

**MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
MEETING HELD ON 3 OCTOBER 2023**

Present: Councillors A Ali, J Burnett (Chair), G Coombes, R Goodchild, K Gurney, M Headley (Vice-Chair), M Hussain, S Hussain, S Owen, A Sultan, M Versallion and R Wenham

CFO A Hopkinson, DCFO C Bigland, ACFO A Kibblewhite and ACO G Chambers, Mr G Britten, Ms N Upton, Ms S Taft and Mr T Warner.

23-24/FRA/24 Apologies

An apology for lateness was received from Councillor M Hussain.

Councillors Coombes and Gurney advised that they had to leave the meeting early due to other commitments.

23-24/FRA/25 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

23-24/FRA/26 Communications

Station Open Days

The Chief Fire Officer thanked all Members who had attended Fire Station Open Days during the summer period, the most recently at Harrold Community Fire Station. The Open Day at Ampthill had raised approximately £1200 for the Firefighters Charity.

Civic Events

The Chief Fire Officer reported on the recent visit of the new High Sheriff to Fire and Rescue Headquarters. The visit had included a tour of the control room and a Road Traffic Collision demonstration.

The previous evening the Chief Fire Officer had taken part in the investiture of the Lord Lieutenant's cadets for 2023/24. It was noted that it was an honour and privilege to have one of our fire cadets appointed to support the Lord Lieutenant in this way.

RAAC Concrete

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the Service was not aware of any RAAC concrete in its buildings from visual checks undertaken earlier in the year. However, given the number of school buildings that had been identified as having been built with RAAC concrete, the Service had recently commenced a more intrusive survey programme.

Rehabilitation of Offenders

Following a change in legislation, the Service was now required to carry out more comprehensive background checks in a step towards raising standards, protecting staff and the public, mitigating risk, and promoting a culture of honesty and integrity. This would automatically be completed for all new employees in operational and other frontline posts working with vulnerable members of the public with enhanced DBS checks on existing employees conducted during 2024.

In response to a comment from Councillor Gurney, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service would primarily be concerned with any unspent convictions; however, any convictions or criminal record would be considered on a case by case basis.

23-24/FRA/27 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority on 19 July 2023 be confirmed as a true record.

23-24/FRA/28 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).

In response to a question from Councillor Owen, the Authority was advised that a question had last been submitted by a member of the public to the Authority's meeting in March 2023.

23-24/FRA/29 Executive Committee 21 September 2023

The Chair introduced the Minutes of the Executive Committee meeting that took place on 21 September 2023.

In response to a question from the Chair, it was confirmed that the Democratic Services teams at the constituent authorities had been contacted regarding the length of time that had elapsed since the last submission of a report from the Authority and notifying them of the

new reporting process going forward. A brief summary of Authority meetings would be prepared for submission to the constituent authorities on a quarterly basis. This may also include performance information and updates on major projects, to allow the nominated representatives to report back to the constituent authorities effectively.

RESOLVED:

That the submitted minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 21 September 2023 be noted.

23-24/FRA/30 Planning report for 2024/25 Revenue Budget, Capital Programme and Council Tax Setting

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer presented the planning report for the 2024/25 Revenue Budget, Capital Programme and Council Tax setting and the proposed timetable, culminating in the presentation of the final draft budget to a meeting of the Authority in February 2024.

Member Budget Workshops had been scheduled on 21 November 2023 and 25 January 2024, with a draft budget and consultation questions being presented to Members at the Authority meeting in December 2023, which it was noted had been moved from 7 December to 15 December.

In response to a question relating to savings and efficiencies, the Assistant Chief Officer confirmed that the non-statutory services being delivered would be discussed at the Member Budget Workshop to determine whether they should be discontinued or if charges should be introduced.

RESOLVED:

That the report and timescales within be agreed.

23-24/FRA/31 Treasury Management Annual Report

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer introduced the Annual Treasury Management report for 2022/23. This was one of three annual reports presented to the Authority relating to the treasury management function, the others being the Treasury Management Strategy, presented in March, and the Mid-Year Report.

Within this outturn report, information had been provided on capital expenditure, loan repayments and investment income. There had been no new borrowing during the year and all prudential indicators had been adhered to.

The Authority had approximately £19 million of investments and had generated around £500,000 of income during the year, largely as a result of an increase in interest rates significantly above the levels forecast in February 2022.

A blended approach was sought, with investments held in a wide range of accounts.

In response to a question from Councillor Wenham on the Authority's outstanding debt, the Assistant Chief Officer reported that this consisted of two split loans totalling £9.9 million and that the rate of interest charged on these was around 4%. Consideration had previously been given to the early repayment of these loans; however, the early repayment penalties were prohibitively high. This would continue to be kept under review, and details of the loans would be provided to Members at the forthcoming Member Development Day.

Councillor Wenham also requested additional information on the Authority's investments in terms of what financial institutions these were held with and their associated credit ratings.

The Chair requested that treasury management training be provided for Members by the Council's treasury management advisors, Link Asset Services.

The Assistant Chief Officer confirmed that Councillor Headley, as the Lead Member for this area, was involved in the processes leading up to the presentation of the three annual treasury management reports.

RESOLVED:

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

Cllr M Hussain arrived 10.26 am

Cllr K Gurney left 10.30 am

23-24/FRA/32 Q1 2023/24 Performance Report (April to June)

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer introduced the Performance Report for the first quarter of 2023/24 (April to June 2023). He highlighted the revised template that had been agreed by the Executive at its last meeting. This had been adopted to make the data set clearer and to improve accessibility. The new reporting template was based on exception reporting, so that indicators not reaching target levels were detailed at the beginning of the report.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that the narrative for primary accidental dwelling fires as set out in the report was incorrect, although the data provided was correct. The number of these incidents was one over target, which was below the five year average and similar to the number of primary accidental dwelling fires recorded in Quarter 1 2022/23.

(Note: following the meeting, the correct narrative text was provided as follows – “Primary fires are larger more serious fires involving property or harm to people. The number of primary accidental dwelling fires (ADF) is one over target, but the same total as in Q1 2022-23 and below the five-year average for Q1. Numbers of ADF show some natural fluctuations.

In common with previous trends, cooking activity was the most common cause of fire, responsible for more than one third of the fires (29 of 75). After-fire ‘hot strikes’ and other targeted Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSV) are carried out to reduce the risk of ADF. Data from our new HFSV system shows that over 6% of households visited deep fry on the hob. A similar proportion of households were found with cluttered kitchens or cooker not kept clean and grease free. Risk reduction advice is provided during the HFSV. ADF have been on a downward trend with the lowest ever total on record in 2021-22. In their report, HMICFRS recognised BFRS achieved the largest reduction in ADF rate of all FRS.”)

In relation to presentation of the data set, Members were advised that a standard deviation line had been included to illustrate if performance was on track in a more visual way. As national performance information was released for the Key Performance Indicators, these would be presented side by side with local performance indicators, where definitions were aligned.

In response to questions, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that:

- There were “family groups” of fire and rescue services that enabled the Service to compare itself to similar services in terms of size and activity levels. Additional work was being undertaken to align the definitions of Key Performance Indicators with the national indicators to facilitate improved benchmarking.
- Work continues to reduce response times to incidents, including a trial involving one of the Luton fire appliances being temporarily moved to another location. Improvements were being introduced across the entire journey of a 999 call, from time of call to time of response, and this had already had a positive impact on response times. The continued work of the on-call improvement project also sought to reduce improve response times, and additional staff resource had been allocated to this project accordingly.
- There were different measurements for time of call and time of alert, with the time of call being when the call was received by Control and the time of alert being when the resources were allocated.
- The number of Home Fire Safety Visits delivered continued to be high; however, there was now much more targeted activity, and the Service was working with partner organisations, such as housing associations, to enable them to also carry out these checks as Service staff focused on embedding the new technology and targeting high risk groups. There were plans to improve the granularity of data.
- Greater clarity around performance management would be welcomed by the Inspectorate and all areas for improvement identified in the report would be linked to a Key Performance Indicator to ensure that progress was tracked.
- The Service worked closely with Age Concern and other voluntary sector organisations to identify and support vulnerable adults with mental health issues.

The Chief Fire Officer added that the locations of the Service fire stations was also influencing the time of response, as many of the fire stations in the County had been in their present locations since the 1970s, with Dunstable being the newest fire station built in 2009. Therefore, resources were not necessarily aligned with the population and housing growth that had taken place since then. The response standards would be discussed in greater depth at the Member Development Day on 5 October 2023.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that the level of prevention activity undertaken by the Service had resulted in a reduction in the number of dwelling fires. Bedfordshire had been the fifth worst performing service in this respect in 2018 and had now improved to thirteenth best. The last year had seen the second lowest level of accidental dwelling fires on record.

The Service continued to support the Ambulance Service with falls response as it was recognised that many of those individuals who were vulnerable to falls may also have a high fire safety risk.

In relation to support of residents with mental health issues, or Alzheimer's and dementia, Head of Prevention and Protection Ian Evans reported that Bedford Borough Council had provided additional funding to enable the Service to target older people with dementia for Home Fire Safety Visits. Discussions were ongoing with the BLMK Integrated Care Board and the Primary Care Networks to determine whether the NHS could provide funding for this preventative work across the County. The Service worked closely with its partners to target the Home Fire Safety Visits to the most vulnerable residents. 40% of visits were delivered as a result of referrals received from other organisations.

In response to a suggestion that, if the ICB was not forthcoming with funding, the Service may wish to approach Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Councils, Ian Evans reported that Luton Borough Council already funded additional work through the Early Years Alliance, and that the Service already accepted referrals to address referrals relating to those suffering with dementia county-wide.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer suggested that case studies be presented to a future meeting by the Lead Member for prevention, Councillor Sultan, to share how the Service was working with other agencies in this area with Members.

In response to a question about the percentage of Road Traffic Collisions that occurred on the M1, the Chief Fire Officer replied that the reduction in speed limit on the motorway had led to fewer incidents and that the most serious collisions usually took place on A roads involving cars travelling in opposite directions.

The Authority was advised that 30-40% of all calls arose from false alarms. These were broken down into fire false alarms due to apparatus at domestic and non-domestic premises, and false alarm good intent or false alarm malicious. 626 fire false alarms in non-domestic premises had been attended during Quarter 1 2022/23.

Noting the control indicators were all red, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that control operators had been asked to provide a greater level of call challenge to prevent mobilisation to false alarms. An increased level of challenge could lead to longer response times.

Mr Evans reported that 4% of all calls originating from detection equipment to non-domestic settings were found to be fires on attendance. For domestic properties this is higher at 9% of calls originating from detection equipment. The Service mobilising policy set out the pre-determined response based upon the type of premises. It was noted that all calls received from care homes and hospitals were provided with a full response as there was a greater threat to life in properties where individuals were not able to self-evacuate.

HMP Bedford was also a setting with a high level of deliberate fires. As this a Crown Property, the Service is not the enforcing authority for the First Safety Order. The Service continues to engage with both the Governor of the prison and the Crown Premises Inspection Group regarding its concern about deliberate fire setting there.

RESOLVED:

That the Service's performance, contained within Appendix 1 of the report, against the published standards within the Community Risk Management Plan and the wider corporate Key Performance Indicators be acknowledged.

23-24/FRA/33 Annual Report

The Chief Fire Officer introduced the Service's Annual Report for 2022/23. The report had been presented in a new format to improve accessibility and the quality of information that the Service was sharing with the public and its partners. The report included performance information and updates on key projects and programmes.

In response to a request for feedback on the new template and the contents of the report, Councillor S Hussain expressed the view that the report was informative and easy to understand. She particularly liked the monthly highlights.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the monthly highlights would form part of the new 'Shout' reports to the constituent authorities.

RESOLVED:

That the report be acknowledged and approved for publication.

23-24/FRA/34 HMICFRS Inspection update

The Chief Fire Officer presented the report and findings from the 2023 service inspection undertaken by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and the proposed action plan to address the areas for improvement identified by the HMICFRS arising from this. The Service had been one of the first three inspected in the third round of inspections. HMICFRS had introduced a new grade of adequate and no longer issued judgments for each of the three overarching areas of effectiveness, efficiency and people, but individual judgments for the eleven underlying areas.

The Service had been judged as good in understanding fire and risk and future affordability; adequate in responding to major incidents, right people, right skills, promoting fairness and diversity and managing performance and developing leaders; and requires improvement in preventing fire and risk, public safety through fire regulation, responding to fires and emergencies, best use of resources and promoting values and culture.

In the area of promoting values and culture, the Service was judged to require improvement as a result of the singular issue of the backlog of firefighter fitness tests that had arisen during the COVID pandemic. HMICFRS had given a 'cause of concern' as they considered the Service could not assure itself that its operational members of staff meet the minimum fitness requirements to perform their roles.

The action plan specifically addressing the cause for concern was tabled. The Chief Fire Officer commented that immediately prior to the publication of the inspection report, the Service had already completed 98.6% of fitness tests. HMICFRS would return in November to assess the Service's performance against this action plan.

In response to a question, the Chief Fire Officer confirmed that there were no surprises arising from the inspection report and commented that there were many areas of good practice detailed in the report. The Service had been disappointed to receive an RI judgment; however, there was a commitment to improve and the draft action plan was one of the first steps on the roadmap to this.

Cllr Gurney joined the meeting virtually at 11.18 am
Cllr Coombes left the meeting at 11.31 am

The Chief Fire Officer introduced Thomas Warner, the Service's Liaison Officer with the HMICFRS, who advised that, following the first six inspection reports being released, the Service was currently ranked third out of six.

It was noted that some services had been issued with the more serious 'accelerated' cause of concern, where HMICFRS judged there to be an issue potentially affecting public safety, that required a letter to be published before the inspection report was released.

The Chief Fire Officer provided background on the inspection regime for newly appointed Members to the Authority. Since its inception in 2018, when the HMIC assumed responsibility for the inspection of fire and rescue services, services had been inspected on approximately a two-yearly cycle. There had also been thematic reviews undertaken on such topics as COVID response and handling of misconduct charges. Therefore, it was anticipated that the next full inspection would take place in 2025.

In previous inspection rounds, HMICFRS had published a table setting out the expectations associated with each judgement. For this round, only the expectations for "good" had been published. To determine the expectations for other judgements would require reading the narrative reports contained within the published inspection reports.

In response to a question from Councillor Versallion regarding value for money and whether the higher spend per capita by this Service compared to others may have influenced the inspection result, the Chief Fire Officer referred to the development of the Productivity and Efficiency Board and the work of the Performance & Insight Team who would draw out these comparisons. The County faced specific challenges related to its large rural areas, along with the urban conurbations of Bedford and Luton, where activity levels were similar to those of a large metropolitan area.

Members recognised the commitment of senior officers in the Service to respond to the areas for improvement highlighted in the inspection report and the development of the comprehensive action plan.

The Authority was reassured that continuous dialogue would be maintained with the Service Liaison Lead for the HMICFRS and that the action plan had already been shared with her. It was important that the Service Liaison Lead was taken on the improvement journey with the Service.

Councillor Headley tabled a number of proposed amendments to the action plan to further refine the actions and suggested that there may be some deliverables that had not been included in the plan. It was important that all the actions required were very specific and measurable, so that their completion could be demonstrated to the HMICFRS in 2025.

In response to one of the suggestions, to include a completion date for all National Operational Guidance packs, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that these had not all been released and therefore, the Service was not able to determine the length of time and resource required to implement them.

The Chief Fire Officer added that these would be included in the Plan following their introduction.

Another suggestion put forward was to simplify the deliverable under action 8.

Mr Warner advised that some of the areas for improvement were subject to standardised wording.

The Chair commented that, as this action plan was available in the public domain, acronyms should be avoided. With the Executive Committee and the Authority receiving regular update reports, the public should be able to understand and engage in the improvement process.

The Chief Fire Officer proposed that the monitoring and approval of the action plan be delegated to the Executive Committee to enable Members of the Authority.

Councillor M Hussain expressed the view that the Service must ensure that it was becoming more representative of the community that it served and should put additional effort into increasing the diversity of its workforce.

RESOLVED:

1. That the findings of the HMICFRS as set out in their report be noted.
2. That the Executive Committee be delegated authority to approve the draft HMICFRS action plan.
3. That the Authority receive regular updates on progress in delivering against the action plan.

23-24/FRA/35 Community Panel

The Chair advised that this was the final full meeting of the Authority that would be attended by the Assistant Chief Fire Officer prior to her retirement in November 2023. She thanked the Assistant Chief Fire Officer for her hard work and dedication over the two and a half years she spent in that role and expressed her appreciation for all that she had achieved during her employment in the Service.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer introduced a report on the way forward for the Service's Community Panel following a decision made at FRA Executive Committee 21 September 2023. The Executive had agreed that a way forward be a blended approach of engaged representation on partnership groups and the development of a virtual community panel of Bedfordshire citizens.

A proposed timescale was set out in the report. Over the next three months, the Service would be developing an email marketing system. This would then be open for a 6 week sign up period, with a prize draw to encourage uptake. The aim would be to have 100 residents on the Panel which would then be consulted on a quarterly basis, with major consultation twice a year including during the budget setting period.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer acknowledged the importance of meaningful engagement and ensuring the Panel represented the diverse communities residing in the County as far as this was possible.

In response to a comment, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Panel would not be used to circulate good news stories, as this was done for each Station's via social media, but to help shape the activities of the Service going forward.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be acknowledged and welcomed.

23-24/FRA/36 Work Programme

Members received the work programmes for the Authority, Executive Committee, Audit and Standards Committee, Member Development Days and Member Budget Workshops.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that, in addition to the inclusion of standing items on progress against the HMICFRS Inspection Action Plan, a report providing benchmarking information would also be submitted to a future meeting to allow Members to compare the Service's performance against that of other similar fire and rescue services. An update would also be provided on the pensions remedy.

In response to a comment on whether there was sufficient time set aside to adequately cover all the proposed subjects due to be covered at the Member Budget Workshop on 21 November 2023, the Chief Fire Officer advised that he would consider this and report back to Members at the Member Development Day to be held on 5 October 2023.

RESOLVED:

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

The meeting ended at 12.12pm