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2008

### AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL

#### Rationalisation of the Fire Emergency Control Room

FINAL REPORT

### PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1 The purpose of the report is to present the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel's assessment and proposals on the issues associated with the rationalisation of the fire emergency control room affecting Middlesbrough.

### OVERALL AIM OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

- 2 The overall aim of the scrutiny was to hold an exploratory meeting, which would provide a greater understanding of the rationalisation and relocation of the fire emergency control rooms to Durham. From this awareness the Panel would determine if a scrutiny examination into the subject is warranted or indeed if the panel wished to identify proposals to convey to the Executive for consideration.

### TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

- 3 The panel, following direction from the Overview and Scrutiny Board, determined the Terms of Reference for the scrutiny examination into the rationalisation of the fire emergency control rooms. The panel identified that the meeting was intended to be exploratory and the following terms of reference were agreed: -
- What is the intention and reasoning behind the proposal to relocate the fire emergency control room, which covers Middlesbrough?
  - What are the potential effects of any changes on Middlesbrough?
  - Did the fire authority consult on these changes with the local authorities in the Cleveland area?
  - What mechanism or process is in place for Middlesbrough members who sit on the fire authority to ensure the Council is appraised of significant changes which may affect their area?

## **BACKGROUND**

- 4 An Executive member raised the rationalisation of the fire emergency control rooms at an overview and scrutiny board meeting. The board considered and agreed that the outline information was significant and directed the Ad Hoc panel to obtain a clearer picture. The Ad Hoc panel determined that there were primarily two areas to be pursued. First, to gain increased awareness of the proposal and the actual impact this would have on the communities of Middlesbrough. Second to determine the communication, which ensured the Council and members of Middlesbrough, were engaged with this rationalisation.

## **PANELS SCRUTINY EXAMINATION**

- 5 The panel considered this to be an exploratory meeting and Members of Middlesbrough Council, who are nominated to sit on the Fire Authority, were invited to attend the panel meeting. The purpose of this was to gain a greater understanding of the reasoning behind the proposal, the perceived impact this rationalisation may have in the locality. Also, to enquire as to the means and procedures in place for members sitting on such bodies to convey issues of significance to their host authority.
- 6 The panel had a full and open meeting, which brought forward a number of key issues regarding the intended rationalisation of the control rooms and also the method of communication for ensuring the local authorities are alerted to any significant changes.

## ADDRESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

7 The panel addressed the terms of reference during their lines of enquiry and the findings are outlined below: -

- **What is the intention and reasoning behind the proposal to relocate the Fire Emergency Control Room, which covers Middlesbrough?**

The panel was informed that this rationalisation commenced in 2004 when Government appointed an independent company (Local Authority Control Company - Fire Control North East) to manage this national initiative. Provoked by issues associated with September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and the need to improve efficiency, the purpose is to establish 9 fire emergency control rooms, which will be the communication hub for all emergency fire communications as opposed to the present 49.

The panel was also informed that the investment and technology to be introduced into the new system and control rooms will improve the service for local people. The greater use of GPS and improved training and development are considered to have a positive impact on the services provided.

- **What are the potential effects of any changes on Middlesbrough?**

The panel was informed that the fire brigade, the trade union and the Cleveland Emergency Planning Committee all had concerns regarding this rationalisation. Indeed it was conveyed to the panel that representatives from Cleveland, Durham, Northumberland and Tyne & Wear had indicated resistance to the proposal but simply told that it was to be introduced. The concerns appeared to primarily focus on the potential loss of local knowledge. However, the panel was told that while there is potentially a reduction in staff (expected reduction of 43%), the local knowledge and improvements in technology would indicate that a physical move of the new control centre, is said, would actually improve the service.

The panel was informed that costs are spiralling and that the existing control rooms do require substantial investment, which would not be forthcoming. Consequently, if the service is to become more efficient and effective then there is little alternative but to run with this proposal.

- **Did the Fire Authority consult on these changes with the local authorities in the Cleveland area?**

The panel could not find 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.

- **What mechanism or process is in place for Middlesbrough Members who sit on the Fire Authority to ensure the Council is appraised of significant changes which may affect their area?**

Reports on the future of the fire and rescue service control rooms were produced from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003. The panel was also told that the minutes of the Fire Authority are despatched to Council members for information.

The panel found, however, that neither was there any covering note to the minutes to indicate that members need to pay particular attention to an issue within the minutes or that the Members sitting on the Fire Authority had specifically brought this to the attention of Council.

From the panel's enquiries it would appear that this issue, which is considered significant, has not been brought to the attention of the Executive or Council. Indeed there is not a procedure or expectation within the Council for members who sit on the Fire, Police Authority and so on, to specifically alert or present to Council such issues.

## **PANEL FINDINGS**

- 8 The Ad Hoc panel undertook this exploratory scrutiny meeting to gain an understanding of the proposed changes to the emergency fire control rooms. In doing so the panel found that the proposed change is significant and that for Middlesbrough the move from Hartlepool to Durham can bring with it some concerns. The panel demonstrated its concerns regarding the expected reduction in staffing levels and the impact this may have on responding to calls. Also, the possible loss of local knowledge and the fact that Middlesbrough lives in the shadow of 37 top tier sights including the second largest chemical complex in Europe and inherently the high density of road tankers travelling on its highways.
- 9 In response the panel was informed that all major industries are directly linked to the new control room and that the introduction of new technology, including the application of GPS will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the control rooms and that local knowledge is therefore not a major issue.
- 10 The panel paid particular attention to the means of ensuring the Council and its Members are kept apprised of any significant changes in its area, which may affect local people or their environment. 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 such organisations as the Fire Brigade and trade unions had demonstrated concerns. However, this had not been conveyed to the Council. The panel recognise that there is no formal requirement or indeed any identified procedure for ensuring member awareness from Middlesbrough members who sit on the Fire Authority to either the Executive or full Council and consequently the panel can not find any evidence that this had happened.

- 11 The panel acknowledges that notification to members on issues such as this is important to ensure they have an opportunity to respond if appropriate or simply to equip them to answer questions from the public if and when approached.

## **CONCLUSION**

- 12 In conclusion, the panel recognises the concerns raised and yet appreciates that at this stage it is unlikely that there is any real alternative to the relocation. The Government is investing £100M into the rationalisation of control rooms and gives assurances that the introduction of new technology and so on, will bring with it improvements in both efficiency and effectiveness of the service.
- 13 The panel does appreciate that when a Member is nominated to sit on the Fire Authority their prime responsibility is to that authority. The panel also recognises that there is no formal procedure or even a documented expectation for members to appraise the Executive or Council of any significant issues, which emerge from any meeting with the Fire Authority. However, the panel does consider that there has been a lack of communication in respect of the fire emergency control rooms and that simple circulation of the Fire Authorities minutes should not be viewed as effective communication. Ward members do need to be equipped to respond to local enquiries or indeed the Council respond to a significant issue, which emerges where appropriate. Consequently the panel are to recommend that a procedure be introduced which ensures Members who sit on outside bodies have both a facility and expectation to ensure the Council and / or its Executive are alerted to any significant issues. This may be through the introduction of a quarterly report to Council or should the member sitting on the outside body consider the item requires swifter attention that the opportunity is provided to facilitate this. The Panel also considers that when Members are appointed to outside bodies that the expectation to ensure Member awareness to significant issues be expressed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 14 The panel appreciates that the Council has no direct control over the introduction of the new fire emergency control rooms. However, the panel does recognise that it does play a key role in ensuring both the Council as a service and Members are appraised of all significant proposals, which may affect the area or its communities. Consequently the panel would encourage the Executive to give the following recommendations serious consideration.
  - A 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 to full Council.

- B That members who are appointed to outside bodies are informed that they are expected to keep their host authority alerted to significant issues, which affect the residents or the environment of Middlesbrough.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- 15 The panel is grateful to all those members who attended and presented information during this initial enquiry. We would like to place on record our appreciation for the co-operation we have received from the following: -

Councillor P Porley	Middlesbrough Council (Chair of F. A.)
Councillor G Clark	Middlesbrough Council
Councillor G Rogers	Middlesbrough Council
Councillor M Williams	Middlesbrough Council
Councillor J Jones	Middlesbrough Council

**COUNCILLOR JANICE BRUNTON**

**CHAIR of AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL**

## **October 2008**

Contact Peter Clark  
Senior Scrutiny Officer  
Performance and Policy Directorate  
Telephone 01642 729708 (DDI)

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 16 The following background papers were consulted or referenced to during this scrutiny and in the compilation of this report:
- (a) Reports from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
  - (b) Minutes of the Emergency Planning Joint committee Sept 2008
  - (c) Media release from the Fire Brigade Union
  - (d) Fire Control briefing paper for MPs
  - (e) Press articles
  - (f) Minutes of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panels of 6<sup>th</sup> October 2008