

**MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY  
MEETING HELD VIRTUALLY ON 23 MARCH 2021**

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

CFO P Fuller, DCFO A Hopkinson, ACO G Chambers, T/ACFO A Peckham, Mr J Atkinson, SOC C Ball, SOC I Evans, T/AC D Cook, T/ J Tai, Ms Fecondi, and Mr P Hughes

A minute's silence to mark the anniversary of the first Covid 19 lockdown was held at 12 noon as a mark of respect to those affected by the virus.

20-21/FRA/95 Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor I Shingler.

20-21/FRA/96 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

20-21/FRA/97 Communications

The Chair reported that he continued to circulate items of communication to all Members of the Authority as and when they were received.

Three items of communication had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. These were Lord Greenhalgh's letter regarding the PCC Review - Part One Recommendations and Next Steps, the HMICFRS State of Fire 2020 Report and the 2021-22 Fire Settlement and Funding Letter.

The Chief Fire Officer reported on there were four issues which had to be considered as part of the consultation on Part 2 of the PCC Review which were: consulting on whether to mandate the transfer of fire and rescue functions to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner model across England where boundaries were co-terminus, unless there was an option to transfer fire governance directly to an elected Mayor; consulting on how to address co-terminuses challenges, including in the South West; legislating to create operational independence

for Chief Fire Officers; and to clearly separate and delineate strategic and operational planning for fire and rescue and considering options to clarify the legal entities within the PFCC model.

The Chair advised that the White Paper would be subject to discussion at the Fire Commission meeting being held on 26 March 2021, at which three Members of the Authority would be present.

In relation to the HMICFRS State of Fire & Rescue Report 2020, which included the Inspectorate's view of the sector's response to COVID-19, Sir Thomas Winsor had expressed views on the reform agenda and how the need to reach a tripartite agreement could have delayed emergency response. The recommendations set out in the previous State of Fire & Rescue Report had not been fully implemented as a result of COVID.

#### 20-21/FRA/98 Minutes from 11 February and 8 March 2021

##### **RESOLVED:**

That the Minutes of the meetings held on 11 February and 8 March 2021 be confirmed as a true record.

#### 20-21/FRA/99 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/100 Audit and Standards Committee 4 March 2021

Councillor Headley introduced the draft Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 4 March 2021.

Councillor Headley reported that he had sought, and received, assurances from the external auditor that resources were in place to conduct the audit of the 2020/21 accounts without delay. This would be kept under review.

The procurement process for internal audit services, which had been progressing at the time of the Committee's meeting, had now concluded and RSM had been reappointed as the Authority's internal auditors.

The Committee had also undertaken its annual review of the Service's complete Corporate Risk Register at the meeting.

##### **RESOLVED:**

That the submitted Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 4 March 2021 be received.

## 20-21/FRA/101 Q3 Performance Report

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer provided a summary of organisational performance at the end of the Quarter 3 of the financial year 2020/21. Members of the Service's Corporate Management Team were present to provide information and context around the performance indicators.

### Prevention

Strategic Operational Commander I Evans reported on the impact of COVID-19 on the incidents that the Service had been called to respond to. There had been a significant decrease in the number of accidental dwelling fires but an increase in the number of fire injuries. The number of deliberate fires was far lower, with the exception of deliberate fires in primary dwellings. There were some repeat locations and the Service was working closely with Bedfordshire Police to investigate these incidents.

Two fire deaths had occurred during the reporting year, one in Quarter 2 and one in Quarter 3. These had both been confirmed as accidental deaths following the coroner's inquests. The fire death in Quarter 3 was as a result of a resident returning to the property to rescue a family pet before fire crews arrived, despite being advised not to do so by Control staff. The individual concerned later died of smoke inhalation.

The number of Safe and Well visits continued to increase from Quarter 2 onwards, as this activity had been paused during the first period of lockdown restrictions. The Service was set to deliver more Safe and Well visits in 2020/21 than in any other previous year. This had been assisted by a Service presence at vaccination centres and other COVID related events.

The total number of secondary fires was slightly over the target, but there was a strong seasonal trend with the majority of these fires occurring during the summer months and it was anticipated that the target would be met by the end of the year.

Strategic Operational Commander I Evans reported that there had been a social media campaign on safe cooking as this had been identified as one of the main causes of accidental dwelling fires and, with more people cooking at home during the lockdown periods, the risks had increased.

Councillor Atkins suggested that the Service liaise with local Councillors in Bedfordshire, who would be able to disseminate the information in this campaign much more widely across the County due to their local knowledge and contacts.

It was also noted that contacting Town and Parish Councils would be an effective way of further spreading any safety messages.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that he would ask the Communications and Engagement Manager to contact Councillor Atkins to determine how this could be progressed.

## Protection

Strategic Operational Commander I Evans reported that the performance in relation to the building regulations consultations completed on time had been impacted by a large number of consultations (19) being submitted to the Service at the same time. The target for response had been missed by one day.

The fire safety audit and inspection programme had been paused earlier in the year as a result of the restrictions introduced as part of the first lockdown period. The Service had allocated additional resource to this area and at the end of Quarter 3 was only 7% below target. Strategic Operational Commander I Evans expressed confidence that the year-end target would be met, as 1800 audits and inspections had now been completed.

The number of primary fires in non-domestic buildings had reduced significantly due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, as there were fewer people in non-domestic buildings, the Service was responding to more automatic fire detector fire alarms as there may not be individuals present at the premises to confirm if it was a false alarm.

## Responding

Strategic Operational Commander C Ball highlighted three main areas of performance in this area, the first of which was the increase in the number of special services attended. This had arisen as the Service was actively providing new areas of response, for example, in assisting the Ambulance Service with forced entry for medical emergency, the work of the falls prevention team and services for complex patients and technical rescues. Whilst this led to increased activity, this could be viewed positively as the Service was providing additional services to the community.

The average time to attend all primary fires within 10 minutes (600 secs) had been achieved by 7% (558 secs). This was an improvement over both the previous year and the 5 year average. The average response time to primary dwelling fires, where the risk of injury/death was high, was 507 seconds, a 5% improvement from the previous year and 15.5% better than the target. Challenge of the data continued to ensure that accurate response data was being provided.

The availability of on-call staff had increased during the pandemic period, with particularly high availability at the start of lockdown, tailing off as further restrictions were lifted. The 70.7% availability in Quarter 3 was a 3% improvement from the previous year and improvement on the five year average. A significant recruitment campaign had commenced in January, with a course planned for June. New ways of working to support the performance against this indicator were being explored.

In response to a question about attendance at a large incident and how this could affect the availability of resources available elsewhere, Strategic Operational Commander C Ball explained that the Service had mutual aid agreements with neighbouring fire and rescue services.

## Empowering

Ms S Fecondi, the Head of Human Resources reported on the two quarterly indicators in this area, measuring the percentage of working time lost amongst both whole-time and on-call staff. These had both met the target as COVID related absence was reported separately.

In response to questions, Members were advised that in addition to the reporting of absence differing from whole-time and on-call staff, as a result of the shift patterns worked, there had also been a long-term injury sustained by an on-call fire fighter which had negatively impacted on performance. The on-call fire fighters were also a much smaller cohort, so a sustained period of absence would have a significant impact.

## Organisational Development

Temporary Area Commander J Tai reported on the significant impact of COVID-19 on the training indicators as there had been a large part of the year during which courses could not be run. Course delivery had now been revised and reintroduced, with additional courses being provided and those most in need of refresher training being prioritised. The Service had now returned to centrally delivered training and assessment utilising COVID-19 safe procedures, included lateral flow testing, and the return to training was delivered on a risk assessed basis, with some courses being provided to “bubbles” of staff.

The provision of online training had enabled the Service to extend certain courses to additional members of staff who would not previously received that training.

The percentage of operational BA wearers that had attended an assessed BA course within the last two years was 10% below target and the percentage of station-based operational Work at Height Operators that had attended a Working at Height recertification assessment within the last three years was 27.5% below. This was being addressed by the provision of additional courses in 2021/22.

Temporary Area Commander J Tai advised that, in his forthcoming interview with the HMICFRS, he would highlight the work undertaken by the Service to redevelop courses to provide them in a COVID secure way.

## Health and Safety

The performance against the indicator measuring the number of working days/shifts lost to accidents per 1000 on-call employees had been discussed earlier.

A total of 39 specific location and activity risk assessments and a further 15 general activity risk assessments associated with COVID-19 had been completed and approved by the HSA.

Due to the increase in homeworking during the year, 125 DSE assessments had been completed.

The Service would be subject to an external audit of COVID assurance.

#### Maximising - Finance

The Assistant Chief Officer advised that all three quarterly finance indicators had missed their targets at the end of Quarter 3. The percentage of routine financial reports distributed within 6 working days of period-end closure was 1 day late in September and 3 days late in October due to ICT / Finance software complications which occurred causing the reports either to be not ready on time or the electronic email failing due to the Microsoft Office 365 upgrade. These issues had now been resolved.

The percentage of invoices paid within 30 days had been impacted by COVID and as a result of invoices being received without Purchase Orders raised and therefore there was a delay in payment due to having to wait for orders to be raised. The budget managers for these areas had been advised.

The percentage of outstanding debt over 90 days old had also not met its target. The Assistant Chief Officer assured Members that there were small debts with no individual debt over £1000.

#### Maximising – ICT

Mr P Hughes, Head of ICT and Programmes, explained that the indicator measuring the number of incidents on administration services resolved within 8 hours had not met its target as there had been a large number of these incidents generated in Quarter 1 as a result of the introduction of large-scale homeworking. Performance had improved during Quarters 2 and 3.

#### **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Service's performance against the delivery of the Authority's Community Risk Management Plan at the end of Quarter 3 be acknowledged.
2. That the publication of the report on the Service website be approved.

#### 20-21/FRA/102 Proposed Indicators and Targets 2021/22

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer submitted his report which set out the proposed suite of performance indicators and associated targets for 2021/22 and sought Member's endorsement to incorporate these into the Service's performance management framework.

In relation to the Prevention area, the majority of targets had been set based on a reduction using either the three or five year average. The target for Safe and Well visits was to deliver 10,000 visits as set out in the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).

In response to a question, Strategic Operational Commander I Evans expressed confidence that, through the Service's close working relationships with other partners, the Service was well-equipped to respond to referrals for Safe and Well visits and to manage the increase in demand for support to those aged 80 and over that forecast in parts of the County.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer added that, through the community risk analysis that had been undertaken, the Service was aware of the projected growth of the ageing population in Bedfordshire.

In relation to the Protection targets, the target for audits and inspections was proposed to be increased to 2400 from 1800, reflecting the increase in resource that had been provided in this area.

The target for the total number of primary fires in non-domestic buildings was based on a 10% reduction on the 3 year average. The target for the number of automatic fire detector false alarms in nondomestic properties would be unchanged.

There were no changes proposed for Responding as these targets were set out in the CRMP.

The Head of Human Resources reported that it was proposed to increase the percentage of working time lost due to sickness for on-call staff from 4.2% to 4.4%. This was in recognition of the longer waiting times for NHS diagnostics and treatment for non COVID related illness or injury. All other indicators were subject to slight increases.

There were no changes to the targets for organisational development, health and safety, and fleet.

The Assistant Chief Officer advised that the only change to the finance targets was a reduction in the indicator measuring the return on investments due to the low Bank of England base rate.

There was also only one change being proposed to ICT targets, with an increase in the number of incidents on mission critical services resolved within 1 hour from 92% to 95%.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the proposed suite of performance indicators and targets for 2021/22 be received.
2. That their adoption and publication of the report on the Service website, be approved.

## 20-21/FRA/103 Treasury Management Strategy and Practices

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer presented his report reviewing the Authority's Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Treasury Management Policies. No major changes were being proposed. The Authority currently had a total borrowing of £9.987 million, short-term investments of up to £5 million (18 million if including short term notice accounts (95 to 180 day notice)), and budgeted interest of £65,000 in 2021/22 from investments.

It was noted that Members had last received treasury management training in July 2017, and Members may find it useful to receive this training again at a Member Development Day.

In response to a question on the term of the borrowing, the Assistant Chief Officer advised that the loans from the Public Works Loan Board were due in 35-40 years' time. There was a high penalty for early repayment.

Members were advised that inter-authority lending was being actively considered, with discussions with a local unitary authority ongoing.

### **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
2. That Members be offered Treasury Management training in 2021/22 at a Member Development Day.

## 20-21/FRA/104 Emergency Cover Review Update

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer introduced his report which provided an overview of progress to review the Service's emergency cover provision in order to better understand how the Service was currently performing and to develop a data driven evidence base from which the Authority could develop options that sought to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the emergency response both now and into the future.

The review was to be conducted in two phases; the first phase, to develop a risk and response analysis methodology and apply this to 5 years of incident data, had already been concluded. The second phase was to use the outcomes from the first phase of the review to develop options for improving emergency response cover to meet current and future risks and demand.

The key findings of the first phase of the review included that the incident profile was broadly consistent year-on-year, appliance availability had a greater effect on response performance than incident demand, parts of Bedfordshire were reliant on an 'over the border' response,

indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) were a good predictor of incidents and there were pockets of the County where there were long response times and relatively high risk levels.

It was being proposed that a half-day Members workshop be arranged to provide dedicated time to develop Members' awareness of the analysis undertaken so far and explore the potential options to improve response performance and maximise return on investment in the Estates portfolio.

A number of Members expressed concern that they had not been involved in the first phase of the review and that Members should be engaged throughout the process so that they could share their local knowledge and expertise, as by doing so, they would add value.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the first phase of the process had been an information-gathering stage and the full suite of information available would be shared with Members. He confirmed that no decisions had yet been made, as his intention was to fully engage with Members.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the progress of the review and the emerging findings be noted.
2. That the Authority receives a more detailed explanation on the work of the review and potential future options at a specific Members workshop at a date to be confirmed.
3. That Members be fully engaged in the future work on this review to utilise their extensive knowledge of the local areas that they served.

(Note: Councillor Headley requested that it be recorded that he voted against resolution 1 above.)

20-21/FRA/105 Blue Light Collaboration Strategic Board

Temporary Area Commander D Cook presented a report providing an overview of key collaboration initiatives between Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, Bedfordshire Police and East of England Ambulance Service Trust as managed through the Blue Light Collaboration Strategic Board.

Of the 32 current workstreams, 8 related to a shared estate and the development of a joint estates strategy and this would be discussed further under the next agenda item.

In presenting the report, Temporary Area Commander D Cook highlighted progress in relation to the tri-service drone response, shared across Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Services and Police Services.

The Service had been active in supporting the Ambulance Service with the servicing of its vehicles. What began as a pilot scheme had now resulted in the Service being awarded a three-year contract, thus providing an additional income stream.

Collaborative work had continued throughout the pandemic period, and evidence of this had been provided to HMICFRS as part of the inspection process.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reminded Members of the work undertaken in partnership with Nottinghamshire Trent University to assess the return on investment of the additional collaborative workstreams with which the Service was involved. This would be shared with Members as soon as it was available.

**RESOLVED:**

That the content of the report and the continued efforts to pursue collaboration with the Service's blue light partners be acknowledged.

20-21/FRA/106 Tri-Service Estate Strategy

Temporary Area Commander D Cook submitted the report which provided an update on progress to establish a Tri-Service Estates Strategy between Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, Bedfordshire Police and East of England Ambulance Service Trust.

As part of the initial preparations for the Joint Headquarters project, the value of developing a joint Estate Strategy had been recognised and agreement on a set of five core principles governing this had been reached by the Strategic Board to guide how the partners would develop and maintain their estates into the long term of 2040 and beyond. An annual review would take place to ensure it remained fit for purpose.

Improvements in joint working in workshops and stores was an example of how this approach could benefit all partners.

Councillor McVicar, as the Member representative on the Board, emphasised the importance of the Estate Strategy being driven by strategic need. He recognised the progress that had been made on the development of the Strategy, which was due for final approval of the Board later in 2021.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the progress of this important collaboration initiative be noted.
2. That the proposed five core principles be incorporated into the draft Tri-Service Estate Strategy for Bedfordshire.
3. That a further report presenting the final draft Tri-Service Estates Strategy once released by the Blue Light Collaboration Strategic Board be submitted to the appropriate meeting of the Authority.

## 20-21/FRA/107 Safeguarding Arrangements

Group Commander S Auger, the Service's named safeguarding lead, gave a presentation on the Service's safeguarding arrangements. The Service worked closely with its constituent authorities and other partners and was an active member on the Safeguarding Boards.

Following the previous HMICFRS inspection, when it had been noted that not all staff were sufficiently aware of safeguarding responsibilities, a refreshed approach had been taken to address gaps in knowledge. Working closely at a Pan Bedfordshire level was important to identify and support vulnerable groups. Areas of focus including hoarding, exploitation, homelessness, the transition to adulthood and domestic abuse.

It was recognised that the Service had been instrumental in raising awareness of hoarding. The Service had also been working closely with the CCG and during the pandemic, the Service had been active in assisting at vaccination centres and had managed to identify many individuals requiring additional support. This activity led to 450 direct referrals.

Group Commander S Auger relayed a case study of a 71 year old hoarder who had not had contact with any agency since 1991. The individual had accepted a visit from the Service and also gave permission for a full referral to be undertaken and had agreed to ongoing support.

The next steps for improving safeguarding within the Service included the recruitment of a safeguarding adviser, upskilling the current safeguarding lead, incorporating further learning from Serious Case Reviews, developing a serious fire and injury sub-group and ensuring that safeguarding awareness was promoted across the organisation. A direct referral portal had also been developed and would be implemented in April.

In response to questions about the importance of hoarding as a capacity indicator, Group Commander S Auger reported that the Service had identified 160 hoarders through its records list and this had led to hoarding being recognised as a key priority.

The Service sought to interact in a more positive way with more vulnerable groups in the County. For example, the Service sought to reduce barriers to communication with those on the autistic spectrum by using Plain English in its communications.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the presentation be received.

### 20-21/FRA/108 HMICFRS Inspection Update

The Chief Fire Officer provided an update on the inspection process which was currently ongoing. The Chair and some members of the Corporate Management Team had been interviewed and the strategic briefing given to the inspection team. The inspection would continue throughout most of April 2021.

Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer Peckham commented that the rate of response to the staff survey had improved by 33% from the one undertaken during the previous inspection.

The disadvantages of being inspected early on in the process, and exclusively virtual, were discussed.

**RESOLVED:**

That the update be received.

### 20-21/FRA/109 Work Programme

Members received the updated Work Programme.

It was noted that a workshop for Members to discuss the risk assessment work would need to be arranged, as would the Treasury Management Training for Members.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Work Programme be received.

The meeting ended at 1.23 pm