

**MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
MEETING HELD ON 15 DECEMBER 2023**

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

CFO A Hopkinson, DCFO C Bigland, T/ACFO J Tai, ACO G Chambers and Mr G Britten

23-24/FRA/37 Apologies

An apology for lateness was received from Councillor Owen, who arrived at the meeting at 10.50am.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Versallion and Councillor Saima Hussain.

Councillor Coombes joined the meeting remotely via Teams.

23-24/FRA/38 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

23-24/FRA/39 Communications

Home Office Response to Consultation White Paper ‘Reforming our Fire and Rescue Services’

The Chair reported that the Government response to the White Paper had recently been published and would be circulated to all Members of the Authority for information. She emphasised that PCCs would not be mandated to take over the Governance of fire and rescue authorities to merge with the Police.

The Chief Fire Officer added that, whilst there was no mandate, it remained the Government’s intention to make it easier for PCCs to do so. In addition to the governance issues, the White Paper sought to establish a National College of Fire and Rescue and make provision for

operational independence for Chief Fire Officers, undertake a review of the National Joint Council pay bargaining machinery and implement a new statutory Core Code of Ethics to improve integrity and culture in the fire and rescue sector.

A report would be prepared for Members of the Authority in the new year highlighting the implications for the Service and Authority.

In response to a question about the response from the Fire Brigades Union, the Chief Fire Officer expressed the view that the union may have views the intention to review the national pay bargaining machinery.

Christingle Service and Passing Out Parade

The Chair invited Members to the Christingle Service at Woburn Parish Church and the Passing Out Parade at Fire and Rescue Headquarters in Kempston, both of which were taking place the following week.

Council Tax Referendum Limit and Local Government Finance Settlement

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer advised that the Service had received confirmation that the Council Tax referendum cap had been set at 3%, rather than £5. The Service was also expecting an announcement on the provisional local settlement for Finance statement on Monday, 18 December 2023. He would be liaising with the Lead Member for Finance on the local impact once this had been determined.

In response to a question, the Assistant Chief Officer reported that the Service could have generated up to £400,000 in additional Council Tax income if the authority had been given the £5 precept flexibility.

Members expressed disappointment that no explanation had been offered as to why the higher cap of £5 had not been allowed.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that, now the cap limit had been announced, the Service's Corporate Management Team would be analysing the projects in the Capital Programme to determine if any should be paused or stopped as a result of the budget announcement.

23-24/FRA/40 Minutes

The Chair asked for an update on the RAAC investigations referred to in Minute 23-24/FRA/26.

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer reported that inspections continued and to date, no RAAC concrete had been identified in any Service buildings.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority held on 3 October 2023 be confirmed as a true record.

23-24/FRA/41 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).

23-24/FRA/42 Audit and Standards Committee 17 October 2023

Members received the Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 17 October 2023. The Committee had made no recommendations to the full Authority.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 17 October 2023 be received.

23-24/FRA/43 Executive Committee meeting 23 November 2023

The Chair presented the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee meeting held on 23 November 2023.

Mr G Britten, the Monitoring Officer, apologised for the late distribution of the confidential version of the Minutes.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 23 November 2023 be received.

23-24/FRA/44 2023/24 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer introduced his report on the forecast year-end budget monitoring position as at 31 October 2023 and presenting the 2024/25 budget/council tax consultation question for consideration by Members.

The draft budget consultation question was as follows:

“The Fire and Rescue Authority, like you, has faced increasing costs due to inflationary pressures. In particular we have seen cost increases in electricity, gas, vehicle fuel, supplies & services and pay impact on our budgets. In order to assist in managing these cost increases, the Fire and Rescue Authority are currently planning our budget for next year and are considering a council tax increase of 2.99%, which would be £3.28 per year for a Band D property. This would increase the Band D council tax charge for your Fire and Rescue Service from £109.45 to £112.73 per year. Would you support this increase to invest in and protect your local Fire and Rescue Service?”

The Authority had previously been advised of the additional £460,000 of business rate income received, a £9,000 service grant, £153,000 Protection Grant, and £707,000 of additional investment income. This, however, was partially offset by the additional salary costs arising from the recent pay awards.

In relation to the Capital Programme, Members approval was sought for the early purchase of four response vehicles, currently scheduled for purchase in 2024/25, as this was identified as an area of potential operational risk.

The Assistant Chief Officer explained the unbudgeted expenditure on kitchens in Stopsley, Luton, Dunstable and Bedford as a result of environmental audits was funded through an earmarked reserve.

In response to a question about whether staff were at risk prior to these urgent property works being undertaken, the Assistant Chief Officer advised that he would provide a full written response to Members detailing the reasons for the works taking place. This would include the frequency of environmental audits on Service buildings.

The Chair referred to paragraph 3.9 of the report and emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Service estate was accessible to all. She sought assurances that all works to enhance service user experiences and comfort should be completed as a matter of priority.

The Assistant Chief Officer stated that the Property Manager had met with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Manager regarding works required and that these would be progressed.

The Chief Fire Officer added that the Service was currently working towards the development of a model specification for our fire stations blueprint and that this would include EDI considerations. A more collaborative approach around estates was being proposed and this had been the topic of a Chief Executives Forum workshop facilitated by the Service. A further workshop on estates would be held in the New Year.

RESOLVED:

1. That the updates provided within the report and the forecast year end position be acknowledged.
2. That the early purchase of four response vehicles currently scheduled for 2024/25 be approved.
3. That it be noted that the unbudgeted expenditure on kitchens is due as a result of Environmental Audits and covered by Earmarked Reserves.
4. That the 2024/25 budget consultation question as set out in paragraph 4 be approved.

23-24/FRA/45 Q2 2023/24 Performance Report (July to September)

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer introduced the summary of organisational performance at the end of the second quarter of the 2023-24 financial year, highlighting the good performance that had been achieved in relation to deliberate fires and injuries and protection activity. The emergency call handling measure on calls answered within 7 seconds had been met during the quarter. This was important within the context of the next report on the agenda, which proposed changes to the Service's published response standards.

Strong performance had also been achieved against training, development and HR indicators.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer then reported on indicators on an exception basis as follows:

- The number of Home Fire Safety Visits delivered was under the target for the quarter; however, as a result of the recent inspection, the Service was now focusing on targeted delivery of these visits to the most vulnerable in the County.
- The secondary fires attendance standard had not been reached for the quarter. It was recognised that performance against this indicator was affected by seasonality and it was anticipated that the target would be reached by year-end.
- Additional training was being provided to on-call firefighters on a monthly basis to develop their competencies more quickly.

In response to a question about the number of fires at HMP Bedford, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Service worked with the prison management at a local level and also formally expressed its concerns to the Governor of the prison to seek improvements to the prison's management systems, behaviour management and housekeeping to prevent incidents of fire occurring at the prison, recognising that it was a challenging environment.

Stuart Auger, Head of Response added that a meeting had been held on 21 November 2023 with the prison management to address concerns around the operation of the Memorandum of Understanding between the two organisations and to emphasise the Service's expectations.

He also reassured the Authority that the mental health of prisoners was taken into account, although provision of services to prisoners was complicated by the method the Integrated Care Board had to use to commission these services.

In terms of availability, the Service was utilising a roaming pump to cover areas that were deficient.

In response to a concern raised about the level of cover at Bedford Fire Station, the Authority was advised that a large percentage of cover had previously been provided by two individuals who had left the Service, one as a result of retirement and the other had moved away from the area. This had a disproportionate impact on availability at that station. It was also difficult to recruit on-call firefighters to the station as it

was surrounded by commercial properties and due to the way that resources were allocated to calls. As it was located so close to Kempston, the whole-time pumps would often be allocated by the system rather than the on-call pump at Bedford.

In an attempt to counteract this, the Service had relocated some whole-time specialist day to day roles to work from Bedford from Kempston and the Service was actively seeking to increase the presence at Bedford.

Councillor Goodchild mentioned a Town Council meeting that had been attended by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer where Home Fire Safety Visits had been discussed and local community agents had been mentioned as a method for identifying appropriate households. He asked if any agents or other local residents had contacted the Deputy Chief Fire Officer in this respect.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer commented that he welcomed this sort of assistance from any Authority Members, as they were the representatives of their local communities.

RESOLVED:

That the Service's performance against the published standards within the Community Risk Management Plan and the wider corporate Key Performance Indicators be acknowledged.

23-24/FRA/46 Response Standards

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer presented a report providing Members with information to support changes to the Service Emergency Response

Performance standards in consultation with the public and key stakeholders.

If agreed, consultation would commence on changes to the response times and ridership factor and removal of old descriptors and control measures to bring the Service in to line and facilitate benchmarking with other services.

The Authority was advised that the response measures and ridership factor had not been reviewed since 2007 and that the proposed standards had been based on five years of performance data, assessment and a benchmarking exercise.

In response to a question on whether the changes in ridership being proposed, to reduce from five to four which would increase the number of appliances operationally available, would be supported by the Fire Brigades Union, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer commented that this standard had been set in 2007 in response to the Carse Report, which recommended a minimum of nine firefighters. The Service would send a three-pump response to a house fire, which meant that, at a minimum, if the new standard was adopted, there would be twelve firefighters at the incident. This was considered to be in accordance with safe operating procedures. He emphasised that four would be the minimum, and many appliances would still have five.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer expressed the view that the union was likely to support retaining the current policy; however, Members were asked to support the change as it enabled the Service to increase its operational flexibility and improve its ability to respond to incidents.

Members sought assurance about the communications plan for the consultation, as it appeared that certain issues, such as ridership, could be quite complicated for lay people to understand.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that a full communications plan had been developed, including explanatory videos, FAQs, key points and a range of other tools to engage with the public. Regular reminders to respond to the consultation would be provided, and the length of the consultation had been increased to 8 weeks in recognition of the Christmas period. The consultation could not be delayed as it was hoped to implement any changes agreed before the start of the next reporting year.

In response to a comment from Councillor Owen, the Chair mentioned a previous visit for Members to the Control Room and suggested that another visit be arranged for those Members who had been able to attend, as it would improve their understanding of call handling challenges if they were able to observe Control staff in action.

Members thanked the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and his team for their extensive work in this area and the view was expressed that the proposed changes would bring the Service's measurement of response standards more in line with the expectations of the Inspectorate.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the changes to ridership proposed would not result in a safety concern, as four was the agreed minimum standard for safe systems of work, especially as there had been improvements in technology, particularly the breathing apparatus (BA) sets.

In this respect, Stuart Auger, Head of Response advised that the new BA sets enabled live data from the BA wearers to be monitored remotely to improve safety at the incident site.

Consultation responses would be reviewed regularly by the Service's Corporate Management Team, with a view to updating the Authority's meeting in February 2024.

Members were advised that the communications plan included information being submitted to the constituent councils asking them to distribute to their Members and stakeholder networks.

RESOLVED:

1. That consultation be approved on the following proposed new operational response performance measures:
 - Mobilise to primary fires within 120 seconds 85% of the time.
 - First fire engine to arrive in 12 minutes to primary fires on 80% of occasions, measured from time of call. (incorporating the existing time of alert measure with the new call handling measure).

- RTCs we will arrive in 15 minutes on 80% of occasions, measured from time of call. (incorporating the existing time of alert measure with the new call handling measure).
 - For secondary fires one fire engine will arrive in 20 minutes on 96% of occasions, measured from time of call.
 - The removal of old descriptors that do not follow the national recording and benchmarking definitions e.g. a move from 'critical incidents' to 'primary and secondary fire'.
 - The removal of the old control measure to answer 90% of 999 calls in 7 seconds or less, as this will now be superseded by the control measure above.
 - The removal of '5 riders' being part of any performance measure due to the limiting nature of such a measure when maximising the amount of fire engines available to the whole County.
2. That consultation also take place on whether the Service should publicly measure the arrival of a subsequent fire engine should the pre-determined attendance require more than one fire engine at the time of the call. If this is required, then the following measure may be applied:
 - Second fire engine to arrive in 16 mins to primary fires on 80% of occasions, from time of call.
 3. That an 8-week consultation period which allows for the LGA 6 weeks best practice period but is extended by two weeks due to Christmas, thus ensuring sufficient time for stakeholders to engage with the consultation, be approved, noting that the consultation will be commenced following the Authority meeting that considers the content of this paper and will be formed of the proposals that are agreed from the above recommendations.

23-24/FRA/47 Programme Board Update

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer submitted an update on the Service Corporate Programme covering the first two quarters of the financial year 2023/24, detailing progress and current status of all major projects. Good progress had been made, with 91% of active projects on track to deliver their objectives on time.

In noting the excellent performance against the programme, the query was raised as to whether the Service was trying to accomplish too much.

The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that, given the recent announcement on the Council Tax referendum cap and the forthcoming provisional settlement announcement, consideration would have to be given as to which projects were continued. He expressed the view that the Service was currently in a period of consolidation.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer agreed and commented that, when the Service was able to determine the impact of the settlement announcement, there may be difficult decisions regarding the prioritisation of the programme to be made.

The Chair added that it was important that staff resources were not over-allocated and that she had highlighted the importance of staff mental health and wellbeing in her Christmas message.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service's most important asset was its staff.

In response to a question on the FSO 50 trial, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the trial had created 650 additional crewing hours over a three-month period. The trial had been so successful that it would be rolled out to three additional stations.

RESOLVED:

That the progress made on the Corporate Programme be noted.

23-24/FRA/48 Mid Year Treasury Management report

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer provided an update on the Authority's Treasury Management to 30 September 2023.

Following agreement by Members, a date for treasury management training had been set for 25 January 2024. This would be provided by Link Asset Services.

The long-term borrowing position continued to be approximately £10 million, with £9.987 million still outstanding on loans taken out in 2006/2007 to fund the build of Dunstable Community Fire Station. Debt rescheduling opportunities continued to be reviewed, although the early repayment charges were prohibitive.

The Authority held short-term accounts with several banking institutions, such as First Abu Dhabi Bank, Goldman Sachs, Standard Chartered Sustainable Account, Lloyds and Qatar National Bank. Standard Chartered had been selected for environmental, social and corporate governance aspirations.

In response to a question from Councillor Wenham on reporting against CIPFA prudential indicators, the Assistant Chief Officer confirmed that not all indicators were applicable to the Authority, and that this could be highlighted in future reports.

In response to an additional question on Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) and the impact of the borrowing on this calculation, the Assistant Chief Officer reported that, when the Authority made future property investments, the CFR would reduce and over the next 3-4 years the situation would correct itself.

Councillor Headley, as the Lead Member for Finance, expressed the view that this situation could not be avoided once the initial decision to borrow had been agreed.

Councillor Wenham requested that additional text be included in the next treasury management report to explain this.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

23-24/FRA/49 Public Sector Equality Duty Report

The Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer submitted the Public Sector Equality Duty Report for 2022/23 and drew Members' attention to the pages of the report that listed the Service's achievements over the 2022/23 reporting year. These included: adopting the National NFCC Maturity model to assess equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) performance and inform the EDI improvement plan; reviewing the EDI awareness training programme in line with the Service Culture Change plan; reviewing the People Impact assessment process and guidance and the EDI Policy. A new EDI Manager was appointed in 2023.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor M Hussain on the gender balance of Service staff, and percentage of staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, Ms R Barker, Head of Human Resources, expressed the view that the Service was engaging in positive action, although attraction remained a challenge.

The Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported that the percentage of female staff had increased from 23.3% in 2021/22 to 27.9% in 2022/23 and the Chief Fire Officer reported that, whilst the percentage of staff from ethnic minority backgrounds was lower than the Service would like, the promotion rate for those individuals was comparable to the overall level of representation in the Service.

The Chair commented that she had discussed the issue of maternity pay with the Chief Fire Officer. This was an issue that was agreed at a local level. As this could be an important consideration for female staff, further consideration would be given to the level of pay awarded, whilst being mindful of the budget envelope.

Analysis of the reasons why females and those from ethnic minority backgrounds who had expressed an interest in working for the Service, but then did not go on to apply for positions, was being undertaken and the feedback, expected in the final quarter of the year, would be reported to Members either at a Member Budget Workshop or at the Authority's meeting in March 2024.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the Public Sector Equality Duty Report (2022/23) report be noted and the publication of the Report be approved.

23-24/FRA/50 Procurement Policy and Contract Procedures

Ms R Radia, the Service's Procurement Manager, introduced a report setting out proposed amendments to the Procurement Policy. As there were extensive changes proposed, the version circulated with the agenda had not been track changed and simplified the former version.

The Procurement Manager advised that the review of the Policy to ensure that it was compliant with the Procurement Bill, expected to become law in October 2024, was already underway. Important in this was the engagement with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

In response to a question on the figures set out in the policy, the Procurement Manager stated that these had not changed, except for VAT being included as required by regulations governing procurement.

In relation to social value, the Assistant Chief Officer clarified that this was not included in the revised policy and was being worked on separately. It was intended that a separate document would be provided on the procurement intranet page to make it readily accessible to procuring managers.

The Procurement Manager added that she was working with a group co-ordinated through the Home Office that supported smaller organisations with social value. The Chair requested that an update be provided to Members on this work, as it could have an EDI impact.

It was suggested that the engagement work with representatives of local businesses currently being conducted in relation to building safety could be included to engage them, as local SMEs, in the Service's procurement process.

RESOLVED:

That the amendments to the Procurement Policy be approved.

23-24/FRA/51 Work Programme

Members considered the updated Work Programme, noting the cyclical items.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that a report on the Government's response to the White Paper consultation would be programmed into a future meeting.

Members discussed the content of presentations provided at a recent Member Development Day.

The Chief Fire Officer reported that work was still progressing in relation to the station-based projects. Subject to the conclusion of this, it was anticipated that Members would receive an update at the next Member Development Workshop, following which a report would be presented to a future meeting of the Authority. It was noted that this was predicated on changes to the response standards, so could not have been progressed until Member agreement had been provided.

Members also discussed the possibility of having more Member Development Days so that all presentations and topics submitted could be given adequate consideration. It was agreed that these could be half days, noting that Members would require advance notice due to a multitude of other diary commitments.

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 12.14pm