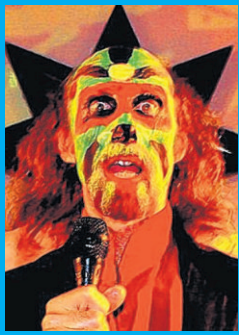


the scene



Prog rock pioneer to fire up Jackdaw Festival
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Sequel to comedy smash is as childish as ever
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John Mayer inspired me to buy two guitars
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Essex Fire Service issued shock bill

ESSEX Fire Service is being forced to use all of its £15million savings to pay off a debt it did not know it owed.

An investigation has been launched after the service discovered it had to pay the huge bill to the Government for firefighters' injury pension payments, wiping out its entire savings.

It should have been paying the Government an extra £1.8million every year since 2006, but an accounting "oversight" meant it had instead been paying just £120,000.

Last week, the Department for Communities Local Government flagged up the huge debt to Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and some other fire authorities.

It means Essex's fire authority will have to find a further £1.8million per year on top of

This is a burden, but unlike other fire and rescue services, the Fire Authority has the cash to pay

its £5.9million cuts over the next few years. It has already covered this year's £1.8million as it had underspent.

Acting chief fire officer Adam Eckley said: "At this stage we don't believe it will impact on the delivery of front line services, we believe the entire liability can be covered by the authorities existing level of reserves."

"Those reserves were held for the authority to manage any in-year shocks, financial shocks that were presented and that is exactly how they

will be used on this occasion. "The Fire Authority's accounts have been audited annually by independent auditors appointed by the Audit Commission, but until now, the discrepancy was missed.

"Even the Department for Communities and Local Government, who receive an annual return from all UK fire and rescue services failed to pick up on the liability.

"Because of our prudent financial management over the last few years we have built up significant reserves and we are in a healthy financial position and able to wipe out this debt immediately.

"This is a significant burden, but unlike other fire and rescue services that will likely face a similar financial challenge, the Fire Authority has the cash to pay while remaining financially sound."

No one has resigned or been

sacked over the mistake, but Kent Fire Service will conduct an independent investigation.

Riccardo La Torre, Essex Chairman of the Fire Brigade Union, said they had been kept in the dark about the debt until it was announced yesterday and was waiting for more details.

He said: "It is just quite concerning for a number of reasons, number one that the mistake happened in the first place and more importantly what it is now going to mean for our members.

"With the cuts they were already looking at losing 170 firefighters jobs when it was £5.9million, so now its £7.7million I am sure they will revisit that strategy."

He also claimed the FBU had been reassured the reserves were to safeguard against redundancies.

Cop is sacked

A POLICE officer based in Tendring has been sacked by police for gross misconduct.

The officer, who has not been named by Essex Police, sought work with two outside companies while he was suspended from the force for unrelated matters.

He was found to have lied about his circumstances when applying for the jobs, to have failed to tell Essex Police about the jobs and to have asked another officer to act dishonestly.

The officer was also on a final written warning in relation to his behaviour at the time.

A panel led by Assistant Chief Constable Maurice Mason found the officer breached expected standards for honesty and integrity.

Mr Mason said: "The public of Essex demand their police officers behave and conduct themselves to the highest moral and professional standards.

"This officer breached the standards of professional behaviour set out in the schedule to the Police Regulations 2012.

"These breaches are considered so serious there is no other possible proportionate outcome and his further employment by Essex Police is untenable."

Kersha's skydive tribute to aunt



SHE'S more familiar with sending customers jet setting on their holidays.

But travel agent Kersha Harries will be taking to the skies herself.

The tandem skydive she will be taking part in today is in memory of her aunt, Rachel Davies, who

died in 2009 from sudden unexpected death in epilepsy.

Kersha, 20, of Colchester Road, Ardleigh, will also be skydiving to raise £600 for the Sudep Action charity. Sponsor Kersha at facebook.com/SUDEP SkyDive or gofundme.com/6ny9fw

FROM PAGE 1

Police said: "Detectives are investigating an allegation of rape.

"Police were contacted to reports a teenage girl had been sexually assaulted at a house in the town.

"At this stage the girl has been unable to provide the police with any further details.

"Officers are looking to locate a local man aged in his twenties who may be able to provide information."

A member of one of the

girls' families, who cannot be named for legal reasons, said: "We were obviously worried when they were missing.

"One of the girls came back several hours later and said they had been given drugs and she had been forced to have sex, so we called the police.

"Since the allegations were made, the officers have been very good.

"We just wish they had been found sooner."

Anyone with information about the incident can call Essex Police's sexual offences investigation team on 101.



WIN CASH PRIZES: PAGE 6 MONEY SAVING COUPONS: P30

TOMORROW

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Professional Pensions


Essex fire authority discovers £15m pensions black hole

- By: Naomi Rainey
- 15 Aug 2014





Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECFRS) has discovered a £15m black hole in its finances, after a pensions accounting error was overlooked since 2006.

Accounting changes made in 2006 meant additional pension payments awarded to firefighters who left the service due to work-related injury were funded by regional fire authorities, instead of central government.

 Essex's accounts failed to incorporate the change, allowing a £1.8m deficit to build annually until the oversight was recently identified.


The service, whose accounts were audited by *PricewaterhouseCoopers and Ernst & Young* under appointment from the Audit Commission, said it would repay the debt through budget reserves.


 Both the auditors and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), which receives an annual return from all UK fire and rescue services, failed to notice the error, the authority said.

 It is thought at least two other fire services, Staffordshire and Cheshire, have been affected by the same issue.


ECFRS finance director and treasurer Mike Clayton has reached agreement with the auditors to remove £1m liability from the unaudited 2013/2014 accounts, while more than £11m will be paid towards capital financing charges for 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 as voluntary contributions, following a revisit of decisions.


The payments made towards the debt are "directly linked to the forecast underspend" in recent years, the authority said.


 Clayton said the additional cost would be absorbed by this year's budget, but there will be an impact in future years, "though it is too early to say what specific changes will be needed".

 While auditors "can never provide complete assurance", Clayton questioned the auditors' role in the debt amassing.

He said: "Where there are changes to the accounting rules we should expect the audit to focus on the risk that the rules have not been correctly applied. Clearly in this instance, the focus was not sufficient to enable them to identify the problem."

 Clayton also queried the role of government in the debacle, noting it "did not seek assurances from fire and rescue authorities until July of this year", which led to the error being uncovered.

 There have been "a lot of questions" as to why the authority must settle the debt immediately, Clayton said. However, delayed payments will attract interest and the government is yet to declare its position on past years' interest, he added.

 An independent investigation has been launched by ECFRS, headed by Kent Fire Authority finance director and treasurer Charles Kerr.