

**MINUTES OF EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON 21 SEPTEMBER 2023**

Present: Councillors J Burnett (Chair), R Goodchild, M Headley (Vice-Chair) and S Hussain

CFO A Hopkinson, DCFO C Bigland, ACFO A Kibblewhite, ACO G Chambers, Mr G Britten (MO), Ms L Ehren and Mrs N Upton

Councillor S Owen was in attendance as an observer

23-24/EC/9 Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

23-24/EC/10 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no disclosures of interest.

23-24/EC/11 Communications

The Chief Fire Officer referred to the publication of the HMICFRS Inspection Report. This would be discussed later in the meeting.

The Chief Fire Officer reported on the visit of the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire that had taken place the previous week. This had been very positive and the High Sheriff had been impressed with the range of activities undertaken by the Service.

23-24/EC/12 Minutes

The Chair requested confirmation that meetings had taken place with Lead Members and relevant senior Officers following the formal appointment to all Lead Member roles at the last meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that all meetings had taken place, with the exception of a meeting between the Chair and Jason Tai regarding the Service's fleet and equipment assets.

All Lead Members present confirmed that these meetings had taken place and that additional meetings had been diarised.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2023 be confirmed as a true record.

23-24/EC/13 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/EC/14 HMICFRS inspection outcome

The Chief Fire Officer gave a presentation on the outcome of the recent HMICFRS inspection. Of the eleven strands of inspection, the Service had been judged as good in two areas, adequate in four areas and requires improvement in five areas, with a 'cause of concern' identified, which had been discharged prior to the publication of the report. There was a recognition that the Service was prioritising resources to tackle the identified areas for improvement which when addressed should result in an improved grading for the five areas currently judged as requiring improvement.

In terms of the national context, this Service had been one of the first services to be inspected in Round 3 and HMICFRS had recently published another batch of inspection reports, a summary of which was presented to Members. There had been a number of other Services where the Inspectorate had identified a cause for concern. It was noted that there were two types of causes for concern: the type which had been identified for this Service and was included in the inspection report, and an accelerated cause for concern, whereby these were published prior to the release of the inspection report, as the Inspectorate believed that these could result in a public safety risk and were therefore much more serious.

Councillor Headley commented on the lack of a written report to accompany this item.

In response, the Chief Fire Officer advised a detailed report, building upon this briefing to Executive Committee members and including an action plan, was being prepared for submission to the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority on 3 October 2023.

The Principal Officers then gave an update on actions being taken to address the areas for improvement identified in the inspection report. These included:

- The development of a Prevention Plan, with a draft due in October 2023.

- More targeted prevention work, with an increase from 46% to 63% of work now targeted towards higher risk communities using new risk stratification tools.
- Improved quality assessment for Home Fire Safety Visits and protection visits.
- The continued development of the Fire Risk Data Warehouse.
- Further provision of education and engagement with the business community to reduce false alarms.
- Modifying equipment to improve response. An example of this was the introduction of a roaming pump in Luton.
- The re-introduction of a buddy system with Essex Fire and Rescue Service to improve Control business continuity arrangements.
- The continued investment in improving on-call availability.
- The implementation of National Operational Guidance.
- Additional resource being allocated to operational assurance.
- The introduction of a digital platform for fire solution guidance.
- Drafting the budget and underlying documents in such a way as to highlight to the Inspectorate the rationale for the allocation of resources for protection, prevention and response.
- The creation of a Productivity and Efficiency Board.
- Bi-monthly Workplace Planning Group meetings to discuss succession planning.
- The production of a talent management policy and the integration of a talent grid into the appraisal process.
- The revision of the grievance procedure and the creation of a post to lead on investigations of grievances.
- The development of core learning pathways to assist in the professional development of corporate staff.

In response to a comment from the Chair on the difficulties of responding to incidents in certain parts of Luton and Bedford due to the width of the roads and size of fire appliances, the Executive was advised that an education campaign had been run in certain areas whereby a fire appliance was parked in the road on some of the most inaccessible streets, so that residents would be aware of the amount of space required for emergency response vehicles. Staff at Luton Community Fire Station had been given contact details for the local parking enforcement officers to address any illegal parking.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that, in future, the Service was looking to procure smaller fire appliances that could more easily navigate congested urban roads. This was following the current batch of vehicles which were designed to fit the same chassis but had more powerful engines to support pumps that would be able to respond to incidents at high-rise properties.

The importance of working more closely with the Local Planning Authorities in relation to issues such as road width in new developments and in the allocation of Community Infrastructure Levy funding to support the provision of fire hydrants was also discussed. It was suggested that those Members of the Fire and Rescue Authority who were also Members of the Planning Committees of the constituent authorities could facilitate a closer working relationship between Planning Officers and the Service.

Councillor Headley expressed the view that the actions included in the Action Plan would need to have costs associated with them. This information had not yet been provided to Members.

In relation to the cause for concern, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer reported that this arose from the backlog of fitness tests that had developed during the COVID pandemic. When HMICFRS had conducted the inspection, the percentage of operational staff who had passed a fitness test within the last 12 months had been 95%. This had now improved to 98.6%, with the only outstanding tests relating to individuals on long term sickness absence. A Service Fitness Advisor had recently been appointed to the vacant post and would commence in post later that month. Training would be provided so that each station had a station fitness advisor, and the fitness and wellbeing strategy was being refreshed. It was anticipated with the action already taken, the HMICFRS would agree that the cause for concern could be removed.

It was noted that the cause of concern was the only area for improvement identified in the Values and Culture strand of the inspection.

Councillor Owen, who had been present at the Member briefing on 17 August 2023 following the release of the inspection report, was invited by the Chair to share his views. The Chair expressed her views on that meeting. As an individual, she strongly believed in challenge, but also in motivating and appreciating staff so that collectively, the Service could make the improvements required.

The Chief Fire Officer thanked Members for their feedback. He reported that the next round of inspections was in early 2025, however, as a cause for concern had been identified, a re-inspection of that area only would take place in November 2023. The Service Liaison Lead would periodically visit the Service. He expressed the view that the Service Liaison Lead had not been long in post before the inspection had commenced and therefore did not have a detailed working knowledge of the Service which, in his opinion, could have disadvantaged the Service. The level of expectation in Round 3 appeared to be higher and it could not be ascertained how well the Service had fared in comparison to other fire and rescue services until the majority of inspections had been completed. Members were reminded that there had also been many positive areas of performance included in the inspection report.

Councillor Headley reiterated the importance of Members being provided with costs associated with the actions being proposed and the need for SMART targets to be introduced so that Members could effectively monitor progress.

The Chief Fire Officer reported that the Action Plan was currently being finalised and would be submitted to the Fire and Rescue Authority at its next meeting for approval.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update on the inspection outcome be received.

23-24/EC/15 Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service Community Forum Update

The Chief Fire Officer introduced Ms L Ehren, the Interim Head of Communications and Public Affairs, to provide an update on the Service's Community Panel and options for ways forward.

Following a decision of the Fire and Rescue Authority to develop a Community Panel, a Panel had been constituted and had met earlier in the year. This had not achieved the aims for which it had been constituted, and Members were now being approached to reconsider how they wished to proceed.

The Head of Communications and Public Affairs highlighted the importance of meaningful engagement, especially as the Service was already a member of many other Panels at which partner organisations were represented.

Three options were presented for consideration: to collaborate with partners to sit on existing partner panels, forums and resident engagement opportunities; to try again to develop a dedicated Fire and Rescue Service Community Panel or commission the Community Voluntary Service Bedfordshire or Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum to do this on behalf of the Authority; or to develop a virtual community panel.

The advantages and disadvantages of the options were discussed and Members expressed a preference for a hybrid of Option 1 and 3, noting that there should be a programme of engagement questions/issues to communicate with the Panel outside of the annual CRMP and budget consultations.

It was suggested that, as the Service would continue its representation on various partnership boards, the strategic direction agreed should be Option 3.

The Chair commented that, with the continued migration into the County from London, there would be greater numbers of younger residents who felt more comfortable interacting virtually via remote platforms and social media.

The Chair requested that an update be provided to the Fire and Rescue Authority at its next meeting along with a list of items that could be discussed with such a Panel once it is constituted.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be acknowledged, and that, recognising that Option 1 as presented in the report represents business as usual and will continue, Option 3, to develop a virtual community panel, be agreed.

23-24/EC/16 SHOUT - communicating with our constituent authorities

The Chief Fire Officer sought Members' views on how best to communicate with the constituent authorities. This had previously been done by submitting the Minutes of the Authority meetings for the appointed Member to report to the relevant constituent authorities. This was not seen as a very effective way to communicate other topics of interest to the constituent authorities. In this respect, he had asked the Interim Head of Communications and Public Affairs to review, in consultation with Members, how best to achieve the requirement of reporting back to the constituent authorities.

Councillor Headley reported that, whilst this review was being undertaken, it was important that the Authority continued to fulfil its duty of reporting back to the constituent authorities.

The Chair added that the Members appointed to report back may be asked questions about the recent inspection and that no information had been provided to enable them to do so.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that a briefing note was being prepared for the appointed Members.

The Chair also requested that the Democratic Services teams at each constituent authority be contacted to explain the delay in receiving reports from the Authority. It was noted that reports from the Fire and Rescue Authority was a standing item on both the Bedford Borough Council and Luton Borough Council Full Council agendas.

Councillor Goodchild advised that he could not recall a meeting at Central Bedfordshire Council when a report of the Authority had been submitted.

23-24/EC/17 Work Programme

Members received the updated work programme for 2023/24 and noted the cyclical items.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that an HMICFRS Action Plan update would be submitted to the next meeting of the Executive.

The Chair requested that this be placed as a standing item on Executive and Authority meeting agendas.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Work Programme 2023/24 be received and the cyclical agenda items be noted.
2. That the HMICFRS Action Plan update be a standing agenda item for meetings of the Executive and the Fire and Rescue Authority.

23-24/EC/18 and 19 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACTION 1972, SCHEDULE 12A, PARAGRAPH 3 OF PART 1: EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

Resolved:

That, pursuant to Sections 100A(2) and 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the discussion of the following items on the grounds that the matters to be discussed involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1-3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended):

Item:

23-24/EC/18 ACFO Recruitment

23-24/EC/19 Brigade Managers Local Pay Review (TOR)

The meeting ended at 12:15pm