

CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING OF: ESTATES AND PROPERTY COMMITTEE
DATE: 24TH JANUARY 2022
REPORT OF: DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE AND COMMISSIONING
AUTHOR: ANDREW LEADBETTER

SUBJECT: WILMSLOW DAY CREWED HOUSING

Purpose of Report

1. To secure guidance from Members about the suggested approach to securing day crewed housing in Wilmslow if the Fire Authority decides to proceed with the day crewing proposal at its meeting next month.

Recommended: That Members

- [1] recommend to the Fire Authority that it delegates authority to the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, Treasurer and Monitoring Officer to purchase nine properties in Wilmslow for day crewed housing.

Background

2. In July 2020 the Fire Authority approved the Integrated Risk Management Plan 2020-2024. The Plan included the proposal to introduce a day crewing duty system at Wilmslow Fire Station.
3. Originally, the proposal was predicated on securing land owned by Cheshire Constabulary to erect nine houses for the day crewing operational staff immediately adjacent to the fire station site. Since this option could not be delivered the proposal had to be altered. As a result the proposal has been the subject of further consultation – this time with the day crewed housing to be provided in the community, in the vicinity of the fire station.
4. The Fire Authority will determine whether to proceed with the proposal for day crewing at its meeting next month.

Information

‘Specification’

5. Officers have an agreed ‘specification’ for the day crewed houses, which is based on the existing housing stock. The houses need to have three bedrooms, a garden and parking. These are often long-term homes for the operation staff that work the day crewing duty system.

Locations

6. Officers have been considering the ideal locations for the day crewed housing. This is a little more complex than it sounds. A plan of the area surrounding the fire station was plotted with a boundary showing a modelled three and a half minute travel time and five minute travel time. However, such a plan does not take into account the true road conditions, e.g. number of traffic lights, significance of junctions, etc. With this in mind operational officers have been testing out some of the routes to help inform the preparation of a shortlist of properties that could fulfil the Fire Authority's requirements.

Housing Market

7. The housing market was extremely buoyant in 2021 with many properties selling almost immediately they were marketed and with reports that some were achieving sums in excess of the asking price. The market has cooled off considerably for now, leaving a dearth of properties, but the situation often changes between the upcoming half term and Easter.

Process

8. Whatever is happening to the property market it will be important for the Fire Authority to have a slick process in place so that properties that fit its requirements can be secured quickly before they are snapped up by other buyers. Thankfully, the Fire Authority's status as a 'cash buyer' should give it something of an advantage, provided it is seen to act decisively and purposefully.
9. The Authority's Financial Regulations state at paragraph 10:30 that: 'Proposals for the acquisition ... of land or buildings must be fully appraised and may only be approved by the Authority.'
10. If the Fire Authority approves the proposal to move to the day crewing duty system in Wilmslow, officers were hoping to secure delegated authority from the Fire Authority to enable them to purchase the day crewed houses. The delegation will not relate to specific properties but allow the purchase of nine suitable properties within an overall figure contained in the capital programme.
11. Officers envisage the delegation being granted to the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, Treasurer and Monitoring Officer.
12. Members are asked to consider whether they are comfortable recommending this approach to the Fire Authority.

Financial Implications

13. Properties in Wilmslow are relatively expensive, with three bedroomed houses likely to cost, on average, between £450k and £500k. Therefore, the budget for nine day crewed houses, could be as much as £4.5m, plus fees etc. (survey, legal, stamp duty, land registry).
14. It is unlikely that new houses will be available in the area that has been identified. Therefore, some additional funds may be needed for some updating

to the houses. However, it is hoped that this can be kept to a minimum by purchasing properties that are in good condition, or better.

15. The funding of the day crewed house purchases will either be entirely from borrowing, or primarily from borrowing (there is an option to utilise some one-off funding from 2022-23 to reduce the demand for borrowing).

Legal Implications

16. External solicitors will be employed to carry out the conveyancing in order to ensure that the Fire Authority's interests are protected.

Equality and Diversity Implications

17. This report is only about the house purchases. The wider project has been the subject of an assessment of the equality issues associated with the introduction of the day crewing duty system.

Environmental Implications

18. Whilst it would be preferable to secure newer, more environmentally efficient properties, this may not be possible. The environmental performance of the houses on offer is unlikely to be an over-riding consideration given the relatively small number of properties that are likely to be available and suitable.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: NONE