

# MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE



Held on Monday, 30th October, 2023 at 6.30 pm

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading RG31 7SD

**Members:**  
(\*present)

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

**In Attendance:**

Paul Bremble (Head of Corporate Services, HCS)  
Andrew Britten (EY External Auditor)  
Graham Britten (Monitoring Officer, MO)  
Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P)  
Ben Cairns (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)  
David Crease (T/Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)  
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)

**Observers:**

Sandie Whiteman

**Action**

**17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies of absence was received from Councillor Robert Stedmond.

**18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Under the Authority's updated Code of Conduct which was adopted in April 2022, Members' Allowances were categorised as 'Non-Registrable Interests'.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed he had granted dispensations to all Members to allow all Members to speak and vote on Agenda Item 12 (Independent Review of Scheme of Allowances).

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.

## 19. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 JULY 2023

There were no recorded actions.

Subject to the amendment to include Councillor Owen Jeffery's attendance at the last meeting, it was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting on 24 July 2023, be approved as a true record to be signed the Chair.

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

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

## 21. INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Dan Harris, RSM Internal Auditor reported one audit had been finalised since the last meeting. On referring to Appendix A page 24, he concluded the production and delivery of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) was well designed and had established community engagement activity. He stated the audit opinion was '*Reasonable Assurance*' and four additional audits (Sickness Absence Management, Information Governance/GPDR, Payroll provider – Dataplan and Firefighter Pension Administration (West Yorkshire pension Fund WYPF)) will be presented at the next Committee meeting in January 2024.

The audit opinion gave two medium and two low actions. In response to a question from Councillor Owen Jeffery, Dan Harris reported 5 out of 9 CRMP controls listed on pages 26 – 28 had already been through Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting and were enhancements that were required.

In referring to page 34, Dan Harris reported benchmarking was a summary of previous years. Page 35 of the report compared Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue (RBFRS) assurance levels between 2020/21 to 2022/23. In conclusion, he stated RBFRS were performing very well.

Pages 39 to 40 was an overview of high priority actions across the client base.

**RESOLVED** that RSM's report be noted.

## 22. EXTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement (HF&P) reported EY (External Auditors) had completed 2020/21 Statement of Accounts. He stated the delay in signing off the Authority's financial statements was due to delays in Deloitte's audit of the Royal County of Berkshire Pension Fund. As part of its audit of property valuations, EY concluded that two properties were materially understated by £1.504 million. Prior to 2017, the Authority's properties were valued on a depreciated replacement cost basis (DRC). In 2023, the Authority's new valuers argued for a change in valuation methodology, which was subsequently adopted. This new methodology, unfortunately proved to be unreliable at valuing recently built properties and EY recommended that the Authority revert back to using DRC to value its properties. This understatement was amended in the Authority's Statement of Accounts.

Andrew Britten, EY External Auditor stated an unqualified opinion had been given on the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts. He stated, EY had recommended the valuation of two Fire Stations were reverted back to the DRC methodology, which would be the cost to rebuild.

In response to Councillor Owen Jeffery's statement on the reason why EY did not pick up the method of the valuation of properties sooner, Andrew Britten reported opinions on how to value properties were under the CIPFA code. In discussing Wokingham and Crowthorne Fire Stations, he explained, in 2017 the valuation method did not matter, however Crowthorne rebuild was significantly different and the recommendation was made to value under the same methodology.

Conor Byrne reported valuers stated the DRC methodology was a better comparison to the market due to new stations being refurbished or going to be refurbished with equality, diversity and inclusion facilities.

Councillor Dennis Benneyworth queried the timeframe of when subsequent Authority's Statement of Accounts would be signed off.

Andrew Britten reported central government were consulting and considering how the sector could sign off previous years' of Statements of Accounts. He stated, 475 local authorities were affected and only five authorities' 2022/23 Statement of Accounts were audited by the required deadline of 30 September 2023.

**RESOLVED** that:

- 1) The Audit Results Report in Appendix A, be noted.
- 2) The 2020/21 Statement of Accounts in Appendix B, be approved.

## 23. FIREFIGHTER PENSIONS - VERBAL UPDATE

Becci Jefferies, Head of Human Resources and Learning and Development (HHR&L&D), provided a verbal update on Firefighter Pensions. She reported reform to Firefighter pensions were made in 2015, which followed a legal challenge based on age discrimination. Proposals to remedy that discrimination came into effect on 1 October 2023 by the introduction of new legislation. The legislation was complicated and was in two parts;

- 1) Forward looking – from April 2024 - move Firefighters to new pension scheme
- 2) Retrospective remedy.

Firefighters will be given a choice and all firefighters will be rolled back into legacy scheme. Becci Jefferies stated the process was putting a strain on the Service and Pension Administrators. In Berkshire, 279 Firefighters were affected by the remedy. She stated that the Service had 18 months to resolve cases and Human Resources (HR) were currently collating information from affected individuals.

Calculations were complex and were only valid for a period of time. For example, she stated it took seven hours to work on the first retirement case. The Service's Pension Administrators (West Yorkshire Pension Fund, WYPF) were also working with 23 other Fire Authorities and regular contract meetings were held between WYPF and HR.

In addition, she provided a brief update on the Matthews case and stated it was another discrimination case which affected on-call staff. She explained on-call staff do not have a set salary and to remedy individual cases pay was required to be calculated. 253 on-call staff were affected which also went as far back as 1970's. She stated her team had payroll records but these were all on microfiche. The requirement to complete this remedy was also 18 months.

The tools to calculate the remedy were due to be launched on 31 October 2023. Some individuals fit within both cases which presented additional challenges and risks. She assured Members the Service were working hard to ensure they were on top of resolving remedies within the allocated timeframe.

In response to a question from the Chair, Becci Jefferies reported 56 individuals were within both cases. In response to Councillor Josh Reynolds, she stated the remedies affected resources and she was in the process of submitting budget bids to create additional support to help with the demand over the next two years.

Councillor Owen Jeffery asked the reason the remedies had to be completed in 18 Months. Becci Jefferies reported the timeframe was set out in law. Councillor Morag Malvern asked whether there was any leeway. Becci Jefferies reported some representations were made as part of a consultation, however, it had become law with very few exception circumstance.

In response to Councillor Dar, Becci Jefferies reported individuals could challenge calculations. She stated for Matthews cases, the Fire Authority have

three months to write to affected Firefighters and individuals have 6 months to respond. In some cases, tracking services will have to be used for individuals that no longer work for the Service.

#### **24. INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES AND DRAFT SCHEME OF ALLOWANCES 2024/25**

Paul Bremble, Head of Corporate Services (HCS) reported the last Independent Review of Members Scheme of Allowance was held four years ago in 2019. The recommendation from the independent review was an increase in Members average time spent on Fire Authority business per year from 18 days in 2019, to 19 days in 2023. Due to the increase in the average number of days there was a small increase to the basic allowance. Travel and subsistence allowance remained unchanged.

Councillor Haqeeq Dar was not present in the room when the vote took place.

**RESOLVED** that:

- 1) The findings of the Independent Review of Royal Berkshire Authority Scheme of Allowances (Appendix A and B) be noted; and
- 2) The draft Scheme of Allowance 2024/25 (Appendix C) be recommended to the Fire Authority for approval, subject to any future indexation that may be applied.

#### **25. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT**

Paul Bremble, Head of Corporate Services (HCS), went through each quadrant starting with Service Provision. He stated operational exercises improved the Service's response to incidences and evidenced preparedness on how staff deliver training. He discussed the Erleigh Road Fire incident which occurred on 5 April 2023 and reported the target of 0 fire deaths would not be achieved. The *Percentage of High Risk Safe and Well Referrals completed* were slightly down in the quarter.

Councillor Josh Reynolds queried the target time to complete high risk safe and well referrals. Katie Mills, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO), reported it was 14 days, however due to the complexity of some cases the target was more challenging to achieve. For example, delays in staff being able to enter the property due to resident's personal circumstances.

Councillor Josh Reynolds asked whether Members could expect the percentage for the quarter between *Percentage of Very High Risk Safe and Well Referrals completed within 72 hours* currently 37.5% to go down, and *Percentage of High Risk Safe and Well Referrals completed* currently 43.1% to go up. Katie Mills, explained it was dependant on the nature of the case and reported in quarter

one, prevention teams focused on improving performance for Very High Risk referrals, resulting in 37.5% (exceeding the target of 35%).

In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Josh Reynolds, Katie Mills reported there was a methodology to triage referrals. In terms of the measure, *Increase the number of Referrals for Safe and Well visits received from our partners*, she explained that the Service still do not see a significant number of referrals from Slough, therefore adult referrals programmes were targeted to areas where referral numbers are lower.

Paul Bremble reported measures of actual targets highlighted in blue were to indicate that it was moving in the right direction.

Councillor Billy Drummond queried how did 4.1% of working time lost to staff sickness across all groups compared to other Fire and Rescue Services. Becci Jefferies, Head of Human Resources and Learning and Development (HHR&L&D) reported the Service were trending quite well in comparison to other Services and identified the graph showing performance.

In discussing quadrant two (Corporate Health), Becci Jefferies, HHR&L&D reported she would provide Members with the breakdown of sickness across all staff groups.

HHR&amp;L&amp;D

Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement (HF&P) provided a finance update.

Quadrant three (Priority Programmes), Paul Bremble (HCS), reported the Service had made a good start to the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) against priorities and non-statutory duties. He stated work was in progress to establish a Development Programme to strengthen the Service's One Team approach and a series of staff conferences will be held in quarter two.

The Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF) sets out how the Service will maintain and renew vital capital assets to support the delivery of services. In relation to ICT, Paul Bremble highlighted Emergency Services Mobile Communication Programme (ESMCP) was highlighted as due it was a national procurement and a detail update will be provided in 12 months. Lukasz Wrona, Head of Business Information Systems (HBIS), explained there were equipment delays in the delivery ESMCP.

Quadrant four (Assurance) – Paul Bremble reported (risk 902) Resource and Development (R&D) staffing was a new risk that had been identified. Risk (917) Culture inherent and current score had been identified as high. The Senior Leadership Team monitored all risks in the Risk Register regularly.

Paul Bremble took Members through the HMICFRS Action Plan and stated a gap analysis had been developed to track the implementation of 19 Fire Standards.

**RESOLVED** that:

- 1) The performance against Service Provision and Corporate Health measures for the targets agreed by the Fire Authority for 2023/24 be noted;
- 2) The progress made on the priority programmes be noted; and
- 3) The position of corporate risk be noted.

**26. FORWARD PLAN**

**RESOLVED** that the Forward Plan be noted.

**27. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Wednesday, 24 January 2024, at 6.30pm, RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading, Berkshire RG31 7SD.

**28. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED** that under 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 circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

**29. PART II MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 JULY 2023**

The action in the minutes had been completed.

On being put to the vote, Councillors Dennis Benneyworth and Owen Jeffery abstained.

**RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting held on 24 July 2023, be approved as a true record to be signed by the Chair.

*(The meeting concluded at 8:01pm)*