

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE



Held on Wednesday, 24th January, 2024 at 6.30 pm

RBFRS Headquarters, Pincents Kiln, Newsham Court, 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: Mark Arkwell (Deputy Chief Fire Officer, DCFO)
Andrew Britten (EY External Auditor)
Graham Britten (Monitoring Officer, MO)
Paul Brooks (Head of Assets, HoA)
Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P)
Ben Cairns (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)
David Crease (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)
Becca Chapman (Data and Performance Manager)
Lucy Greenway (Senior HR Adviser)
Daniel Harris (Internal Auditor, RSM)
Katie Mills (Assistant Chief Fire Officer, ACFO)
Jim Powell (Area Manager, Collaboration and Policy, AM C&P)
Fayth Rowe (Democratic Support Lead, DSL)
Michaela Smith (Democratic Support Assistant, DSA)
Lukasz Wrona (Head of Business Information Systems, HBIS)
Cath Dukes (Information Governance Manager, IGM)

Action

30. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors Benneyworth, Reynolds and Stedmond.

31. 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.

32. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 30 OCTOBER 2023

The action for Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources & Learning and Development HR & L&D) to circulate a breakdown of sickness across all staff groups to members was completed.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting on 30 October 2023, be approved as a true record to be signed the Chair.

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

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

34. INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Dan Harris, Auditor (RSM) referring to Appendix A, stated 5 out of 8 audits planned for 2023/24 had been finalised. The 3 remaining audit reviews will be held this quarter and presented at a future Audit and Governance Committee (A&GC) meeting. Out of the 5 audits presented, 4 received positive opinions. The 5th audit (Information Governance/GDPR) was an advisory and received management actions.

Dan Harris further explained the Information Governance/GDPR review on page 34 detailed 17 best practice actions to enhance control arrangements with key findings relating to personal data maps and 3rd party management. He stated 'Protecting Information' training needs to be improved as only 53% of staff had completed this. He stated implementation dates had been agreed with management in March, June and December.

In response to a question from the Vice-Chair, Lukasz Wrona (Head of Business Information and Systems HBIS) emphasised all Green and Grey book staff, as well as Fire Authority members were required to complete Information Governance/GDPR training, as they all encounter data. He stated, since the above audit the percentage of staff that had completed this training had increased.

Councillor Dar referencing page 35 asked whether the ICT password policy would be amended in line with National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) best practice. Cath Dukes (Information Governance Manager) confirmed this policy was being updated.

RESOLVED that the RSM progress report be noted.

35. EXTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement Services HF&P) introduced auditor Andrew Britten (EY) who confirmed that at the last meeting in October the Statement of Accounts for 2020/21 had been signed off. He explained the

position of the current two outstanding open 2021/22 and 2022/23 Statement of Accounts. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) announced its move on open audits to provide maximum assurance. The back stop date to resolve open audits had been moved from 31 March to 30 September 2024. A modified opinion will be produced on those audits. He stated it was his hope legislative tools would be available to provide an opinion of 2023/24 Statement of Accounts.

Members asked for Conor Byrne's view on the open 2021/22 and 2022/23 Statement of Accounts. Conor Byrne stated it was not satisfactory from a Fire Authority perspective and stated there was no easy answer to this issue. One of the reasons for this delay was due to a shortage of personnel in the audit sector.

The Vice-Chair stated he was reassured to know that this was a national issue and acknowledged it was not an issue solely related to Fire Authority actions or lack of actions. Andrew Britten confirmed it was down to several factors not relating to the Fire Authority.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Dan Harris, Andrew Britten & Cath Dukes left the meeting at 6.49pm.

36. PAY POLICY STATEMENT

Lucy Greenway, Senior HR Adviser, stated the Service were required to prepare a Pay Policy Statement each financial year in accordance with Section 38 (1) of the Localism Act 2011. The statement includes information on remuneration for all staff as defined by the Act. Information on staff was taken from data as at 31 October 2023.

She stated several amendments were made to the 2024/25 Pay Policy Statement (Appendix A). Detailed on page 55/56, amendments include Pensions legislation to address age discrimination issues with legacy Firefighter Pensions Schemes, a second options exercise for retained Firefighters, employer contribution rates for the Firefighters Pension Scheme following GAD revaluation, car users in line with changes to the Car User Scheme, enhanced mileage rates for casual, essential and lease car users and finally incidental mileage claims for Flexible Duty Officers, Level 4 Officers and those on a continuous duty rota.

The recommendation was proposed by the Chair and seconded by Councillor Drummond.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The report be noted, and
- (2) The draft Pay Policy Statement for 2024/2025 Appendix A be recommended to the Fire Authority for approval.

37. GENDER AND ETHNICITY PAY GAP REPORTS 2023

Lucy Greenway, Senior HR Adviser, reported the Service was required to publish Gender Pay Gap data in accordance with the Equality Act each year and that the findings must be published on RBFRS website, and uploaded to the Government's gender pay gap reporting service by 31 March 2024. She also stated that the Service had undertaken an Ethnicity Pay Gap report, which showed the pay gap between white staff and staff from ethnic minority groups. RBFRS has chosen to voluntarily publish these findings for the third year.

Lucy Greenway stated the same method of calculation was used for both reports (Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap). Calculations were complex and based on hourly rates as of 31st March 2023. The Gender Pay gap reports on the proportion of males and females in the Service, as well as the mean and median pay gap. The Ethnicity Pay gap uses the same reporting method but considers white staff and staff from ethnic minority groups rather than males and females.

She explained that overall, in paragraph 3.6 of the report that a negative pay gap exists, meaning that female employees were paid more than male employees. This year the overall mean pay gap was -5.70%, and the median was -2.32%, meaning for every £1 males earn, females earn approx. £1.05p, and for the median for every £1 males earn, females earn approx. £1.02p. Mean and median decreased since last year due to several factors including roles and grades, recruitment activity and staff gaining competent status. The median was a more accurate reflection of the pay gap which was positive for RBFRS as the median was below the national average (8.3% for 2022), and comparably better than other Fire Services in 2022.

Detailing quartile information, Lucy Greenway stated a quartile was impacted year on year by movement within quartiles such as recruitment of new staff, pay increases and promotions. The gender pay gap can be explained by the terms and conditions of employment that individuals were conditioned to, with Grey Book staff attracting allowances and additional payments that Green Book staff do not. Recruitment activity of predominantly male Firefighter Apprentices had significantly impacted the pay gap overall this year.

Lucy Greenway highlighted it was important to note that while the gender pay gap figures do indicate a strong position, it should be recognised that females were significantly underrepresented in the operational workforce. The mean and median gap should therefore be looked at in the context of these demographics.

An action plan had been produced to help address the gap, particularly in terms of female operational staff which include positive action events, expanding equality monitoring processes and focus on the retention of female identifying staff. Specific actions were identified in the EDI Action Plan (Appendix C). She stated it was a sector wide issue and RBFRS were continually working on ways to address this.

Ethnicity Pay Gap figures on page 79, paragraph 3.27 show that a negative pay gap exists. This year the overall mean pay gap was -11.12%, and the median was -5.61%, meaning for every £1 a white employee earns, staff from ethnic minority groups earn approx. £1.11. The median resulted for every £1 a white employees earn, staff from ethnic minority groups earn approx. £1.05. Like the previous report the median was a more accurate reflection of the pay gap.

With no national figures to compare RBFRS to, CIPD research suggests that nationally, the average mean gap was 8.1% and the average median gap was 12.9%. RBFRS therefore has an ethnicity pay gap below the national average.

Detailing the quartile results (Appendix B), Lucy Greenway reported when broken down the gap within each quartile differs significantly from the overall ethnicity gap. She explained this could be attributed to the scope for variation in hourly pay in each quartile. Longer serving staff were more likely to have achieved competent status with 62.5% of staff from ethnic minority groups having over five years' service. i.e. ethnic minority staff were paid slightly more than white staff.

Similarly, to gender pay gap figures, the ethnicity pay gap figures were skewed due to the recruitment of Apprentice Firefighters, all of which were white. It is recognised that staff from ethnic minority groups were significantly underrepresented in the fire service.

Activities were being undertaken to attract a more diverse workforce including recruitment opportunities, creating an inclusive workplace, summer internship, community engagement and the expansion of the equality monitoring processes. She concluded that the Fire Authority can be satisfied that staff were paid for equal work and have access to the same opportunities.

In response to a comment from the Chair, Lucy Greenway stated that paragraph 3.23 on page 79 should be amended to read *ethnic minority staff are paid more than white staff*.

Councillor McElroy thanked Lucy Greenway for her work on this report and stated he felt that the median was still as important as the mean. Lucy Greenway confirmed it was a useful measure, as it relates more to private companies who may have multiple staff on very high salaries for executive staff. Lucy Greenway stated that as the Service did not have a high number of staff on higher salaries this was not so much of an issue for the Public Sector.

In response to a question from the Vice-Chair, Lucy Greenway confirmed Appendix B was a positive result, and reiterated that we need a more diverse workforce as we have had an influx of majority white male Firefighter Apprentices.

The Chair moved the report, and it was seconded by the Vice-Chair.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The details of the Gender Pay Gap Report shown in Appendix A be noted and it be agreed it be published on the RBFRS and gov.uk websites;
- (2) The details of the Ethnicity Pay Gap Report shown in Appendix B be noted and it be agreed it be published on the RBFRS website; and
- (3) The details of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plan be noted.

38. CODE OF CONDUCT CONSULTATION

Graham Britten stated the report stemmed from the Committee on Standards on Public Life in 2019, made several recommendations one of which was for Authorities to consult on the Local Government Association (LGA) Model Code of Conduct on an annual basis. The Fire Authority subsequently adopted the LGA Code and Conduct and to date has held two public consultations.

Due to little engagement from the public, the report was seeking Members to note the report and recommend to the Fire Authority that the Code of Conduct public consultation to be held every three years, or sooner subject to updates made to the document.

The Vice-Chair sought clarification on the number of people that responded to the consultation. Graham Britten reiterated that due to the low response, the report recommended consultation was not held for another three years.

A discussion was held on the low response rate to the consultation.

Councillor Malvern moved the recommendation, and it was seconded by Councillor Dar.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The outcome of the second annual consultation on the RBFRS Code of Conduct be noted; and
- (2) It be recommended to the Fire Authority it agree RBFA Code of Conduct consultation be held every three years, subject to any proposed updates for which the draft Code of Conduct document will be consulted upon sooner.

39. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT- QUARTER TWO

Becca Chapman, Data Performance and Risk Manager stated the Quarter two Performance Report outlined performance across four quadrants: Service Provision, Corporate Health, Priority Programmes and Corporate Risk.

She confirmed Quadrant 1 (Service Provision) scrutinises the Services performance against statutory obligations and pointed to case studies which detailed the effectiveness of hub-working and the response standard targets.

The Vice-Chair commented that he was impressed colleagues went above their roles in assisting with the local car wash.

In referring to page 11, the Chair cited the repeated challenge in the high number of staff in development and the effect the closed training centre (due to flooding) had on the training programme and asked if the programme could be modified with training done in smaller groups to lessen the effects of the closed centre.

Ben Cairns, Area Manager Response and Resilience (AM R&R) stated Apprentice Firefighter recruitment were in cohorts, and as part of their development attended training at the Firefighters College. He added that cohorts were in different stages of their training. Katie Mills, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) stated measures were in place to manage the impact of training on appliance availability.

Becca Chapman stated Quadrant 2 (Corporate Health) show how we monitor and manage key resources e.g. People and Finance. The case study detailed how Green Book staff absence was managed and how sickness performance compares to other fire services. She also referenced the progress against achieving EDI objectives. She confirmed the finance measures were back on track this quarter.

The Chair commented on the positive nature of refresher training referenced on page 23 of the quarterly report.

Councillor Drummond stated that on page 21, showed the Service were over budget on fleet maintenance. Conor Byrne (HF&P) stated the Authority had a fleet maintenance agreement with Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service and increasing costs had meant the Authority had to outsource to third parties. He then added that work had been carried out on water rescue safety in the east of the county. Mark Arkwell Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) added he and Paul Brookes Head of Assets (HoA) recently visited Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service to discuss current performance and to see how this can be maintained or improved via a revised partnership agreement. He stated he expected this to be in place in Q1 24/25 with improved visibility and cost controls.

Quadrant 3 (Priority Programmes) - Becca Chapman reported this quadrant focused on the progress of RBFRRS Development Programme, CRMP priorities and Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF). She stated that the Emergency Services Mobile Communication Programme (ESMCP) element of the SAIF continued to show red due to the national status of this work. She concluded this quadrant contained additional detail explaining the situation and progress on the ICT Network Equipment Upgrade, which was currently showing as amber on the SAIF.

Lukasz Wrona (HBIS) added the ESMCP project had temporarily ceased due to factors outside of the Authority's capability. Jim Powell, Area Manager Collaboration and Policy (AM C&P) stated the ESMCP project was currently going through a re-tendering process.

The final Quadrant 4 (Corporate Risk) draws together information that provide an assessment of corporate risks that may impact the delivery of objectives. The section also includes data and information from audit monitoring. Becca Chapman detailed three new risks:

- preparation for wildfire in the context of climate change,
- national power outage planning risk
- IT Disaster Recovery risk.

She stated this section also include a summary of progress against His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS) action plan, and implementation of the Fire Standards.

In response to the Chair's comment relating to page 41, risk ID 844 (*Cost of Living rise impact on staff*), Katie Mills (ACFO) confirmed this was an on-going area of concern for the Service, and retention of staff was key, as staff were likely to move to higher paid locations.

In response from a question by Councillor Drummond about page 37, risk ID 906, Lukasz Wrona (HBIS) confirmed that some systems were older than a year and stated equipment can last for up to seven years with warranties and security measures in place.

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.

40. FORWARD PLAN

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

41. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 28 March 2024, at 6.30pm, RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading, Berkshire RG31 7SD

The meeting concluded at 19:36