

BEDFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY MEETING

held on 8 September 2022 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillors P Duckett (Chair), R Berry, J Burnett, J Chatterley, K Choudhury, M Headley, D McVicar, I Shingler and Y Waheed

Chief Fire Officer A Hopkinson, Deputy Chief Fire Officer C Bigland, Assistant Chief Officer G Chambers, Mr J Atkinson and Mr S Frank were also present

Councillors C Atkins and Assistant Chief Fire Officer A Kibblewhite and Area Commanders S Auger and I Evans logged in remotely to the meeting via Teams

22-23/FRA/32 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Franks and J Gambold.

Councillor Atkins apologised for being unable to attend the meeting in person.

22-23/FRA/33 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

22-23/FRA/34 Communications

Pay Negotiations

The Chair referred to discussions with the Fire Brigades Union regarding the ongoing national pay negotiations.

Fire Station Open Days

The Chair thanked all Members who had supported the Open Days held over the summer.

White Paper

The Chair reported that he and the Chief Fire Officer had met with Richard Fuller, MP to update him on the latest developments in the Service such as our collaboration with the East of England Ambulance Service; and to discuss the Government's White Paper on 'Reforming our Fire Service', outlining the Authority's views on the proposed changes in governance in particular. The discussion also covered the national pay negotiations and the need for proper investment in the fire and rescue service. Meetings with the other MPs representing areas of Bedfordshire are being arranged.

General Communication

The Chair continued to circulate information and communications to Members of the Authority as and when they were received.

Governance Review

The Chair thanked all those who took part in the morning's exercise.

Lord Lieutenant's Service of Thanksgiving

The Chief Fire Officer advised that he and Councillor McVicar had attended the Lord Lieutenant's Service of Thanksgiving held on 4 September 2022 to celebrate the retirement of Mrs Helen Nellis, CVO and the appointment of Mrs Susan Lousada, DL to the post.

Fundraising for the Firefighter's Charity

The Chief Fire Officer reported that a letter had been received from the Firefighter's Charity thanking the Service for raising over £63,000 in support of the Charity's work.

Quarterly Shout Out

The quarterly shout out, which had replaced the information bulletin, would soon be circulated to all Members. This document would form the basis of the reports to the constituent authorities and looked both forwards and backwards at future plans and past achievements and performance.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Authority held on 20 July 2022 be confirmed as a true record.

22-23/FRA/36 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).

22-23/FRA/37 Audit and Standards Committee meeting 14 July 2022

Members received the Minutes of the informal meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 14 July 2022 for information.

As the Committee continued to meet remotely, the Authority was required to ratify all decisions made by the Committee as set out in the Minutes.

Councillor Atkins introduced the Minutes and highlighted the following:

- Councillor Berry had been appointed as Vice-Chair of the Committee.
- The Committee's terms of reference had been approved with no amendments proposed.
- In receiving the external audit year-end report, it was noted that EY could not commit to specific dates for the completion of the audit of the Statement of Account due to ongoing resourcing issues.
- Neil Harris, who had managed the audits on behalf of EY, had accepted a role outside the organisation and EY was hoping to appoint a successor in advance of the Committee's next meeting.
- There were no implications arising from lower than expected land valuations as the Service had no current intentions to sell any of its property assets.
- The Committee received the draft Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement and a Member briefing would be arranged in advance of the formal submission of the accounts post-audit.
- A report from EY on its quality assurance processes had provided assurance to the Committee that these were effective.
- A positive internal audit report had been received. The Committee had provisionally approved four extensions to completion dates and these would require ratification by the Authority.
- In reviewing the Code of Conduct, it was pleasing to note that no complaints had been lodged against Members of the Authority. The Committee had recommended that the LGA Model Code of Conduct not be adopted at this time, although it was suggested that this could be reviewed the following year.
- A comprehensive report on the Service's Corporate Risk Register had been considered.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 14 July 2022 be received.
2. That the decisions made by the Committee be ratified by the Fire Authority, with particular note being given to the extension requests to completion dates and the Committee's proposal not to adopt the Local Government Association's Model Code of Conduct at this time.

22-23/FRA/38 Monitoring Officer Report

The Authority received a report asking it to appoint a Monitoring Officer for Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority in order to comply with section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

The Chair thanked the current Secretary and Monitoring Officer, Mr J Atkinson, for his years of service to the Authority and wished him a well-deserved retirement.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Mr Graham Britten as Monitoring Officer for Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority, in accordance with section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, from the 9th September 2022 be confirmed.

22-23/FRA/39 Annual Report 2021/22

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer presented the Annual Report for 2021/22. This document set out the performance of the Service from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 and was prefaced with a welcome and the Service's values before summarising the highlights of each month during the year.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer drew Members' attention to the following:

- Road Traffic Collisions (RTCs) had increased by 16% from the previous year to 398, with outdoor bonfires decreasing by 21% and building fires by 5%.
- There were 252 accidental dwelling fires during the year, a 24% reduction when compared to the five-year average and a 15% reduction from the previous year.
- There had been one fire death during the year, which was a reduction on the previous year, with a comparable number serious injuries and outpatient injuries to previous year.
- The Service had responded to 1,804 automatic fire alarms, a significant increase of 227 from the previous year.
- The number of road injuries and fatalities remained consistent with figures recorded over the five-year period, with 2020/21 being an outlier as fewer people were travelling as a result of the pandemic.
- A total of 8,443 Safe and Well Visits had been conducted in the year. Whilst this was below the stretch target of 10,000, it was the highest number of visits ever conducted by the Service. This included 2,397 doorstep visits and 616 telephone consultations.
- 270 safeguarding referrals had been made, 208 directly as the result of Safe and Well visits.
- To combat arson when there was an identifiable threat, 259 arson proof letter boxes had been installed during the year.
- There had been an increase in deliberate fires from 430 in 2020/21 to 565 in 2021/22, although this was still under the five year average.
- The Service continued to actively engage with partners in relation to road safety. Examples of this included participation in “Survive the Drive” at Chicksands, the development of a training package for Institute of Advanced Motorists (IAM) National Observers in partnership with Herts & Beds Advanced Motorists and assisting the Police in delivering “Bike Safe”.
- A road safety vehicle with built in virtual reality was being produced and would hopefully be available by the end of the year.
- The Service had been involved with the installation of six water safety boards at the Forest of Marston Vale to improve water safety.
- 22 young people fascinated with fire had been supported by the Service to change their behaviour.
- 24 fire cadets had been recruited in October/November 2021 with three centres at Luton, Leighton Buzzard and Sandy. Another unit had been formed later in that year in Bedford, bringing the total number of cadets up to 32.
- A total of 3,288 audits and inspections had been conducted during 2021/22, an increase of 71% compared to the previous year. This included 647 audits of which 243 were to high risk premises. 20 prohibition notices had been served; this was the highest number to date. Fines totalling £40,000 had been awarded to the Service through the court process.
- 14 employees had reached the milestone of working for the Service for 20 years and this had been recognised internally.
- The Recruitment Team had successfully recruited to 22 support roles, 18 whole time operational roles and 35 retained roles. It was worthy of note that the Service had been awarded a positive audit result in relation to recruitment.
- The Wellbeing Policy had been revised and a Cycle to Work Scheme had been launched.
- 961 training courses had been delivered during the year.
- The Service was now providing training in house to new recruits in partnership with Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, rather than using the Fire Services College.
- Promotion gateways had been provided at every level and 25 individuals had been identified for the talent pool.

- Several major training live play events for major terrorist attacks had been undertaken and these had been attended by over 1,500 personnel from a wide range of agencies.
- The Service had been the first in the country to adopt a 100% cloud based mobilising system compatible with the Emergency Services Network. This had also been integrated with Gartan, enabling the Service to manage its resources more effectively.
- New incident command software had been implemented in January 2022 and Wi-Fi had been upgraded at all stations from July to October 2021.
- The Corporate Risk Register had been updated in September 2021.
- The Service had upgraded from version 3 to version 5 of PDRPro.
- The Service continued to work in partnership with East of England Ambulance Service. An exercise had been conducted demonstrating that public services benefited by £7 for every pound spent by the Service in this work.

In response to questions about the increase in deliberate fires, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service worked closely with the Police to identify the cause of the fire and to put cases forward for prosecution where possible. Following a recent spate of arson incidents, the Service had installed 7 arson-proof letter boxes in one afternoon as a preventative measure. Community engagement events were held after incidents.

The Chief Fire Officer added that deliberate fires classified as outdoor fires were primarily seasonal in nature and there had been four months during the year that had been over target levels. Performance had improved following this period, and despite the increase, final performance remained under the target level.

It was noted that there was a duplication of bullet points on page 57 relating to improved situational awareness and this would be rectified before the final version was published.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service had not altered its working relationship with EEAST, although there were discussions ongoing with the FBU regarding additional duties.

The value of maintaining the collaborative working relationship with EEAST was acknowledged, as was our impact on their organisational performance.

In response to a question on operational leavers, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer confirmed that exit interviews were offered to all staff upon their resignation from the Service. The Chief Fire Officer commented that, in the majority of cases, the reason for leaving the Service was purely financial. There was a recruitment and retention crisis throughout the industry and currently only 25% of operational staff had worked for the Service for more than 5 years. This was a major issue that would have to be addressed at a national level.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported that the Service was now an accredited apprenticeship provider which enabled it to provide training and to draw down from the Apprenticeship Levy. The ability to provide training to recruits in house generated a significant saving and also provided recruits with a more family friendly training package.

RESOLVED:

That the report, and the content contained therein, be acknowledged.

22-23/FRA/40 Statement of Assurance 2021/22

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer presented the Authority's Statement of Assurance for 2021/22. As the Statement had not been submitted as normal practice through the Audit and Standards Committee prior to its submission to the full Authority for approval, Members were asked if they were satisfied that they could consider the report and approve it at the meeting or if they wished to approve it in principle subject to further scrutiny by the Audit and Standards Committee at its next meeting.

The Statement of Assurance covered the three following areas: finance, governance and operational assurance, and was very similar in content to the Annual Governance Statement that was produced in conjunction with the annual Statement of Accounts. Therefore, consideration would be given to whether these two documents could be combined, taking into account this may not be possible due to timescales involved in the production of the Statement of Accounts and the audit process.

The Monitoring Officer advised that, as the Audit and Standards Committee, if meeting virtually, would not be able to approve the Statement, and any decision would have to be referred back to the Authority for ratification.

Members agreed that the Authority would be able to approve the Statement at this meeting, as Members of the Audit and Standards Committee were present and part of the full Authority.

RESOLVED:

1. That the contents of the Statement of Assurance for 2021/22 be acknowledged.

2. That the Statement of Assurance be approved and published on the Service's website.

22-23/FRA/41 Q1 2022/23 Performance Report

Members received a summary of organisational performance at the end of the first quarter of the current financial year. These included some of the changes that had been agreed at the previous meeting of the Authority (Minute 22-23/fa/030 refers).

In response to a question on how the response standards were reported against in this report, the Chief Fire Officer advised that some amendments had been made to improve the visibility of the performance indicators relating to those standards and that the narrative had been updated to make it easier to understand. As there was a difference in how response was measured by the Service (as set out in the response standards) and by the Inspectorate, the response standards may need to be revisited in future. For example, the current response standards set a target of attending 80% of critical (primary) fires responded to within 10 minutes, measured from the time a fire appliance is alerted by Control whilst HMICFRS measure response times from the time the first 999 call is received by our Control Room. In summary, the reporting of indicators in this area were still evolving in order for them to be more reflective of the Service's published response standards.

Prevention

As previously discussed under the Annual Report item, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported on the rise in arson incidents and a particular spate of events in Luton in April 2022. Given the extreme weather experienced during the summer and the corresponding increase in number of events attended, it was unlikely that a downward trend would be reported for the next quarter.

There had been a decrease in the number of Safe and Well visits conducted as staff were directed to a high volume of operational incidents. A volunteer manager had recently been appointed and it was envisaged that, in future, volunteers and third sector organisations could be trained to conduct the visits on behalf of the Service to increase capacity. It was also recognised that the target measuring the number of Safe and Well visits delivered was a stretch target and that the Service had conducted more visits in this reporting period than in had done during the whole year of 2016/17.

Area Commander I Evans added that the community risk analysis recently undertaken had identified that those households most at risk of accidental dwelling fires, poorer pensioners, were also the group that was most likely to be the subject of Safe and Well visits.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to the work of the Falls Team in identifying and supporting individuals in this cohort.

Protection

National shortages in qualified fire protection officers had impacted on the ability of the Service to recruit to vacant posts in this area. However, a recent recruitment exercise had been successful and the Service was beginning the process of training and upskilling staff to take on these roles.

Area Commander I Evans advised that four new staff, two Grey Book and two Green Book staff, had recently started in the fire safety team, with the cost funded through the grant.

To combat the increase in attendances to Automatic Fire Detectors, a greater level of call challenge and other measures had been introduced in Control.

Response

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that there had been an increase in special services. This was expected to continue as the Service was supporting EEAST with a range of activities including bariatric response, falls, Emergency Medical Response and co-responding.

The increase in total incidents was also expected to continue as the extreme heat and associated incidents had fallen within the second quarter of this reporting year.

As previously mentioned, false alarm calls were being subject to greater challenge.

On call availability was affected by recruitment and retention issues and the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that he and a small team had recently attended an On Call Improvement Working Group meeting run by the National Fire Chiefs Council in August. A new Group Commander had been appointed, with one of the job roles being to lead on on-call availability.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that the Service had to take operational decisions that could impact adversely on performance against the indicator measuring whole-time global crewing enabling 9 riders on two pumps as the Service sought to maximise overall pump availability by deploying the fifth person on a two pump station to increase pump availability at other locations. This increased the number of pumps available in key strategic locations but reduced the global crewing for this specific indicator. It was hoped that the On-Call project would positively impact on performance against this target.

The view was expressed that the trial of relocating a pump to Leagrave would not improve response times as measured by the indicators, as it had been suggested that there would be an improvement to response times within Luton and the surrounding areas by 30 seconds. Most of these incidents were already responded to within 10 minutes, and this did not appear to improve response times in the rural areas so that these would be within 10 minutes.

The Chair suggested that response times would be a good topic for discussion by a Scrutiny Panel and it was agreed that a meeting to conduct a deep dive of this issue would be arranged.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the relocation of the pump would also improve response times in parts of Central Bedfordshire.

Area Commander S Auger provided assurance regarding the pilot that the project team was taking views such as those expressed at the meeting into account and that the data would be analysed to determine if there was a measurable benefit in response times and what geographical location this related to.

The Service had concerns about the performance of indicators measuring call handling. The majority of calls were from individuals who could provide an identifiable address or could use What3Words to provide their specific location to Control staff. The primary issue affecting performance related to road traffic incidents on roadways where motorists could easily provide an addressable location. In these instances, it could take 2-3 minutes to triangulate a location from the information available. In future, consideration would be given to separating out the calls without an identifiable location.

Empowering

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that sickness absence remained within target levels even though COVID-19 sickness was no longer being reported separately.

Some of the training indicators could not be reported against as the Service had recently upgraded from version 3 to version 5 of PDRPro.

Training for water responding had to be cancelled during quarter one for operational reasons; these were being rescheduled later in the year for all relevant staff. A new trauma care course was being provided for new starters.

All health and safety indicators were achieving target levels.

Utilising

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that there had been one incident relating to a gearbox repair which was not completed in time due to the delay in receipt of parts from a third party supplier.

The Technical Response Unit had required a complete motor refit and this had led to it being unavailable during that time period. The repairs had been funded by the Ambulance Service as part of the partnership arrangements.

Maximising

The indicator measuring invoices paid within 30 days was amber as there were many invoices being received without a valid purchase order in place and/or delays in managers authorising invoices for payment. Work continued with budget managers to improve processes so that invoices could be processed in a timely manner.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Service's performance against the delivery of the Authority's Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) at the end of the first quarter 2022-23 be acknowledged.
2. That a Scrutiny Panel meeting be arranged to consider a deep dive on response times.

22-23/FRA/42 2022/23 Budget Monitoring

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer introduced a report setting out the forecast year-end budget monitoring position as at 31 July 2022.

In introducing the report, the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer highlighted the following:

- Following a request made at the previous meeting, it was proposed that the unbudgeted Business Rates Relief income of £392,000 be allocated to offset both the in-year inflationary pressures and a reduction in ICT Firelink grant.
- Pay awards for both Green and Grey Book staff had not yet been agreed and it was suggested that the earmarked reserve be used to fund these.
- There were increased budgetary pressures arising from inflation and the rising cost of gas. This was now at 60% above budgeted levels. It was anticipated that the CPI rate would rise to 14.5% by January 2023.
- The forecast income from investments was £80,000 above the levels reported at previous meetings. The Service had recently invested £4 million in environmental, social and governance (esg) investments following due diligence into the green credentials of the fund.
- The report included the salary and non-salary budget forecasts. It was noted that the salary budget forecasts did not include all on call payments.
- Only two projects in the Capital Programme had been reported as amber, with the rest on target.

RESOLVED:

1. That the updates provided within this report be acknowledged.
2. That the proposed use of the unbudgeted Business Rates Relief income from central government, as set out in paragraph 2.3.4 of the report, be approved.

3. That the potential unbudgeted increase for both Grey and Green Book pay awards built into the salaries forecast in table 2 and use of an Earmarked Reserve to fund these, as set out in paragraph 2.3.76 of the report, be noted.
4. That the updated inflationary pressure on Utilities budgets which has increased from a forecast 40% above budget to 60% above budget, resulting in an extra £40,000 pressure from the last monitoring report, as set out in paragraph 2.3.4 of the report, be noted.
5. That the increase in forecast income from investments from £55,000 above budget reported at the end of May 2022 to £135,000 as at the end of July due to greatly improved rates available on investments, as set out in paragraph 2.3.4 of the report, be noted.

22-23/FRA/43 Cost of Living Support to Workforce

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer gave a presentation on the results of a staff survey undertaken earlier in the year as well as the recent meeting of the Cost of Living Taskforce.

The survey had been conducted in April 2022 and ran for 29 days. 28% of staff, or 164 individuals across the organisation, responded to the survey. Suggestions on actions that the Service could take to support staff with the cost of living arising from the survey included changing the CPD uplift to an annual payment, offering access to discount schemes and offering access to independent legal and financial advice and access to private medical treatment.

44 suggestions had been submitted as a result of the Cost of Living Taskforce meeting. These were very similar to those listed above, with the addition of the possible provision of affordable takeaway meals for purchase from the mess deck, the provision of childcare during the school holidays and the creation of a hardship fund. A more flexible approach to hybrid working and access to a pool of electric bikes to travel to meetings were also suggested.

As a result of these discussions, a discount for the use of leisure facilities had been negotiated through Active Luton. The Service had also committed to paying the cost of IFE exams. Individual support and advice was provided to certain members of staff following the meeting by HR. The current Employee Assistance Programme had been promoted internally and a special edition of the Blue Bulletin had been circulated on 5 September which included information and advice for staff. Financial wellbeing had now been included as an item for consideration of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Group.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer stated that the Service would be assessing the recommendations and their associated costs so it could determine the level of additional support that it would be able to provide. Government announcements would be monitored and information passed on as and when it was provided.

Members recognised the importance of good financial education and supporting members of staff in understanding the difference between wants and needs.

Councillor Burnett commented that “The Richest Man in Babylon”, available on YouTube, was a good resource and that staff could be signposted to this. The Chair suggested that Macmillan was also providing information and guidance and this should be investigated by the Service.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that a representative of the Citizens’ Advice Bureau would be attending the next staff engagement meeting.

RESOLVED:

22-23/FRA/44 CRMP Planning update

Members received an update on progress with Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) planning and the summer survey results.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that Members would be presented with a summary of the latest community risk analysis at the Member Development Day scheduled for 6 October 2022.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the report be acknowledged.

22-23/FRA/45 Portfolio Leads Updates: Digital and Data Transformation

Councillor Headley gave a presentation on digital, data and technology and highlighted the project to update the Service’s website. This would improve its content, effectiveness and accessibility. It was anticipated that the updated website would go live early in the New Year and Members would be updated on progress.

It was also noted that 84% of staff had completed the recommended cyber security training.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be received.

22-23/FRA/46 Work Programme

Members received the proposed work programme for 2022/23.

The Chief Fire Officer introduced Lauren Fair, the new Business Support Manager, to Members of the Authority. He advised that a report on immediate detriment would be prepared for the October meeting of the Executive Committee.

It was noted that the next meeting of the Authority would be held on 31 October 2022.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme for 2022/23 be received and the 'cyclical' agenda Items for each meeting in 2022/23 be noted.

The meeting ended at 16:12