

MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY MEETING HELD ON 11 FEBRUARY 2021

Present: Councillors C Atkins, R Berry, J Chatterley (Chairman), K Choudhry, P Duckett, D Franks, J Gambold, M Headley, D McVicar, I Shingler and Y Waheed

Mr J Atkinson, CFO P Fuller, DCFO A Hopkinson, ACO G Chambers, ACFO A Peckham, T/AC J Tai, Ms S Fecondi and Mr S Frank

Ms L McMahon, Service Liaison Lead HMICFRS, was also present

20-21/FRA/74 Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S Khurshid.

The Chairman welcomed Leanne McMahon (Service Liaison Lead HMICFRS) and Steve Frank (Audit Wales) who are working on the current HMICFRS inspection.

20-21/FRA/75 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

20-21/FRA/76 Communications

The Chair reported that he had circulated all relevant correspondence to Members of the Authority for information. The latest of these had related to the COVID Inspection undertaken by HMICFRS and the Inspectorate's report on the sector's response to the pandemic.

Progress against recommendations arising from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry

The Chair reported that he would be circulating the report on the progress against the implementation of recommendations relating to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. He asked if all the high rise buildings in Bedfordshire over 18 metres high had been inspected and if they were safe. He also asked which authority was responsible for inspecting clad premises under 18 metres high.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that although the report was a follow up report arising from the recommendations made to the London Fire Brigade in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster, it was relevant to the sector. Following Grenfell, all 73 high rise premises in the County had been inspected and the Service had been satisfied with the safety measures in place in the majority of these cases. There were some premises which had been requested to implement remediation plans and these had been progressed in relation to all but one high rise building. This was located in Luton and the Service was now threatening prosecution if the remediation plan was not delivered.

In relation to buildings under 18 metres, the Service's Corporate Management Team had asked the Protection Team for an update on progress against plans to assess the whole built environment in a more holistic way. It was recognised that this was a large piece of work that could take months to complete and may involve the use of volunteers and/or more contact with the local authority building control and planning functions.

Account would also be taken of any changes to national guidance on the efficacy of the stay put policy arising from the report.

COVID-19 Vaccination Centres

The Chief Fire Officer reported that some Station and Group Managers had been seconded to assist in the management of vaccination centres. Not only has this assistance been welcomed by the CCG, it also provided an opportunity to engage with and provide information about Safe and Well visits with one of the Service's target groups. At each vaccination centre managed by a Station or Group Manager, a Safe and Well Hub had been provided to provide advice and information.

It was suggested that the work undertaken by the Service in support of vulnerable groups such as older adults should be communicated more clearly by both the Service and its partner organisations.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that this would be reflected in a report outlining the accomplishments against the Community Risk Management Plan over the last two year period.

Industrial Action

The Chief Fire Officer commented on the national position on industrial action that had been subject to recent correspondence and social media posts.

The Chief Fire Officer reported that this Service had never supported the national tripartite agreement and had adopted a local approach of working closely with the Fire Brigades Union to allow for fire fighters working for the Service to carry out broader duties, especially during the pandemic.

The strong stance adopted by the Service was reflected in the recent COVID-19 thematic inspection as the Service had not provided any data for the relevant table.

20-21/FRA/77 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2021 be confirmed as a true record.

20-21/FRA/78 Public Participation

Members noted that no questions had been received in accordance with the public participation scheme approved at the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority held on 5 April 2000 (Minute 99/fa/94 refers).

20-21/FRA/79 Executive Committee 3 February 2021

The Chair reported on the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 3 February 2021. The main topic of discussion had been the Chief Fire Officer appointment process which was subject to a separate agenda item later in the meeting.

The Executive had resolved that an additional meeting of the Authority be called during the week commencing 8 March 2021 if the Executive felt able to appoint a suitable candidate, in order that the appointment could be ratified by all Members.

RESOLVED:

That a special meeting be called during the week commencing 8 March 2021 to confirm the appointment of the new Chief Fire Officer, if required.

20-21/FRA/80 2020/21 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring as at 31 December 2020

The Assistant Chief Officer – Finance and Corporate Services introduced his report providing an update on of the forecast year-end budget monitoring position as at 31 December 2020.

The forecast underspend as at 31 December 2020 was £790,000. It had previously been agreed by the Authority that this underspend would be allocated to a Collection Fund Deficit Reserve. Members were reminded that the underspend had arisen as a 5% fire fighter pay award had been forecast and only a 2% pay award had been agreed. The Service had also been awarded a £607,000 COVID grant.

In relation to additional bids submitted by the Service, the decarbonisation bid to fund energy efficiency improvements such as new boilers, LED lighting and insulation, had been unsuccessful as the fund had been significantly oversubscribed. The funding would have enabled the Service to bring forward the planned spend in these areas.

The Service was in the final stages of preparing a bid for additional COVID grant funding.

The Assistant Chief Officer reported on slippage in the Capital Programme relating to funding the replacement of public address systems at stations and the upgrade of CCTV on fire appliances. Delays had been caused by the pandemic as it had been difficult to allow third party access. The workload of the ICT team had also been reprioritised to ensure that equipment was available for wide scale homeworking during the pandemic.

The station equipment project was also being partially slipped into 2021/2022 as this would enable the Service to pilot the newest technology which may result in additional savings.

A concern was expressed about the investment and continued overspend on ICT projects. This should be monitored to ensure that the value for money was being achieved from the high level of investment.

RESOLVED:

1. That the updates in the report be acknowledged.
2. That the requests in paragraph 3.4.1 of the report to slip the capital schemes into 2021/22 be agreed.

20-21/FRA/81 The 2021/22 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme

The Assistant Chief Officer – Finance and Corporate Services submitted his report which provided Members information to allow them to set a budget and precept level for 2021/22 in line with statutory requirements; approve a Medium-Term Revenue Plan for the period 2021/22 to 2024/25; approve a Medium-Term Capital Programme for the period 2021/22 to 2024/25 and to approve a Medium-Term Financial Strategy which provides the strategic context for each of the above, linking them to the Authority's corporate aims, objectives and strategic priorities. These had been discussed in the two Member Budget Workshops as well as at the Service's Corporate Management Team meetings.

A Council Tax increase of 1.99%, resulting in an increase in the precept for a Band D property from £100.41 to £102.41 per annum was being proposed.

Following receipt of the NNDR1 forms from the constituent authorities, an amended budget report had been submitted with an increased business rate income, an update on the business rate element of the Collection Fund deficit and the impact of Section 31 grants. The Assistant Chief Officer advised that in future, the final budget report would not be prepared until the NNDR1 forms had been received.

For the next four year period covered by the Medium Term documents, it had been assumed that there would be a 0% pay award for 2021/2022 and 2% for the following three years. It was hoped that the next Comprehensive Spending Review would cover a three year period. Assumptions had also been made about the reduction in Revenue Support Grant and an increased reliance on business rate income.

Appendix 2 to the report covered the programme of savings and efficiencies, totalling approximately £700,000. Councillor Duckett suggested that this programme be monitored by the Audit and Standards Committee throughout the year.

Councillor Headley proposed the following amendment, which was seconded by Councillor Franks:

“That the FRA particularly endorses the statement in the MTFS that “the Authority’s plans for 2021/22 and beyond include making additional significant efficiency savings through ...Efficiency improvements from investments in ICT” and therefore only approve investment in the Business Management Information System (BMIS) and GIS if the savings determined by the business cases are greater than the ongoing cost within the period of the MTFS.”

Both the Chief Fire Officer and the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that this investment would enable the Service to become more efficient and enable the organisation to become more data driven and evidence based by reducing the amount of time spent by the performance team on processes that could be automated so that up to date data was more easily accessible and their expertise could be directed towards priority areas.

The BMIS system in particular had been implemented successfully by other fire and rescue services as well as local authorities.

On the amendment being put to the meeting, the Chair declared it to be carried.

The recommendations relating to the revenue budget requirement of £31.773 million, with a corresponding precept of £22.193 million and a 1.99% Council Tax increase, and the approval of the Medium Term Revenue Plan, Medium Term Capital Programme, Medium Term Financial Strategy were put to the meeting and the votes recorded thereon were as follows:

For the Recommendations (11) Councillors C Atkins, R Berry, J Chatterley, K Choudhry, P Duckett, D Franks, J Gambold, M Headley, D McVicar, I Shingler and Y Waheed

Therefore, these recommendations were carried unanimously.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be considered and it be determined for 2021/22 that:
 - (a) A Revenue Budget requirement is set at £31.773 million, met as indicated in paragraph 3.8 of the report.
 - (b) In meeting this budget requirement, the Authority's Precept be set at £22.193 million and that consequently, a Council Tax increase of 1.99% up to £102.41 per Band D equivalent property, calculated as shown in Paragraph 3.8 of the Report, be approved.
 - (c) In order to meet the Precept requirement, the Treasurer be authorised to issue Precepts in the necessary form to each of the Unitary Councils and for the amounts indicated in Paragraph 3.11 of the report.
2. That the Medium-Term Revenue Plan attached at Appendix 1 to the report and 2021/22 savings and efficiencies detailed at Appendix 2 of the report be approved.
3. That the 2020/21 year-end underspend be allocated to the new Collection Fund Deficit Reserve.
4. That the 2021/22 Capital Programme of £1.038m as attached at Appendix 3 to the report be approved.
5. That the Medium-Term Financial Strategy attached at Appendix 4 to the report and the Reserves Strategy at Appendix 5 of the report be approved.
6. That in considering the above recommendations, the Treasurer's statement on the robustness of estimates included in the budget and the adequacy of the reserves for which the budget provides, attached at Appendix 6 to the report, be noted.
7. That any budget amendments, following receipt of the final settlement figures, be delegated to the Treasurer and Chief Fire Officer.
8. That the FRA particularly endorses the statement in the MTFS that "the Authority's plans for 2021/22 and beyond include making additional significant efficiency savings through ...Efficiency improvements from investments in ICT" and therefore only approve investment in the Business Management Information System (BMIS) and GIS if the savings determined by the business cases are greater than the ongoing cost within the period of the MTFS.

20-21/FRA/82 2019-2023 Community Risk Management Plan, 2021/22 Action Plan: Consultation update

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer presented the outcomes of the public consultation on the proposals for inclusion in the 2021/22 Annual Action Plan within the four year Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) covering the period 2019-2023.

The consultation had been conducted alongside the annual budget consultation and had included the delivery of 15,000 emails, publication on the Service website and through its social media channels. 471 consultation responses had been received, with 67% agreeing that delivery of the identified actions would help the Service to achieve its mission to provide outstanding fire and rescue services.

96 responses had also been received to the free text question on how the Service could improve. The majority of these comments were very positive.

In response to a comment about the lack of Member involvement in the Emergency Cover Review, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that the review was in its initial stages and that a report would be submitted to the next meeting of the Authority on the proposed next steps to be taken.

RESOLVED:

1. That the outcomes from the Community Risk Management Plan public consultation be acknowledged.
2. That the adoption and publication of the final draft of the refreshed 2019-2023 Community Risk Management Plan and the 2021/22 annual action plan set out at Appendix A of the report be approved.

Leanne McMahon left the meeting prior to:

20-21/FRA/83 HMICFRS Covid 19 Inspection Report

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer submitted his report outlining the outcomes of the COVID-19 thematic inspection conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) during 2020. The inspection had covered four areas: what was working well and what was being learnt; how the fire and rescue sector was responding to the COVID-19 crisis; how fire and rescue services were dealing with the problems they faced; and what changes were likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report had been presented as a narrative report rather than as a graded judgement. As previously discussed, rather than engaging in the national tripartite agreement, the Service had engaged early and on a regular basis with the Fire Brigades Union to adopt a practical and agile approach locally and detail of the additional duties undertaken during the pandemic, such as providing ambulance drivers and participating in the delivery of food parcels, in addition to maintaining the response and prevention elements of the Service's work was set out in the body of the report. Unfortunately, this could not be reflected in the data tables in the national report.

HMICFRS had criticised the Service for not continuing to undertake all its protection duties during the pandemic and an action plan was in place to ensure that the Service maintained its risk based inspection programme during subsequent lockdowns.

The Chief Fire Officer reiterated that the Service had, from an early stage, advised that it would not engage in the tripartite agreement and had continued with this robust stance, being the only Service in the country to do so.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer added that the Service had been one of the first visited after the first lockdown period as it was recognised as having many areas of good practice, including its collaborative work with the East of England Ambulance Service, its co-responding capability, bariatric capability and work undertaken by the Falls Team. The joint work with the Ambulance Service was currently the subject of a study by Nottinghamshire Trent University seeking to identify the social value to the community of this initiative. When this was complete, it would be presented to Members for information.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported on some of the results of the staff survey which was conducted by HMICFRS as part of the inspection. These compared favourably to the most recent staff survey undertaken by the Service in 2019 as well as to the national average. For example, 97% of staff felt that the communications from the Service on COVID-19 were informative compared to 90% nationally. 74% of staff ranked their wellbeing higher on a scale of 1-5 compared with 66% nationally.

RESOLVED:

1. That the findings of HMICFRS into Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's response during the COVID-19 pandemic be received.
2. That a further progress update be received at a future Authority meeting.

(Note: The meeting was adjourned at 11.37am and resumed at 11.45am)

20-21/FRA/84 HMICFRS Round 2 Service Inspections - Update

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Mr S Frank provided an update on the Round 2 Service Inspections. These had been brought forward, with the Service being in the first tranche of inspection. The inspection would focus on efficiency, effectiveness and people.

Mr Frank provided Members with the detail around the planned eight week inspection period which would start on 3 March 2021. Pre-inspection preparation had already been undertaken. This included an update of the Improvement Plan and Self-Assessment. The Service had developed a strong narrative around the following four themes: the strong financial position of the Service, the Service's move towards becoming more data-led and evidence based, a step change in evaluation and the adoption of a longer-term vision. Data had been collected and coded in such a way as to facilitate its use by the HMIFRS.

In response to a comment about performance against the people strand of the inspection, the Authority was advised that there had been clear progress on that. Of the 22 areas identified for improvement in the first inspection, nine actions had been completed and the rest were in progress.

RESOLVED:

That the update be received.

Leanne McMahon returned to the meeting.

20-21/FRA/85 Localism Act 2011 - Pay Policy Statement 2021

The Authority received the report of the Head of Human Resources which reminded Members of the statutory requirement to agree and publish an annual pay policy statement and its constituent parts for the financial year 2021/22. Updates to the Policy were marked in bold for ease of reference and reflected all recent pay awards and increases agreed by the respective National Joint Councils.

It was noted that the current pay multiple between the lowest paid employee and the highest paid Chief Officer was 7.6 to 1. This compared favourably to other public sector organisations.

RESOLVED:

That the submitted proposed pay policy statement for 2021/22 be approved.

20-21/FRA/86 Work Programme

Members received the updated Work Programme.

The Chief Fire Officer reported on plans to introduce video conferencing facilities into all stations so that virtual Station Visits could be conducted, recognising the value of Member visits to the Service's Community Fire Stations, which had not taken place as a result of COVID-19.

As an interim measure, a notice would be placed in the Weekly Bulletin advising members of staff that they could contact the Chair if they wished to bring anything to the Authority's attention on an informal basis.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer commented that the Emergency Cover Review should be added to the Work Programme for the Authority's next meeting.

The Chair requested that the Authority receive a presentation on benchmarking against other Fire and Rescue Services be added to the Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Work Programme be received.
2. That a report on the Emergency Cover Review be added to the agenda for the Authority's meeting on 23 March 2021.
3. That a presentation on benchmarking against other Fire and Rescue Services be added to the Work Programme for a future meeting.

20-21/FRA/87 Information Bulletin Q3 Oct-Dec

The Chief Fire Officer submitted the information bulletin covering the period October to December 2020.

In response to a comment about the high number of leavers during the period, the Chief Fire Officer advised that formal exit interviews were conducted, as well as the leavers being offered the opportunity to have an informal discussion with himself or the Deputy Chief Fire Officer. In the majority of cases, individuals left the Service as a result of a legitimate life change.

RESOLVED:

That the information bulleting be received.

20-21/FRA/88 CFO Appointment Process

The Authority received the information pack for the post of Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive of the Service. This had undergone a significant refresh. As previously noted, the selection process had been delegated to the Executive and would take place during the period 16 February, with the commencement of the shortlisting process, and concluding with two days of interviews on the 4 and 5 of March 2021.

Ms S Fecondi, the Head of Human Resources, provided more detail on the process, which would be conducted entirely virtually. The Chief Fire Officer would be acting as a Technical Adviser to the Selection Panel and the Chief Constable of Bedfordshire Police and the Chief Executive of Bedford Borough Council would be taking part as stakeholders in one of the interviews to be conducted on 4 March 2021.

At the end of this process, the Executive would score each candidate to identify the successful individual and the Authority would be asked to ratify the decision made.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the Chief Fire Officer appointment process be received.

20-21/FRA/89 Business Continuity Annual Review

RESOLVED:

That, pursuant to Sections 100A(2) and 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the discussion of the following item on the grounds that the matters to be discussed involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended):

Item

Business Continuity Annual Review

The meeting ended at 12.44 pm

