

**MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
MEETING HELD ON 15 JULY 2021**

Present: Councillors R Berry, J Burnett, J Chatterley (Chairman), K Choudhry, D Franks, D McVicar and Y Waheed

Councillors C Atkins and J Gambold observed the meeting via MS Teams

CFO A Hopkinson, ACO G Chambers, Mr J Atkinson, Temporary DCFO D Norris, Temporary ACFO A Kibblewhite and Ms S Fecondi

SOC I Evans joined the meeting via MS Teams

21-22/FRA/15 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Duckett, M Headley and I Shingler.

21-22/FRA/16 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

21-22/FRA/17 Communications

The Chair advised that he circulated regular communications to Members of the Authority for information. An update on one of these items, the Future of Fire Reform White Paper, was being discussed later in the meeting.

The Chair reported that he was exercising his discretion to add an item to the agenda to receive the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 9 July 2021.

Members thanked the Chief Fire Officer for the work undertaken to arrange the funeral of the late Chief Fire Officer, Paul Fuller. The support from Bedfordshire Police and other partners was also recognised.

21-22/FRA/18 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2021 be confirmed as a true record.

21-22/FRA/19 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).

21-22/FRA/20 Annual Overarching 2020/21 Performance Report

The Chief Fire Officer introduced the overarching performance report for year end 2020/21 that was aligned to the Service's strategic objectives and the Authority was provided with a summary of performance for each area as set out below.

The Temporary Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Service was now strongly committed to providing greater clarity around data and intelligence and was using this as a tool to improve performance going forward. A revised and expanded set of Key Performance Indicators had been developed, with approximately 250 indicators measured at the corporate level. The indicators were now more aligned with Home Office statistics and those used by the HMICFRS inspection regime.

The proportion of targets RAG rated as green had increased from 64% in 2019/20 to 68% in 2020/21.

Prevention

There had been an increase in the number of primary fire injuries where the victim went to hospital and an increase in the number of deliberate primary dwelling fires. 12 injuries had been deemed as suitably serious and 23 injuries required outpatient treatment only.

The number of Safe and Well visits delivered had not reached its target, but the Service had delivered 16% more of these visits in 2020/21 than in the previous year and it was suggested that the target would have been met if prevention work had not been paused during the first lockdown period. An online referral portal had been developed and was now operational. Self-referrals were accepted and the Service had promoted the uptake of Safe and Well visits at vaccination centres and other community locations. The Chief Fire Officer commented whilst the target had not been met due to the impact of the pandemic, the number delivered in 2020/21 was the highest on record which is a fantastic achievement.

Three fire fatalities had been recorded during the reporting period, one each in August 2020, October 2020 and February 2021. These had been investigated and followed up with targeted risk reduction activity. A new multi-agency sub-group of the pan-Bedfordshire Safeguarding Board had been formed to determine if there were any lessons that could be learnt from any fire fatality or serious fire.

In response to a question on deliberate fires, Strategic Operational Commander Evans advised that the Service was aware of the recent spate of deliberate fires involving ice cream vans and that these were not classified as dwelling fires unless the fire spread to the dwelling. In relation to the number of deliberate fires that were investigated by the Police and led to successful prosecutions, he reported that the Police did advise the Service of successful prosecutions but that there was a significant time lag. The difficulties involved in investigating such incidents was acknowledged. Information on the number of prosecutions secured during the last 12 month period could be circulated to Members.

Protection

The number of automatic fire detector false alarms in non-domestic properties attended had not reached its target but had performed well against the five-year average as additional challenge had been introduced into the process following a change in the Service's policy in the last few years. The Service was also working closely with "repeat offenders" to provide them with support and advice.

Out of 387 building consultations, only 86 had not been responded to within the 15 day period. 19 of these only missed the deadline by one day. Performance had been impacted by a shortage in qualified fire safety inspectors. The Service had recruited to vacant posts and was "growing its own" by introducing feeder posts of fire safety advisors; however, the impact of this would be gradual as the training programme could take up to 2 years.

In response to a question, Strategic Operational Commander Evans advised that the Service was only consulted on developments to which the Fire Safety Order applied. These were larger developments or those with a shared means of escape. Therefore the Service was not consulted on development of single, private dwellings, undertaken under permitted development rights.

Response

There had been an increase in the number of special services provided during the last quarter and a slight increase in the number of false alarms attended.

The average call handling time was 2 minutes and 30 seconds. This figure included call challenge. The average response time was 9 minutes and 24 seconds, with the second appliance arrival time at 10 minutes and 15 seconds. The average response time to a Road Traffic Collision was 10 minutes and 30 seconds. These times were in the expected range set out in the Community Risk Management Plan.

The availability of the first appliance from on call stations had improved from 69.8% to 70.6% and the Service was still working towards improving on call availability and improvements were being made in this respect.

It was acknowledged that there were some whole-time fire fighters who also worked as on call fire fighters at their local fire stations. The Service monitored this to ensure that it was fulfilling its obligations under the Working Time Directive and to ensure that its fire fighters had sufficient periods of rest.

In response to a comment, the Chief Fire Officer confirmed that he and other Chiefs were actively lobbying the Government at a national level to minimise the risks involved with high-rise buildings.

Empowering

Councillor Burnett requested that, in future reports, the use of “BAME” be removed and that the performance information be broken down by ethnicity.

Members discussed the suggestion that the Police were more successful in recruiting individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds, although this appeared to relate primarily to recruitment of individuals of Asian heritage and that the Police still had difficulties around retention.

Ms S Fecondi, the Head of Human Resources, advised the Service did have regular meetings with Bedfordshire Police to share their knowledge and reported that the Service had a higher level of retention as it sought to engage more meaningfully with candidates prior to the selection process so that they were fully aware of what the roles they were applying for entailed.

The Service had recently run a virtual “have a go day”, with an in- person event scheduled for the near future. Staff based at stations were very involved with their local communities and in reaching out to groups who were resident in the areas around the stations.

The recruitment vehicle was available to attend local community events subject to staff availability, and it was suggested that the vehicle visit a local community event in Luton.

Ms Fecondi reported that the sickness absence indicator masked the impact of Covid, as this was not reported in the figures and guidance was awaited to whether this should still be treated as an infectious disease or included in the sickness absence figures.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that a working group of the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) was considering the impact of Covid on ill health and early retirement and the subsequent pensions impact.

Ms Fecondi commented on the decrease in turnover rates and the higher percentage of appraisals that had been completed during the reporting period.

In relation to Occupational Health, the lockdown had caused a significant impact as annual fitness testing had been suspended for a time. Fire fighters had been encouraged to maintain their physical fitness and had been subject to return to work fitness testing following any prolonged absence.

Organisational Development

The Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported on the impact on Covid on the delivery of the Service's training programme. Despite this, the training courses recorded on the Course Management System for 2020/21 was an increase from the previous year.

The Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer referred to the percentage of watches/sections at fire stations that had at least 60% of operational personnel qualified in Trauma Care, as this was one of the courses that had to be suspended during the outbreak. Resumption of the training had begun in quarter 1 of 2021/22.

In response to a question, the Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that, due to a change in the provider of services at the Fire Service College, and to allow for a better work life balance for new recruits, the Service was planning to offer induction training in house.

Health and Safety

The Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported that the number of working days/shifts lost to accidents per 1000 employees (excluding RDS//On-Call employees) was red due to 11 injuries, one of which resulted in 43 days lost.

The number of 24 hour cover periods lost to accidents per 1000 On Call (RDS) employees was also reported as red. This was primarily the result of a single incident involving a burn sustained during hot fire training, with the employee having been off work since October 2019.

Utilising

All the fleet indicators were reporting as green.

Maximising

The Assistant Chief Officer stated that some of the indicators could not be finalised until the Statement of Accounts had been audited in November 2021.

The Service was considering employing a debt collection agency to chase the small debts that contributed to the indicator measuring the percentage of debt over 90 days. The level of debt was immaterial and most small debts arose from the provision of special services, even though individuals were made aware of and signed for the payment of the charge before the service was provided. The level of debt would be included in the narrative for future reports for the benefit of Members.

Information and Communications Technology

All indicators had reached or exceeded their targets with the exception of the number of incidents on administration services resolved within 8 hours. There had been a high number of incidents in the first quarter as many staff started to work from home during the first lockdown period. Performance had improved in subsequent quarters.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Service's performance against the delivery of the Authority's Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) at the end of quarter Four 2020/21 be acknowledged.
2. That the Overarching Performance Report be published on the Service website.

21-22/FRA/21 Fire Report White Paper Update

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the release of the White Paper had been delayed and was now not expected until after the summer recess. No major changes were expected.

RESOLVED:

That the update be received.

21-22/FRA/22 Revenue Budget and Capital Monitoring Programme

The Assistant Chief Officer introduced his report on the forecast year-end budget monitoring position as at 30 June 2021. At that time, there were no variances forecast in the non-salary budgets. An overspend of £194,000 in salary budgets was being reported due to the pay award. The full year impact of the pay award for Grey Book staff was estimated as £260,000. It was being recommended to the Authority that this be funded from a drawdown of the pay earmarked reserve. A potential 1.5% for Green Book staff had been proposed but had not yet been agreed and this could add an additional £94,000 budget pressure.

The Service had been awarded a grant of £35.4k to fund additional costs relating to Sergeant/McCloud Fire Fighter Pension administration costs, which it was anticipated would be incurred over a number of years.

In relation to the Capital Programme, a request had been made to slip the BA Set, Cylinders and Ancillaries project into 2022/23 as, due to Covid-19, the release of new technology had been delayed and only one of the three major suppliers had currently released upgrades to this equipment.

The current savings and efficiencies programme was appended to the report for information.

The Assistant Chief Officer identified pensions and the Emergency Services Network as future potential areas of budget pressure.

RESOLVED:

1. That the updates provided within the report be acknowledged.
2. That the request in paragraph 3.4.1 to slip the capital schemes into 2022/23 be agreed.
3. That the Pay Earmarked Reserve be drawn down to offset the in-year forecast overspend due to the unbudgeted pay award in paragraph 2.4.2 of the report.

21-22/FRA/23 Treasury Management Annual Report

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer introduced the Authority's Annual Report for Treasury Management for 2020/21.

The Authority currently held long term debt to the value of £9,987 million through the Public Works Loan Board at an interest rate of 4.27%. There were high penalties for overpayment of the debt and this could not be rescheduled to take advantage of lower interest rates.

Of the Authority's current investments, approximately £13 million of this was held in UK banks with the remaining £5 million being held in foreign banks. This demonstrated a spread of investment geographically. There was also a spread of term length.

In response to a question about the availability of reserves, the Assistant Chief Officer advised that the reserves were either set aside to fund specific projects or were money available. Consideration was being given to loan to other local public bodies at a preferential rate, which would be beneficial to both parties.

The Authority then discussed ethical investments, and how difficult it was to determine whether the Authority's investments were being invested ethically. Advice could be requested from the Authority's treasury management advisors, Link Asset Services on this issue.

The Authority currently held £16.751 million in reserves, £13,505 million of this in earmarked reserves. Investment income of £83,993 had been achieved during the year.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received.

21-22/FRA/24 Horizon Scan Workshop

The Chief Fire Officer provided an update following the horizon scan workshop that had taken place on 6 July 2021. Members, Officer and key stakeholders had been involved in the workshop and a report on the feedback would be submitted to the next meeting of the Authority.

Members commented positively on the workshop.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the horizon scan workshop be received.

21-22/FRA/25 Member Development Programme

The Assistant Chief Officer referred to an email that had been circulated to Members outlining suggestions for future Member Development Days. These included the emergency cover review, Treasury Management training, the role of Authority Members, the Members Code of Conduct, a Code of Ethics, equality, diversity and inclusion, update on building safety, fire regulation and station visits. A visit to Control was also suggested.

RESOLVED:

That the list of Member development topics be recirculated and programmed into the current Member Development Programme.

21-22/FRA/26 Work Programme

The Chief Fire Officer presented the current Work Programme to the Authority, highlighting that reports on the fire protection standards and Statement of Accounts had been added to the agenda for the Authority's next meeting.

A Work Programme had also been introduced for the Executive Committee.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that a report on the return on investment analysis of providing support to the East of England Ambulance Service would be presented to Members at the next meeting of the FRA. A sustainable funding model would need to be agreed to continue service delivery as the Home Office had indicated that no additional Covid grant funding would be made available.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be received.

21-22/FRA/27 Information Bulletin (April to June)

The Chief Fire Officer introduced the information bulletin for 1 April to 30 June 2021 and commented that the Service continued to consider ways in which the bulletin could be presented in a more engaging way.

RESOLVED:

That the information bulletin be received.

21-22/FRA/28 and 29 Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Paragraph 1 of Part 1: Exclusion of the Public

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 Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended):

Item

28. Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 9 July 2021
29. Appointment of Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Assistant Chief Fire Officer

(Note: The Temporary Deputy Chief Fire Officer and the Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer left the meeting before the discussion of the exempt items.)

The meeting ended at 11.53 am

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