

To all Members of the Regeneration and Economic Development
Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Date: 17 March 2010

Dear Member,

**REGENERATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT POLICY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE - WEDNESDAY, 24 MARCH 2010**

I am now able to enclose, for consideration at next Wednesday, 24 March 2010 meeting of the Regeneration and Economic Development Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the following report, which was unavailable when the agenda was printed.

Agenda No Item

1. **Designing out Risk - Building in Safety. Presentation by Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority on its links to the Regeneration Framework - TO FOLLOW**
(Pages 1 - 6)

Yours sincerely



Peter Sass
Head of Democratic Services & Local Leadership

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By: Charlie Hendry, Chief Executive & Chief Fire Officer
Kent & Medway Fire & Rescue Authority

To: Regeneration and Economic Development Policy Overview and
Scrutiny Committee – 24 March 2010

Subject: **DESIGNING OUT RISK - BUILDING IN SAFETY**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The development of the built environment in Kent and Medway is of considerable importance and interest to the Fire and Rescue Authority. The demand for our response services and, to a large extent, the revenue budget requirement for the Authority, are driven by the need to attend and resolve emergency incidents. This in turn is heavily dependent upon the nature of the built environment, the risk it presents to residents, business and our firefighters, and its longer term sustainability. The Authority is committed to supporting the economic development and regeneration of the County as evidence suggests that economic prosperity is a key factor in reducing risk across the board. It is, therefore, one of our key strategic objectives for the next five years.

The Authority is also a regulatory authority under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order and wants to exercise its duties proportionately to ensure public safety as well as seeking to keep the regulatory burden on business to a sensible level. The considerable success we have had in reducing fire deaths and injuries in domestic premises in recent years rests largely on investment in prevention work, and we wish to ensure that similar success can be sustained in the business community. The County Council's ambition for supporting economic development is one which the Authority shares and wishes to support. We do, however, have growing concerns about both the sustainability and vulnerability of many modern methods of construction, as well as the variable quality of aspects of the wider planning and regulatory framework applied to the built environment.

The purpose of this submission to the Committee is both to make clear the nature and extent of those concerns, but also to clarify the opportunities that closer working with the fire and rescue authority can offer in support of the County's economic strategy.

INTRODUCTION

1. Through prevention and protection activity Kent Fire and Rescue Service has been working to improve safety and reduce risk in the built environment. The way the built environment is being planned and developed is, however, changing and our approach to the issue is being reconsidered to reflect these changes and to mitigate their effect on risk.

DEVELOPMENT - THE CHALLENGES CREATED

2. Kent and Medway is a large area with a diverse community. Major housing and commercial developments, though temporarily slowed during the recession, are planned for the area. Though generally a relatively affluent county, it has pockets of severe deprivation and significant inequalities of health and life expectancy. For the older population, the trend is also to encourage independent living rather than relying

on state or private provision and it is noteworthy that the majority of fatal fire casualties last year were in the over 50 age range. The impact of the recession is likely to increase indices of deprivation in those areas already housing the most vulnerable and there are well-established links between deprivation, poor living conditions, and fire losses. In addition, there is a growing transient population, many of whom may be living “off the radar” and in sub-standard houses in multiple occupation.

3. A further problem is emerging in relation to the built environment concerning methods and materials of construction. Innovations in less expensive methods of construction, particularly timber-framed property, have been observed to create additional risks and hazards for fire and rescue services. Such buildings are particularly vulnerable to fire during the construction phase and once alight are characterised by very rapid fire spread, higher than normal heat production and sudden and rapid structural collapse. Once built, they are clad and protected by fire resisting material but its continuing integrity, once buildings are occupied, may be extremely hard to ensure and the potential exists for rapid fire spread between compartments. Recent fires nationally and in developments in Thanet and Ashford have highlighted concerns about the fire spread in homes under construction. I am particularly concerned about the emergence of new hazards for firefighters in such circumstances and the severity and spread of such fires are causing us to reconsider our response tactics.
4. The significant residential building programme for the South East, and for Kent in particular, has the potential to increase and vary the demand for our services. This is especially relevant to any proposals to build on recognised flood plains. Maintaining and improving our ability to deploy resources in adverse weather events may well become a more prominent feature of our future work. The scale of development in Kent may also impact on fire cover and the way in which the Authority delivers services such as community safety or technical fire safety.

SUPPORTING THE BUSINESS SECTOR

5. A significant proportion of the Kent economy is small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), and our experience suggests strongly that these businesses can be particularly vulnerable to fire and other business interruptions. Recent statistics suggest that as many as 7 out of 10 SMEs that experience a serious fire will probably not resume trading. As economic health is a critical factor in driving other social improvements this is obviously something we are keen to help with, both as a fire and rescue service and as a local partner.
6. Our relationship with the business community tends to fall broadly into two main areas; first, the preparation for and response to fires and other emergencies. We have much to offer in terms of planning advice for business continuity and, amongst other things, we are in the process of working with a national agency, the Fire Protection Association, which has produced a free web-based toolkit for business continuity, and some of the major insurance companies to develop a more supportive approach, particularly for SMEs. The insurance industry is particularly interested as they are seeing significant increases in fire-related loss even though the overall number of fires continues to decline.
7. The second area of interest for us concerns our regulatory responsibilities under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. This new Act fundamentally changed the way in which fire prevention is governed in the UK, removing the inspection and certification regime in favour of a more self-regulatory approach with the Fire and

Rescue Service adopting an advisory and auditing role in relation to businesses' self assessments. We are reviewing the operation of this new regime as there is some anecdotal evidence that this may not be working as well as it might, particularly when SMEs face some tough choices about prioritising their own resources and activities to cope with the economic downturn.

WHAT WE'VE DONE SO FAR

8. At present there are a number of work streams to influence the quality of the built environment. The 'Safer with Sprinklers' campaign has now been running for over two years, and focuses on the installation of sprinklers in the homes of the most vulnerable. There have been successes including the Medway Sprinkler Policy and the soon to be completed Kent Design Guide Appendix. Recent research (repeated following two years of the campaign) has shown the main areas of success have been the increase in awareness amongst building professionals and those that enforce building methods of the benefits of sprinkler systems. There is still a lack of awareness amongst those involved in planning process and a reluctance, due to cost, for builders to consider their use. Using the information gained during the research the project has re-focused on influencing in the following areas;
 - Working with planners and developers of large scale developments (new build social and sheltered housing developments) to increase the installation of sprinklers in high-risk homes.
 - Screening of planning applications to target clients and professional advisors and promoting the use of the Kent Design Guide Appendix on Fire Safety, which includes designing out risk and specific guidance on sprinkler systems.
 - Development of a number of case studies which highlight the benefits of sprinklers including the design freedoms and cost reductions achieved as a result of sprinkler installations.
 - Establishing a live fire demonstration facility that will provide the ability to dramatically show the benefits of sprinkler systems in a domestic setting.
9. Progress has also been made on reducing the risks to firefighters due to the fire risks posed by timber framed construction. SiteSafe, the UK Timber Frame Association (UKTFA) initiative to minimise the risk of fire on timber frame construction sites was recently launched with backing from the Chief Fire Officers Association. SiteSafe, goes above and beyond current legislative procedures and relies on collaborative working to reduce the risk of fire on timber frame construction sites.
10. Controlling fire risks in the homes of vulnerable adults is also a key element of protecting the built environment. Two recent cases highlight the risks that are encountered by fire service staff in Kent. Both cases involved homes in which families were living at extremely high risk of fire (due to mental health or dependency issues). To reduce these risks a semi-portable system, based on a water mist system, has been developed. The system has been installed in these homes and provides an increased level of protection.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

11. The revision of Building Regulations will commence in 2012/13. To ensure that maximum advantage is made of this opportunity, we will work through the National Fire Sprinkler Network and the Environment Agency to lobby to increase the mention of sprinklers and other safety measures to design out risk and build in fire and flood safety in high risk homes. We will also look at the programme of activity for CLG fire research and see if this could be focused on the perceived risks of current construction methods. **But most of all we wish to work with partners in Kent on a combined approach to development and regeneration which explicitly recognises the balance needed between essential development and sustainable development.**
12. In the short-term we will develop a programme to promote the Kent Design Guide for fire safety amongst all planning committees, planning officer working groups and housing specifiers. A programme of visits is currently being prepared for this awareness activity and it is hoped that this will support the drive to influence housing strategies and local development frameworks.
13. Influencing the content of Sustainable Development Guides and working to ensure that these don't increase risk to occupants and firefighters will be an additional message that will be promoted during discussions with district and county colleagues. Through regional and national networks we will combine or work with others to commission work to develop guidance on future-proofing the built environment for the long-term. Outcomes will also be used to influence local development frameworks and Sustainable Community Strategies.
14. The sprinkler campaign will continue and will be amended to include designing out risk and building in safety. The campaign will focus not just on sprinklers but other practical fire risk control measures such as cooker shut off systems and more temporary forms of sprinkler protection such as the two systems recently installed.
15. The relationship with Medway Council and Kent County Council continues to grow. Both organisations have adopted sprinkler installation policies and we have developed a programme of regular meetings with the schools capital project team. They are committed to installing sprinklers in schools and through specification at the design stage they have been able to reduce the cost of installation to just 0.4% of the overall build cost.

FLOOD RISK

16. Kent and Medway were not badly affected by the floods of 2007 and 2008, but the Environment Agency is forecasting higher flood risks for some parts of the area. This is because more extreme weather, such as storms, and rising sea levels are predicted. We are working with the Agency and local authorities through the Kent Resilience Forum to reduce the impact of flooding, and to make sure we can respond adequately when it happens. A key element of this work is raising public awareness of flood risks, and what you can do to help yourself.
17. It will be important to address the issue of cost and promote the idea that a sustainable built environment, capable of accommodating a person's changing needs, could actually be more efficient in the long-term. Additional expenditure on safety and flood control measures will ensure that whenever changes to an individual's life style occur (mobility, health or dependency) through thoughtful design they can be accommodated. The longer term efficiencies should derive from a

reduced dependency on a range of local services that will otherwise need to intervene in a reactive capacity.

CONCLUSION

18. The Fire & Rescue Authority wants to help. It also wants to ensure that the less obvious risks posed by some types of development are better known. We recognise that the regeneration and economic benefits are of critical importance to the County and we want to play our part. We can support business and economic sustainability, help with business continuity, and exercise our regulatory role proportionately and sensitively. But ultimately our responsibility is to promote public safety. And we have a similar responsibility for our firefighters who are being faced with new and dangerous challenges in some of the new built environment. It is important that others recognise these and understand the changes it may force in response tactics and activities.
19. The Authority wishes to promote and pursue a constructive dialogue with partners which enables our actual and potential contributions to be recognised, and which can take due account of the concerns we have about risks for the future.

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