

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE



Held on Monday, 24th July, 2023 at 6.30 pm

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters,
Newsham Court, Pincnts Kiln, Calcot, Reading, RG31 7SD.

Members:
(*present)

Councillor Dennis Benneyworth	*	Councillor Morag Malvern
* Councillor Tricia Brown		Councillor Owen Jeffery
* Councillor Haqeeq Dar		* Councillor Joshua Reynolds
Councillor Billy Drummond	*	* Councillor Robert Stedmond
* Councillor Dave McElroy		

In Attendance: Lincoln Ball, Chair of Pension Board
Wayne Bowcock (Chief Fire Officer, CFO)
Paul Bremble (Head of Corporate Services, HCS)
Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P)
Doug Buchanan (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)
Becca Chapman (Data, Performance and Risk Manager)
Daniel Harris (Internal Auditor, RSM)
Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources and Learning and Development, HHR&L&D)
Katie Mills (Assistant Chief Fire Officer, ACFO)
Fayth Rowe (Democratic Support Lead, DSL)
Lukasz Wrona (Head of Business Information Systems, HBIS)

Action

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR MUNICIPAL YEAR 2023/24

Audit and Governance Committee gave their consent for Paul Bremble, Head of Corporate Services (HCS) to preside over the meeting for the election of Chair. He requested for nominations. Councillor Dar nominated Councillor Tricia Brown as 23/24 Audit and Governance Committee Chair. This was seconded by Councillor Malvern. There were no further nominations.

RESOLVED that Councillor Brown be elected Chair.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR FOR MUNICIPAL YEAR 2023/24

Paul Bremble also sought (by consent of the Committee) nominations for the appointment of Vice-Chair. Councillor Drummond nominated Councillor Owen Jeffery. This was seconded by Councillor Reynolds. There were no further nominations.

RESOLVED that Councillor Jeffery be appointed as Vice-Chair.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Dennis Benneyworth.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest from Members in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Authority's Local Code of Conduct.

There were no Declarations of Interest received from Officers.

5. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 28 MARCH 2023

Recorded actions had been completed.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 28 March 2023, be approved as a true record to be signed by the Chair.

6. CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTERS PROPERLY REFERRED TO THIS COMMITTEE FOR DECISION

There were no matters properly referred to this Committee for decision.

7. EXTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement (HF&P) apologised on behalf of Andrew Britten's (External Auditor) inability to attend the meeting remotely, due to technical difficulties. He presented the report on behalf of Andrew Britten.

He tabled two documents, one, a letter from Lee Rowley MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local Government and Building Safety, and the other was proposals to clear the backlog and embed timely audits.

Conor Byrne summarised both documents and stated 27% of local audits have been completed for the financial year 2021-22. The National Audit Office (NAO) and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) were proposing to set a series of statutory deadlines for accounts preparers and auditors to clear the backlog of delayed audits for financial years 2015/16 to present.

Conor Byrne reported the Fire Authority had three years of unaudited accounts on its website, however, EY was in the process of finalising its audit of the

Authority's 2020/21 Statement of Accounts due to be presented to Audit and Governance Committee in October.

RESOLVED that the update from external auditors be noted.

**8. ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (RBFRS)
ACTION PLAN FOR HIS MAJESTY INSPECTORATE OF
CONSTABULARY AND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (HMICFRS)
INSPECTION REPORT 2023**

Paul Bremble, Head of Corporate Services (HCS) reported the recent His Majesty Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection resulted in the graded judgement of 'Good'. The inspection did identify 12 areas for improvement (AFI), outlined in Appendix A, of the report.

In response to a question from Councillor Reynolds, Paul Bremble reported the 12 AFI were also areas of work the Senior Leadership Team had identified as a priority. E.g., Response model (number 6 on action plan) and Workforce planning (number 10 on the action plan).

The Chair commended the actions identified on workforce planning and the improvement to positive action tools and opportunities to increase diversity in the Service. Katie Mills stated one of the recent apprentice Firefighters was previously a Fire Cadet.

RESOLVED that the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) action plan for HMICFRS Areas for Improvement (AFI) be approved.

9. LOCAL PENSION BOARD - ANNUAL REPORT

The Chair of the Pension Board, Lincoln Ball presented the report. He stated it was a legal requirement for the Fire Authority to have a Local Pension Board and provided a brief overview of the membership and role of the Board. Last year, the Pension Board Scheme Manager's role had transferred to Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer, who attended meetings.

In referring to the data in the report, paragraph 3.19, Lincoln Ball stated there was a slight decrease in the performance target met in 2022/23 (90.2%) in comparison to 2021/22 (94.6%). He reported performance indicators (KPIs) were regularly discussed at contract meetings with Pension Administrators. In response to a question from Councillor Reynolds, Lincoln Ball explained the target of *Deaths in retirement* figures were down due to the delay in the Pension provider receiving information.

Becci Jefferies, Head of Human Resources and Learning and Development (HHR&L&D), reported there was complexity associated with the age

discrimination remedy in terms of the delay in calculating individual estimates. The remedy legislation will be in place in October 2023, however, there may be a dip in performance until software is developed to deal with changes.

Councillor Reynolds asked whether targets needed to be adjusted. Lincoln Ball reported performance was likely to be steady state in six months (following the implementation of the new legislation). He also stated the role of the Pension Board was to assure compliance.

Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) outlined his role as Scheme Manager. He stated that he could exert pressure on pension administrators, however, he felt that exerting pressure on them would not be the right thing to do. The pension administrators were guiding the Service through complex changes around pension legislation, and they were one of the best pension administrators in the country.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

10. CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC FINANCE AND ACCOUNTANCY (CIPFA) FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT CODE REPORT

Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement (HF&P) reported it was a requirement of the Fire Authority to demonstrate compliance to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) financial management (FM) code document. He stated, Appendix A demonstrated how the Authority complied with the Code during 2022/23 via 17 financial standards. In referring to the RAG (red, amber and green) status of the assessment of current position table, Conor Byrne stated the amber column (external financial reporting) was due to the delay in the signing off Statement of Accounts.

RESOLVED that the contents as presented in the CIPFA FM Code report (Appendix A) be noted.

11. ANNUAL REPORT 22/23

Paul Bremble (HCS), reported the Annual Report provided a summary of performance in 2022/23 in delivering services for the people of Berkshire. He listed the following achievements and challenges during the last twelve months:

- Recruitment of 18 new Firefighter apprentices
- Donated fire aid to fire colleagues in Ukraine
- Summer heatwave – Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) dealt with 550 emergency calls on one day across the Thames Valley
- 1st year Summer Internship scheme (year one of three-year pilot scheme)
- Official opening of Theale Fire Station
- Concluded Built Environment programme

RESOLVED that the Annual report prior to external publication be noted.

12. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022-23 QUARTER FOUR (JANUARY - MARCH 2023)

Becca Chapman, Data Performance and Risk Manager presented the quarter four performance report. She reported each quadrant is discussed at Strategic Performance Board (SPB) meetings, excluding the Corporate Risk Register.

Quadrant One – Members were informed of the work that was underway to reduce fire risks, including incidents involving e-bikes and e-scooters. The Chair requested an update on the *Percentage of Full Fire Safety Audits with a 'Broadly Compliant' result*, due to the 60% target had not been achieved. Katie Mills, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) reported, the Risk Based Inspection Programme (RBIP) visited premises that had not been inspected before, and stated Members should expect to see the score move in the right direction.

Councillor Reynolds asked whether the Service were providing safety education advice on e-scooters and e-bikes to schools.

Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) reported of the problem / incidents related to charging e-bikes inside residential spaces, such as hallways. This was captured in Safe and Well visits. He stated safety education targeted at schools were around Water Safety and Road safety.

Quadrant Two – Becca Chapman reported this quadrant was around how the Service managed Human Resources and Finance, as well as progress against Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) objectives.

In answer to a question from the Chair on whether the Service had overpaid on section 31 business rates relief payments, Conor Byrne explained the Fire Authority estimate its income from central Government for section 31 business relief payments as part of budget setting and received reimbursement for current and previous years.

In response to a question from the Chair on the increase of *Percentage of working time lost to sickness across all staff groups*, Becci Jefferies reported there was likely to be an impact from delayed NHS appointments linked to the pandemic.

Quadrant Three – In discussing this quadrant, Becca Chapman reported several projects against Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) commitments in the 2022/23 Annual Plan which were in progress. In response to a question from Councillor Reynolds on the amber RAG rating on *Focus on our activities in support of Children and Young People through our road and water safety education programmes, Fire Cadets and FireSafe*, Katie Mills explained the amber status was due to the commencement of a Safety education review and new appointments had been made to this team.

Quadrant Four – This quadrant looked at how the Service assessed risks. Becca Chapman highlighted three current risks;

- Firefighter Safety
- Wholetime Operational Availability, Crewing and Capabilities
- Cost of living rise impact on staff

In response to a question from Councillor Reynolds on how the Service were targeting younger people in recruitment, Becci Jefferies provided a brief explanation of the challenges in recruitment and retention of staff across the organisation.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) The performance against Service Provision and Corporate Health measures for the targets agreed by the Fire Authority for 2022/23 be noted.
- 2) The progress made on the priority programmes be noted.
- 3) The position of the corporate risk be noted.

13. FORWARD PLAN

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Monday 30 October 2023, at 6.30pm, RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading, Berkshire RG31 7SD.

15. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the public be excluded from the meeting for the following Agenda Items on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information, as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the said Act indicated and is exempt information if, and so long as, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

16. INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement (HF&P) provided an update on RSM's final two audits on Governance and Risk Management and IT General Controls.

Action

RESOLVED that RSM's report be noted.

(The meeting concluded at 20:10)