

BEDFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY MEETING

held on 20 July 2022 at 10.00 am

Present

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

Chief Fire Officer A Hopkinson, Deputy Chief Fire Officer C Bigland, and Mr S Frank were also present

Councillors C Atkins and I Shingler, Assistant Chief Officer G Chambers and Strategic Operational Commander S Auger logged in remotely to the meeting via Teams

22-23/FRA/16 Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Burnett.

Councillors Atkins and Shingler and Assistant Chief Officer G Chambers were unable to be present at the meeting and logged on remotely via Teams.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer A Kibblewhite was unable to attend the meeting for operational reasons. Mr J Atkinson, the Secretary and Monitoring Officer, was unable to attend the meeting as he was on annual leave.

22-23/FRA/17 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

22-23/FRA/18 Communications

Pay Negotiations

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the Employers had written to advise the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) had rejected the employer's 2% pay offer for Grey Book staff earlier in the week.

Major incident caused by extreme weather conditions

The Chief Fire Officer provided an update on the major incident that had been declared the previous day due to the record-breaking temperatures. The Service was one of fourteen in the country that had declared a major incident. In addition to receiving an unprecedented level of calls (over 700 calls, of which 210 were 999 emergency calls), there had also been many incidents to respond to, both locally and in other Service areas, with many major incidents in the County and region. Additional fire engines and crews had been deployed to cope with demand.

The Service had been leading both the Strategic and Tactical Coordination Groups of the Local Resilience Forum. The Service had also taken part in national mutual aid arrangements and Control staff had taken calls which had been diverted by BT from other services who were experiencing high volumes of 999 calls. Additional control room staff had been brought in to cover the increased workload.

Six of our firefighters had been treated for heat exhaustion, with three being admitted to hospital. All six had now fully recovered.

The comments of the Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council that nationally, the Fire and Rescue Service had been stretched to its capacity, and in some areas, beyond, were noted, as was the increased likelihood of wildfires arising from the changing climate.

The Chief Fire Officer paid tribute to all staff throughout the Service for their extraordinary efforts in responding to the unprecedented level of demand in both the county and beyond on the hottest day on record.

The Chair added his thanks on behalf of the Members of the Authority.

22-23/FRA/19 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 7 June 2022 be confirmed as a true record.

22-23/FRA/20 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/21 Executive Committee meeting 22 June 2022

Members received the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 22 June 2022 for information.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 22 June 2022 be received.

22-23/FRA/22 2022/23 Revenue Budget and Capital Monitoring Programme

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

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

- The Service had received an additional £392,000 in business rate income than had been allocated in the budget.
- The Service had provisionally budgeted for a 4% pay increase for both Green and Grey Book staff. If a 5% pay award was agreed, this would have an additional impact of £200,000 for the 2022/23 financial year, as the pay award would be effective from 1 July 2022. The full year impact of an additional 1% pay increase was £250,000.
- The Firelink grant had been £50,000 less than budgeted and would be subject to a 20% reduction each year.
- The project that was to be funded through the £593,000 received through the Government's decarbonisation grant was no longer being progressed.
- The forecast pressure of increased inflationary costs was £285,000.

In relation to the non-salary forecast, there was currently a £308,000 overspend, largely related to the increased inflationary costs. There were no variances currently being reported against the forecast salary budgets.

The Capital Programme projects were all currently on target. The Authority was being asked to bring forward spend on the thermal imaging cameras capital scheme into the current financial year from 2023/24 as there had been a number of failures with the current equipment.

In response to a question, the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer advised that the non-salary variance relating to the increased inflationary pressures had been RAG rated as green as it was believed that this cost could be managed and measures were being put in place to address this. Further consideration could be given to changing the RAG status to Amber if this was felt necessary.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer detailed how the funding for the improvement of fire safety was being allocated. This included two new crew commander posts, as well as funding the cost of a number of Level 3, 4 and 5 certifications in fire investigation.

He also reported that the funding received for dementia prevention from Bedford Borough Council funded two posts within the Prevention Team.

As it was noted that the Authority had to approve any changes to the budget over £100,000, it was agreed that the proposals for how the additional income of £392,000 received from business rates was to be allocated should be submitted to a future meeting of the Authority for Member approval. Final proposals had not yet been agreed by the Service's Corporate Management Team.

RESOLVED:

1. That the updates provided within this report be received.
2. That the receipt of unbudgeted Business Rates Relief income from central government be noted.
3. That the potential extra unbudgeted costs as a result of the recent inflation rate increases and expectations for the remainder of the financial year be noted.
4. That the request in paragraph 3.4.3 of the report, to bring forward £300,000 spend for thermal imaging cameras capital scheme into 2022/23 from the 2023/24 Capital Programme, be agreed.
5. That a further report be submitted to the next meeting of the Authority for Members to agree the allocation of the additional unbudgeted £392,000 of business rate income.

22-23/FRA/23 Updated Medium Term Financial Strategy

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer submitted the latest position of the medium-term budget for 2023/24 onwards, after setting the 2022/23 budget in February 2022 and receiving updated business rates information and other material changes such as inflation. Five different scenarios were presented as part of the Strategy, with varying assumptions regarding the pay award, business rate income and inflation.

The budget gap, ranging between £1.075 million and £1.539 million, would need to be managed. As previously discussed, a pay increase of 4% was currently being budgeted for. There would be additional cost pressures if a larger award was agreed. The Authority held a reasonable level of reserves and, if possible, wished to retain these.

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer reported that the Authority had set aside funding for invest to save initiatives and income generation opportunities, such as the servicing of East of England Ambulance Service vehicles. There was also the possibility that the Council Tax referendum cap could be increased. It was not yet known how the Authority, as a top-up authority, would be affected by any changes in business rates.

The Chief Fire Officer referred to reviews that were currently being undertaken, such as the emergency cover and specialist capability reviews, and the interest amongst other public sector organisations in the Blue Light Estates Strategy that had been agreed by the three emergency services, as well as the income generation opportunities, that could be explored in order to address the budget gap.

RESOLVED:

That the report be reviewed, considered and noted.

22-23/FRA/24 Treasury Management Annual Report

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer presented the Authority's Annual Report for Treasury Management for 2021/22.

The Authority's long term borrowing through the Public Works Loan Board was currently £9.987 million and the remaining repayment period was 35 years. The financial penalties for the early repayment of the loan were prohibitive.

The Bank of England forecast base rate had changed significantly from the previous Treasury Management Report for 2020/21, when the interest rate for March 2024 had been forecast at 0.10%. It was now forecast to increase to 2.75%.

Members were advised that the total investment income achieved during the 2021/22 financial year was £121,000.

The view was expressed that when the Treasury Management Strategy was reviewed, the Responsible Investment Policy should be updated as part of that process. It was noted that part of the treasury management training provided by Link Asset Services related to environmental, social and governance (esg) considerations.

RESOLVED:

That Members review and consider the information presented in the report.

22-23/FRA/25 Independent Review of Governance

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer provided an update on the independent review of governance that was being undertaken. It was his understanding that a preliminary meeting with the Chief Fire Officer had already taken place but that the Member meeting had been postponed as it had clashed with a meeting at Central Bedfordshire Council.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the meeting referred to had taken place and that it was intended that a report on the review be submitted to the October 2022 meeting of the Authority. This would tie in with the Home Office's response to the consultation on the White Paper.

Concerns about the current governance arrangements, such as reports not including full implication sections and 'to follow' reports, on full Authority agendas, were expressed.

The Chief Fire Officer apologised that one of the reports had been marked to follow and had not been circulated. This was due to operational pressures. He also commented that the lack of detailed implication sections in reports to the Authority was being addressed. The increased resource proposed in relation to the Monitoring Officer role would improve the governance arrangements.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the independent review of governance be noted.

22-23/FRA/26 Final Resourcing Options for Monitoring Officer

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer introduced a report setting out the final resourcing options for the recruitment of a new Monitoring Officer. This had been discussed recently at a Member Development Day and Members were now being asked to agree their preferred option.

In discussing the initial retainer, it was agreed to start with one day per week, which could be increased up to one and a half days if necessary following a six-monthly review.

A candidate from a local Fire and Rescue Authority had been identified who had spare capacity to provide support to this Authority. This was seen as preferable to employing a Monitoring Officer from a local authority, as there would be more crossover in regards to the work undertaken.

In response to a question, the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer reported that the annual cost for a retainer of one day was £28,500, increasing to £42,750 for one and half days a week. The current level of resourcing for the Monitoring Officer role was £16,000 per annum.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be received and that it be agreed that the identified candidate be engaged on a one day a week retainer as the Authority's Monitoring Officer.
2. That this arrangement be reviewed in six months' time.

22-23/FRA/27 Emergency Cover Review - Pilots and Trials Update

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer provided an update on progress with the work commissioned as part of the current 2019-23 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), to review emergency cover provision and, specifically, the implementation of two pilots/trials in Luton and Central Bedfordshire.

The first related to the deployment of an additional peripatetic appliance. This had been delayed until November 2022. In the interim period, it was being proposed to primary crew one of the existing on-call rural fire appliances, once upgraded with the new hydraulic rescue equipment, which would respond to incidents in the eastern part of Bedfordshire and reduce the need for wholetime appliances in the north of the County to respond to incidents in that area. This would also reduce the number of occasions where neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services, such as Hertfordshire, were called to assist, and the costs associated with this. The analysis had identified that Shefford was the station that would have the greatest impact on improving response times but the appliance would be deployed wherever it would best improve availability.

The second pilot related to the relocation of a fire appliance from Luton Community Fire Station to Luton Ambulance Station for set periods during the day.

Whilst recognising that the relocation of an appliance somewhere between the railway station and the Luton and Dunstable Hospital would improve response times, many Members expressed concern about the specific location chosen, as this area was subject to very heavy traffic and surrounded by narrow roads down which it would be difficult to manoeuvre a fire appliance in heavy traffic conditions.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the location had been identified through analysis of the heat map of incidents and modelling of response times. The immediate availability of the site was also a factor. It was anticipated that there would be an improvement in response times to incidents requiring two pumps to be mobilised, when compared to mobilisation from the existing station to Leagrave.

The Chief Fire Officer assured Members that if there was not a demonstrable improvement in response times, the pilot could be stopped at any time. Officers continue to explore other potential sites to undertake further trials to inform future proposals.

The Chair mentioned other pilots that had taken place and queried whether the firefighters involved in trials were advised of the outcome.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the red route trial had not been successful and would not be pursued as there was no demonstrable impact. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Service was still involved in youth diversion courses and that these had been very successful nationally.

In response to a question, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that the costs of the Luton pilot were negligible, relating primarily to the provision of laptops for firefighters so that they could continue to undertake online training and complete administrative tasks whilst at Luton Ambulance Station. They would also identify a fireground around the station so that they could undertake Safe and Well visits and other normal duties. The crews would return to Luton in the evenings so sleeping quarters did not need to be provided. The costs of the additional crewed vehicle in the Shefford area had not yet been confirmed, but were in the region of £100 per hour in staff costs, for 10 hours per day. This would be funded through the on-call underspend.

It was noted that there was no pilot that specifically addressed response times within Bedford Borough but the trial in the eastern area of Central Bedfordshire would indirectly improve appliance availability in the Bedford Borough area.

In response to a further question, the Chief Fire Officer advised that real-time traffic information was not currently used on the fire appliances; however, the Service sought to be a “fast follower” of the technology once it was adopted by other Services. The new mobilising system already included Automatic Vehicle Location so that the Control Room could identify the nearest available appliance to an incident in terms of response time.

RESOLVED:

1. That the proposal to temporarily relocate one fire appliance from Luton fire station to Luton ambulance station for set periods each day over an initial period of 6 months be supported.
2. That the primary crewing of one of the Rural Fire Appliances during periods of low on-call availability, once upgraded with the new hydraulic cutting equipment, to reinforce appliance availability over an initial period of 6 months be supported.
3. That it be agreed that a further report be received in the autumn detailing proposals to temporarily introduce an additional, fire appliance to the fleet, primary crewed at key times, to be deployed on a peripatetic basis as required.
4. That it be agreed that a further update report be received detailing the impact of these two pilots and trials on appliance response times over the duration of the trials.

22-23/FRA/28 Blue Light Estate Strategy

Members received with an update on progress to establish a Blue Light Estates Strategy between Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, East of England Ambulance Service Trust and Bedfordshire Police. The Chief Constable and Police and Crime Commissioner had only very recently agreed to be signatories to the document.

As mentioned earlier in the meeting, it was now possible to gauge the level of interest of other public sector partners in Bedfordshire to sign up to a countywide estates strategy at meetings of the Chief Executives Forum.

In response to a comment about the lack of recognition of climate change issues and no mention of a net-zero target, the Chief Fire Officer offered reassurance that these issues would be addressed in the foreword and despite the length of time it had taken to reach agreement on the principles set out in the strategy as submitted, he was pleased with what has been achieved.

Members would be engaged in the oversight of the delivery plan through the development of a Steering Group.

RESOLVED:

1. That the progress of this important collaboration initiative be noted.
2. That the content of the proposed Blue Light Estates Strategy for Bedfordshire between BFRS, East of England Ambulance Service Trust (EEAST) and Bedfordshire Police (BP) be approved, with the Chairman and Chief Fire Officer as signatories.

22-23/FRA/29 FRA Response to the White Paper 'Reforming our Fire & Rescue Service'

The Chief Fire Officer advised that due to operational pressures, he had been unable to finalise the report setting out the Authority's draft response to the White Paper on 'Reforming our Fire & Rescue Service.' He now intended to circulate this to Members by the end of the week so that the response could be submitted in advance of the deadline on 26 July 2022.

It had previously been agreed that, given the tight timescales, responsibility for approving the Authority's response had been delegated to the Chair.

The Chair commented that Members from both Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Council had submitted motions opposing the proposals in the White Paper to transfer responsibility for holding the Chief Fire Officer to account away from Fire and Rescue Authorities to a directly elected individual appointed for that purpose. In the case of Bedfordshire, this would be the Police and Crime Commissioner.

The importance of ensuring that the response was made publicly available once it had been agreed was emphasised.

22-23/FRA/30 Revised FRA Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) Suite

Mr S Frank, the Head of Strategic Support and Assurance, presented proposals for revising the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the current financial year and for 2023-24 onwards to provide a more balanced suite of strategic KPI measures. This would assist Members in undertaking their oversight role.

The Authority was advised that the HMICFRS currently reported against only 25 KPIs, whereas the Authority's proposed KPI suite included approximately 60. A mapping exercise had concluded that the current KPI suite was too detailed in some areas and not detailed enough in other areas. It was recommended that there was no public reporting of 18 of the current KPIs, that 25 KPIs be reworded and 4 new KPIs be added. Gaps had been identified between the HMICFRS performance reporting and the Service's KPI suite in areas such as response standards, fire safety and training competency. There were currently no indicators relating to climate change.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that more detailed performance information would underpin the KPI suite reported to Members. These would also be reported on an exception basis as required.

In relation to the recommendation to not publicly report performance against the indicator measuring the total number of deliberate primary fires, clarification was sought as to whether this would be combined with the other deliberate fire indicators or if the intention was to no longer report to Members on this.

The view was expressed that the KPI suite should include indicators relating to the Service's response standards as published in the Community Risk Management Plan.

The Head of Strategic Support and Assurance explained that the Service would be working with academic partners to develop the new performance framework.

RESOLVED:

1. That the proposals for reporting a more balanced suite of strategic KPI measures be received.
2. That it be agreed in principle that the process to amend the KPI dashboard in 2022-23 commencing with Q1 and for Members to be involved in developing a new corporate dashboard for 2023-24 by including a session on performance management in the Member Development Programme for 2022-23.

22-23/FRA/31 Work Programme

Members received the proposed work programme for 2022/23.

It was noted that additional reports arising from the outcome of the White Paper may be required at future meetings. The outcomes of the community risk analysis would also be shared with Members at a future meeting.

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 12.36 pm