

MINUTES OF FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY MEETING HELD ON 6 NOVEMBER 2019

Present: Councillors C Atkins, J Chatterley (Chairman), K Choudhry, D Franks, J Gambold, M Headley, D McVicar, K Malik and Y Waheed (Vice-Chair)

CFO P Fuller, DCFO A Hopkinson, ACO G Chambers, Mr J Atkinson, SOC G Jeffery and Mr R Jones

19-20/FRA/49 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Berry, Duckett and Shingler.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillors Atkins and Franks.

19-20/FRA/50 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests.

19-20/FRA/51 Communications

Messages from the Chair

The Chair thanked Members who attended the recent Member Development Day held on 29 October 2019. He reminded Members that a Members Budget Workshop was being held on 27 November 2019.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer for providing detailed answers to questions asked by Members at the previous meeting of the Authority on 7 October 2019.

Members were reminded that station visits were being held at Stopsley (12 November) and Shefford (19 November) Community Fire Stations.

The “passing out” ceremony for the new recruits would take place on 4 December 2019. All Members were invited to attend.

Summary Letter from the Inspectorate

The Chair advised that he had circulated a letter from the Inspectorate to all Members for information.

LGA Oversight of Performance

A workshop was being hosted by Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service on national performance data and benchmarking on 26 November 2019. The Chair and Councillor Berry would be attending the workshop with an Officer from the Service.

Combined Fire Authorities Conference

The Combined Fire Authorities Conference presentations had been circulated to Members of the Authority electronically for information.

Excellence in Fire Service Awards

The Chief Fire Officer reported that Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service had been shortlisted in two categories: resilience and learning from major incidents and emergency services collaboration. One of the Service's employees had also been shortlisted in the category most influential LGBT+ individual in Fire.

Asian Fire Service Association Conference

Three Members of the Authority would be attending the Asian Fire Service Association Conference on 28-29 November 2019.

Grenfell Inquiry Phase 1

The report on first phase of the Grenfell Inquiry had recently been published. This phase focused largely on the events on the night of the incident and the response of the London Fire Brigade.

The Chief Fire Officer provided an update on the situation in relation to high-rise buildings in Bedfordshire. The Service was very proactive in inspecting and monitoring the high-rise buildings in the County, both pre and post Grenfell. There were 116 high-rise buildings in Bedfordshire, none of which had ACM cladding. All of these had been inspected by a Fire Safety Officer. Three had potentially combustible cladding and these were currently under investigation, with the Service working closely with the relevant local authorities.

The Service had a strong working relationship with the social housing providers operating in the County and the overall standard of premises was high.

Post Grenfell, the Service had reviewed all its procedures and its operational response to incidents in high-rise buildings, increasing the resource made available to such incidents. Revised guidance on evacuation from high rise premises procedures had been issued in 2018. This reinforced the Service's "stay put" policy but emphasised that this must be kept under review by the Incident Commander. Leaflets had also been circulated to landlords and residents of high rise premises explaining the "stay put" policy.

All operational personnel received high-rise training on an annual basis and this was reinforced by access to a module on LearnPro.

It was noted that the next phase would focus on the building materials and the view was expressed that this phase of the report would be more critical.

Incident at Twinwoods Business Park

The Chief Fire Officer reported on the large fire at Twinwoods Business Park on 1 November 2019. This had been successfully contained with no significant issues arising for members of the public or firefighters.

A more detailed incident report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Authority.

19-20/FRA/52 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 7 October 2019 be confirmed as a true record.

19-20/FRA/53 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).

19-20/FRA/54 Audit and Standards Committee 15 October 2019

Councillor Headley submitted the Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee held on 15 October 2019. Upon receipt of the external audit report, the Committee had expressed concern and disappointment at the ongoing delay of the audit process caused by resourcing issues experienced by the external auditors, Ernst and Young (EY). Assurances had been sought for the next year's audit process. The EY representative had been able to provide only limited reassurance and further information would be provided to the Committee in due course. The Committee would continue to monitor this situation.

The Authority's accounts had received an unqualified audit opinion and an unqualified value for money opinion.

The Committee had also received the internal audit progress report. The two internal audits submitted, on statutory compliance and operational business continuity, had been issued negative opinions of partial assurance.

In response to a question, the Assistant Chief Officer explained the Service's materiality levels.

RESOLVED:

That the submitted Minutes of the meeting held on 15 October be received.

19-20/FRA/55 HMICFRS Update Report

Strategic Operational Commander Gary Jeffery provided an update on the progress made against the HMICFRS Action Plan. Following the HMICFRS inspection in August 2018, the effectiveness of the Service had been judged as "good" whilst the efficiency and people had been judged as "requires improvement". 23 areas for improvement had been identified and the report set out the actions that had been taken to date against all areas for improvement.

Two of the actions, relating to responding to fires and responding to national risks, had been completed and closed. A further two, relating to making best use of resources and ensuring fairness and promoting diversity, had been progressed through the development of the 2019/20 Community Risk Management Plan. Four additional actions had been completed but were subject to further assurance. The remaining fifteen areas were ongoing.

The Service continued to address these areas for improvement whilst preparing for the next round of inspections. A close working relationship had been maintained with the HMICFRS service liaison lead.

In response to a question as to how the Service could demonstrate that it was effectively targeting vulnerable groups, the Strategic Operational Commander confirmed that the Service had used MOSAIC data to target its Home Fire Safety Checks and Safe and Well Visits for a number of years but had to demonstrate the effectiveness of this. The data was being cascaded down through the Service so that fire crews could target and identify the most vulnerable individuals in their areas.

RESOLVED:

That the progress made against the action plan be acknowledged.

19-20/FRA/56 National Benchmarking Overview

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer gave a presentation on a selection of prevention and protection measures and how the Service was using its risk and performance data to target its activity to support the most vulnerable members of the Bedfordshire community.

The Service used the national Exeter data set to identify vulnerable groups such as the disabled and over 65s. The Service also received referrals from GPs and other health professionals and was focussing on community engagement to further extend its understanding of the vulnerable communities in the County. Information was also obtained from visitors to the station Open Days.

It had been recognised that the Service's staff was its biggest asset and to affect change, staff required better access to data. The Service had been working with the University of Bedfordshire to develop a performance dashboard that was available to all staff. The number of Key Performance Indicators had increased dramatically, from 40 to 240 in Service Delivery.

In relation to the prevention measures, nationally 590,000 Home Fire Safety Checks had been undertaken. The Service had delivered 5195 in 2018/19, 10% by partner organisations trained to do so by the Service. 2599 were visits to elderly residents and 2026 were to MOSAIC high risk groups. These visits were important as Bedfordshire had a high rate of accidental dwelling fires.

Further work on the identification of high risk groups was being undertaken and a report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Authority in this respect.

In relation to protection measures, over 49,327 Fire Safety Audits had been completed in 2018/19 nationally. This was a reduction of 42% from 2010/11, largely as a result of deregulation and self-compliance. Bedfordshire was the third highest performing Service in this area.

Bedfordshire was slightly above the national average in rates of Non-Domestic Fires and work was being undertaken to identify the reasons for this.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Authority would receive the draft Community Risk Management Plan at its next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be received.

19-20/FRA/57 Public Sector Equality Duty Report

Mr R Jones, the Service's Diversity Adviser, submitted the Public Sector Equality Duty Report 2018/19 to Members for consideration. This was the seventh annual report and included detailed information on the Service's workforce and the services provided. The Executive Summary included information on staff demographics and the measures taken by the Service to ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and support staff, including health and fitness provision, access to the Employee Assistance Programme, and a work life balance policy. The Service was required to publish its Public Sector Equality Duty Report by 31 January of each year.

The Service's approach to disability was highlighted in the report. The positive action campaign to attract a more diverse workforce was also detailed in the report.

Training and guidance was provided to staff on an ongoing basis and equality data was used to inform all of the Service's major policy documents including the Strategic Assessment, People Strategy, Community Risk Management Plan and the Community Safety Plan. A golden thread of equality and diversity ran through the Service's policy documents.

The Service had set Equality Objectives for 2016 to 2020 and these had been progressing well.

Members discussed why employees may select "prefer not to say" when self-recording data on religious belief and sexual orientation.

The Service's Diversity Adviser reported that the Service continued to work to provide an environment in which individuals were happy to disclose their information, although it was recognised that not all employees would wish to do so regardless.

The lack of female and BAME representation at senior management level was noted, and the Authority was advised that the Service was seeking to close the gap by introducing talent programmes to identify and support talented individuals from underrepresented groups.

Members noted that the Service was very proactive in the area of equality and diversity when compared to other Fire and Rescue Services.

The view was expressed that individuals in the smaller groups may be able to be identified by their protected characteristics, particularly in the event of a change, and that this should be considered before the report was made publically available.

RESOLVED:

That the report be approved.

19-20/FRA/58 Procurement Policy and Contract Procedures

The Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer introduced a report setting out the proposed changes to the Procurement Policy and Contract Procedures. These were currently in draft and out for consultation. The Policy had been rewritten by the new Procurement Manager and incorporated a number of changes including sections on achieving social value, category management, introduced in line with the NFCC categories of spend and the National Procurement Strategy 2018 for Fire and Rescue Services and the duty to collaborate, greater emphasis on health and safety and equality and diversity considerations. The conflicts of interest section had been strengthened.

A Member queried the relevance of the section on purdah. It was suggested that the Treasurer and Secretary and Monitoring Officer discuss whether it was appropriate and necessary to include this section outside of the meeting.

In response to a question related to banding, the Assistant Chief Officer reported that, following recent discussions with the Procurement Manager, the following change was proposed:

- Band 1 up to £2000 – evidence of best value
- Over £2000 and up to £4999 – a minimum of two written quotes to be obtained

These changes would bring the banding in line with the transparency data levels of £5000 and reduce demand on the procurement team.

It was noted that the Government had indicated that there would be no changes to procurement legislation in the short term and therefore there was no impact on the current Policy as a result of Brexit.

RESOLVED:

That the new Procurement Policy be approved, subject to the changes to the banding levels outlined at the meeting and further discussions being undertaken between the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer and Secretary and Monitoring Officer to determine whether the section on purdah should be removed.

19-20/FRA/59 Work Programme

Members received an updated work programme for 2019/20.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that the work programme had been updated to include all reports that had previously been submitted to the Policy and Challenge Groups. Whilst this had resulted in more items to be considered by the full Authority, it provided a more accurate reflection of the work undertaken and issues dealt with by the Service.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme for 2019/20 be received and the 'cyclical' Agenda Items for each meeting in 2019/20 be noted.

The meeting ended at 11.59 am