

**MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
MEETING HELD ON 30 MARCH 2023**

Present: Councillors C Atkins, R Berry, J Burnett, J Chatterley, P Duckett (Chair), D Franks, J Gambold, M Headley, D McVicar and Y Waheed (Vice-Chair)

CFO A Hopkinson, DCFO C Bigland, ACFO A Kibblewhite and ACO G Chambers, G Britten (MO), Ms L Fair and AC I Evans.

22-23/FRA/79 Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor I Shingler. Steve Frank was unable to attend the meeting due to illness. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer had tendered his apologies for lateness.

22-23/FRA/80 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

22-23/FRA/81 Communications

Meetings with Members of Parliament and High Sheriff

The Chair reported that meetings continued to be held with local Members of Parliament so that they could understand the depth and breadth of services and activities undertaken by a modern Fire and Rescue Service. Additional meetings with local Members of Parliament continued to be arranged.

A meeting had also taken place with the High Sheriff, Lady Jane Clifford.

The Chief Fire Officer added that meeting arranged with the Fire Services Minister had been postponed and would be rescheduled. This may coincide with visit of the Director of Fire and Resilience being planned for in late April/early May 2023.

Pay Awards

The Chair advised that the Grey Book pay awards had been agreed.

White Paper on 'Reforming our Fire Service'

The Chief Fire Officer reported Government's response to the consultation on the White Paper on 'Reforming our Fire Service' was expected before the summer recess.

22-23/FRA/82 Minutes

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer provided clarity on the Members Allowances report that had been submitted to the previous meeting. In addition to agreeing the scheme for the 2023/24, Members should also have been made aware of the back dated pay to which they were entitled following the agreement of the Green Book pay award in June 2022. As this was a set amount of £1925, it had been agreed that a 4.04% increase on allowances would be applied from the start of the 2022 financial year.

In response to a question from Councillor Headley, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that, as in previous years, Members had agreed that the increase be aligned to that which was awarded to non-operational staff. Therefore, the provision of, and entitlement to, back pay was in accordance with the Members Allowances Scheme for 2022/23, agreed in February 2022.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Authority held on 2 February 2023 be confirmed as a true record.

22-23/FRA/83 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/84 Audit and Standards Committee 2 March 2023

Members received the Minutes of the informal meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 2 March 2023 for information and to ratify the decisions made at that meeting.

In introducing the Minutes, Councillor Atkins highlighted the discussion that had been held with the Authority's external auditors, EY, regarding the timing of the audit of the 2021/22 accounts and the pressure this would place on the finance team who would simultaneously be working on the closure of the 2022/23 accounts. The EY representative had confirmed that additional flexibility for response to queries would be provided in recognition of this.

Councillor Atkins recommended that the Authority, in ratifying the decisions made at the meeting, approve the Internal Audit Plan for 2023/24. This included audits on contaminants and staff health and safety, strategic approach to partnerships and collaboration, governance of the Project Management Office and stock control in stores and technical bay.

Councillor Atkins concluded by thanking the Assistant Chief Officer and his team for their support of the Committee over the past year.

Councillor Berry commented that, although he had submitted his apologies for the meeting, these had not been recorded.

RESOLVED:

That the submitted Minutes of the meeting held on 2 March 2023 be received and the decisions made by the Committee, informally, be ratified, subject to the inclusion of Councillor Berry's apologies.

22-23/FRA/85 Executive Committee meeting 14 March 2023

The Chair submitted the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 14 March 2023.

The Executive Committee had considered a number of constitutional documents in great depth, and a number of changes had been proposed and incorporated into these as a result of these discussions. This included emphasising the Chair's discretion in allowing members of the public to put questions to the Authority without notice and reducing the number of Members required to call in a decision to two.

RESOLVED:

1. That the submitted minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2023 be received.
2. That the following documents be approved:
 - i. draft Terms of Reference for the Authority and the Executive and Audit and Standards Committee;
 - ii. draft procedural rules for Task and Finish Groups (including Call in Task and Finish Groups);
 - iii. draft procedural Standing Orders for the Authority and its Committees;
 - iv. an additional procedural Standing Order (6b for call-in); and
 - v. draft Scheme of Delegation to Officers.

22-23/FRA/86 Treasury Management Strategy and Practices

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer presented the Authority's Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Treasury Management Policies to the Authority for approval.

Members were asked to agree to increase the maximum amount of fixed term deposit placed with any one institution has from £5 million to £7 million and the maximum amount of fixed term deposit placed with a Group, where a number of institutions were under one ownership from £7 million to £10 million.

Members were also being requested to confirm whether they wished Treasury Management training to be provided by Link Asset Services after the elections.

In relation to long-term borrowing, there had been no change in these levels from the previous report to the Authority. The Authority currently had investments of £19 million, with a projected level of investment income of £195,000 forecast for 2023/24. No new capital borrowing was being proposed at this point in time.

Although it was recognised that these increases were being put to the Authority following consultation with the Authority's treasury management advisors, Members expressed the view that this proposal may not be prudent given the current financial landscape and that these limits could be revisited later on in the year. Considerations in assessment of risk included the absence of any investment guarantee for public sector bodies and current volatility in the financial markets.

The Assistant Chief Officer reported that the Authority's treasury management advisors had expressed the view that any increase to maximum amounts of fixed term deposits must be set at a level that both he, and the Authority Members were comfortable with. Therefore, he suggested that the current maximum amounts be retained and any increases be considered when the Mid-Year Treasury Management Report was presented to the Authority in the autumn.

As there was currently volatility in Public Works Loan Board rates and inflation, if there was an opportunity to reschedule the Authority's existing debt, this would be raised with the Chair at the earliest possible opportunity and fed back to the next Authority meeting.

RESOLVED:

1. That the following documents be approved:
 - i. Treasury Management Strategy Statement
 - ii. Minimum Revenue Provision Policy and Annual Investment Strategy
 - iii. Treasury Management Practices, subject to the removal of the increases of the maximum amount of fixed term deposits placed with any one institution and with a Group, with this to be reviewed later on in the year.
2. That the Authority be requested to consider if it wishes to receive Treasury Management training in 2023/24 following the appointment of Members after the local government elections in May 2023.

22-23/FRA/87 Proposed Indicators and Targets for 2023/24

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer submitted the proposed indicators and targets for 2023/24 to the Authority for consideration. The majority of targets had been based on the five year averages and these were provided in the report, along with the previous targets and proposed targets.

The indicators and targets had remained broadly the same in Prevention and Protection.

In the area of response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer was seeking views from the Authority as to whether the indicator measuring the percentage of occasions global crewing enabled nine riders (5 and 4) on two pumps responses (Wholetime) should be removed or temporarily suspended for one year. His rationale was that the Service had determined to improve county wide fire cover by more frequently deploying the fifth rider on Wholetime appliances to cover deficiencies in on-call fire appliance availability. In simple terms, moving the fifth firefighter from a Wholetime pump with 5 crew to an on-call appliance with only three crew available would enable two fire appliances to be mobilised with the minimum crewing of 4 (a total of 8) rather than a single fire appliance with a crew of 5.

The Chief Fire Officer added that this proposal had been developed in response to the continued challenges around on-call availability. As this was being addressed by the on-call improvement programme, it was hoped that, in future, these global crewing levels could be maintained.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer also reported on proposed changes to the call-handling indicators. As discussed at previous meetings, benchmarking exercises had identified that the current target was not in line with other Fire and Rescue Services across the country. For example, the average call-handling time to primary fires for Bedfordshire incidents, at 60 seconds, was far below the average of 90-120 second target in place at other Services. It was therefore proposed to increase the target to 90 seconds.

Whilst Members expressed support for the reasoning behind these proposed changes, it was also noted that some of these indicators formed part Authority's and long standing standards of Emergency Response set out in the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). The CRMP latest had already undergone extensive consultation and was being presented to the Authority for final approval later on in the meeting.

In response to a comment on the status of the CRMP, the Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service had not consulted on changing the standards of emergency response even though he believed they needed a through review to ensure they were easily understood and enabled ready comparison with other Services. This would be undertaken during 2023/24 now that the new Performance and Insight Manager was in post in this CRMP.

Following this discussion, it was agreed that the current Response indicators remain as they were, but that additional indicators be developed to provide more insight.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported on new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Our People indicators and on the indicators that were now being reported to the Corporate Management Team rather than Members as they related to operational management of the business.

RESOLVED:

1. That the proposed KPI targets for 2023/24 be received.
2. That the agreed targets be approved for inclusion in the Service Performance Management Framework, subject to the exclusion of the Response targets, which are to remain as set out in the Authority's Community Risk Management Plan.

22-23/FRA/88 Q3 2022/23 Performance Report (Sept - Dec)

Members received a summary of organisational performance at the end of the third quarter of the current performance year.

In introducing the report, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer commented on the positive direction of progress; however, some areas of concern remained. These were detailed in the report, along with the efforts being taken to improve performance.

Prevention

It was noted that the third quarter included part of the summer period. As this had been unusually dry and hot, there had been an increase in the number of incidents. There had also been a general rise in activity following the years affected most by the COVID pandemic and incident levels would continue to be monitored.

The Head of Prevention and Protection agreed that all areas had been impacted by the exceptionally hot and dry summer, with significant increases in both accidental and deliberate fires. The spate conditions had been reflected in the figures and it was likely that this would also be reflected in national data.

In relation to the ban of sales of disposable barbeques during the hottest periods in the summer, Members were advised that this action had been taken by responsible retailers across the UK as there was no legislation preventing these sales.

Councillor Burnett requested that the Chief Fire Officer continue to support local and national campaigns working with retailers to prevent the sale of disposable barbeques during peak fire conditions and to report back to the next meeting of the Authority on progress.

The Chief Fire Officer commented that there had already been 60 incidents that qualified as wildfires across the UK in the current calendar year.

Protection

Councillor Franks expressed his thanks to the Head of Prevention and Protection and his team regarding recent activity in relation to an unlicensed HMO in Luton.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that positive performance had been demonstrated against all protection performance indicators, with the exception of mobilisation to Automatic Fire Alarms, the reasons for which were set out in the report.

The Head of Prevention and Protection advised that approximately 40 formal notices had been issued by the Protection team during the current financial year. There appeared to be significant issues in terms of the quality of housing within the County, particularly in the southern parts of the County. The Protection Team worked with landlords and many properties were made operational within a day of a notice being served.

Response

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to his previous comments in relation to the general increase in incidents, with all areas reporting a substantial increase in activity.

The deep-dive into the performance on some of the response targets was nearing its conclusion, with the results being reported to the Lead Member prior to being submitted to the Authority for information.

The whole-time global crewing indicator had been discussed earlier in the meeting, with the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reiterating that overall pump availability was maximised by deploying the fifth person on a two pump station to increase on call pump availability. This increased overall availability and the percentage of calls that could be responded to within the response times.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that additional resource had been allocated to the on-call improvement project to improve availability which would lead to future improvements in performance against these indicators.

In relation to the percentage of primary fires attended within 10 minutes, which was subject to the deep-dive review, measures were being implemented to improve performance incrementally in both the control room and at fire stations. These included changes to the pre-rigging areas to reduce the travel time to mobilise.

Members challenged the continued level of suboptimal performance. As the response standards were set out in the Community Risk Management Plan, it was important that performance improved. It appeared, in the current report, to be that the percentage of primary fires attended within 10 minutes was significantly lower than it had been the previous year.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that, in addition to the improvement measures being introduced, there was also work being undertaken to improve confidence in the data being captured. This was not necessarily measuring the correct activity when compared to national benchmarking data. There was also a large difference in response times to be expected when responding to an addressable location in comparison to a vehicle fire at an unidentified location on the M1. As he had previously mentioned, a meeting with the Lead Member for response had been arranged after Easter to present the results of the call-in of performance in this area.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer added that the calls mobilised to also included calls from a third party, such as the Ambulance Service. These required additional time to mobilise to and therefore would impact on performance.

In relation to a question on recruitment and retention, and how this linked to the cadet programme, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported that the Service attended careers fairs and events, and had recently been invited to an “Employability Day” organised by Luton Borough Council in April.

In concluding the discussion of the response targets, the Chief Fire Officer emphasised that emergency response was the core function of the Service and that improving response times was his top priority.

Empowering

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that the majority of the empowering performance indicators were green, with two areas of slight decrease, one of which was the result of a crew being unable to complete Working at Height training as they had been called to an operational incident. The other was related to PDRPro and was being addressed.

Utilising

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that only one indicator was amber and the reasons for this were set out in the report.

Maximising

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported on the one amber indicator: percentage of uncontested invoices paid within 30 days. Parts of the approval process were now being automated and it was hoped that this would speed up the process. Training for new budget managers continued.

RESOLVED:

That the Service’s performance against the delivery of the Authority’s Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) at the end of the third quarter 2022-23 and any issues arising be acknowledged.

22-23/FRA/89 CRMP pre-publication report

The Chief Fire Officer introduced the final draft of the 2023-27 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) prior to being prepared for publication.

It was noted that the CRMP had gone through an extensive consultation process and had been well-received by the public and partner organisations.

A decision had been made to retain the four-year life of the CRMP, which corresponded with the election cycle, rather than extend it to 5 years.

The CRMP itself began with a forward from the Chair and the Chief Fire Officer and then went on to explain about the Authority and the Service, the values and behaviours and the adopted approach to risk management.

Six strategic commitments were set out in the CRMP, with the first three focused on the delivery of core services and the latter three focused on enabling the delivery of those services.

The actions for 2023/24 were set out at Appendix 1 to the report and included:

- making better use of digital technology to improve engagement and build a better risk profile of the local community so that prevention services can be targeted to the most vulnerable;
- taking delivery of a new Road Safety Vehicle, funded through the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, to raise awareness of the dangers of poor driving;
- improving emergency response performance;
- continuing to invest in recruitment, development and retention of staff;
- updating the Service's range of specialist capabilities to ensure that it is line with the changing risk landscape;
- hosting Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum from April 2023;
- incorporating learning from the London Fire Brigade Cultural Review report, to ensure that staff are provided with a working environment in which they feel safe and supported;
- establishing a Productivity and Efficiency Board to ensure that a balanced budget is prepared over the life of the CRMP; and
- improving the availability of on-call fire appliances.

In response to a question on the Road Safety Vehicle, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that this was a virtual reality multi-seated van.

In response to a question about the gender and race pay gaps, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that the gender pay gap was reported on an annual basis as required by statute. She agreed that there was more that the Service could do to monitor the pay gaps based on race.

The Chief Fire Officer added that improving data capture was one of his key Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) priorities. A Head of Culture post was being created to replace the Head of Human Resources and consideration was being given as to how EDI advice could be provided throughout the organisation, including the reinstatement of a staff EDI Forum.

Members noted the intention to establish a Community Forum, which could also assist with EDI issues.

In relation to assets and ensuring links with the constituent authorities' Local Plans, the Chief Fire Officer made reference to forthcoming workshops of the Bedfordshire Chief Executives Forum where data-sharing and estates would be discussed. The Service also worked with Planning Departments to ensure it had full access to the Community Infrastructure Levy funding.

As this was the last item on the agenda, the Chair thanked all Members and Officers for their hard work and support over the year.

The Chief Fire Officer added his thanks to Members and wished those standing in the forthcoming elections good luck.

RESOLVED:

That the final draft of the Authority's next 4-year Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) covering the period 2023-27 be approved.

22-23/FRA/90 Disposal of Assets under the Scheme of Delegated Authority

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer presented a report detailing the disposal of obsolete vehicles and equipment assets during the current financial year.

Members noted that only one vehicle had been disposed of below the £10,000 threshold during the year, and this had been sold for more than expected at auction. Three vans had been due to be disposed of in 2022/23, but had been repurposed for use as vehicles for the cleaning team when this service was brought in-house.

The Service had also disposed of 151 items of equipment that had no value to the Service and would have been disposed of through waste disposal. These items generated a total net income of £29,482 after deductions and auction fees.

Four complete sets of Holmatro RTC equipment had been donated to the Ukraine as part of a National Fire Chiefs Council appeal.

Members were provided with information on the assets due to be disposed of in 2023/24. The potential income from vehicle disposal was estimated at £13,400.

RESOLVED:

1. That the content of the report be acknowledged.
2. That the disposal of the equipment assets detailed in the report which collectively have the potential to achieve income over the £10,000 threshold under the scheme of delegated authority be authorised.

22-23/FRA/91 Response to the Reverend James Jones report on the Hillsborough disaster

Members were asked to sign up to The Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy. The Charter had been adopted by the National Fire Chiefs Council and most of the Fire and Rescue Authorities in the country.

The Charter set out six points to support bereaved families, including placing the public interest above the Authority's own reputation, searching for the truth, treating members of the public with respect and being accountable and open to challenge.

RESOLVED:

1. That the contents of the report be acknowledged.
2. That 'The Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy' be adopted and be attested by the signatures of the Chairman and the Chief Fire Officer.

22-23/FRA/92 Work Programme

Members received the proposed work programme for 2023/24 and were asked if there were any items they would like to be included.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the additional items discussed at the meeting, such as the call-in of performance against the response indicators and the proposed new set of KPIs, would be programmed in at the appropriate meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme for 2023/24 be received and the 'cyclical' agenda items for each meeting in 2023/24 be noted.

The meeting ended at 12:51pm