

ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY



COMMITTEE	AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
DATE OF MEETING	28 MARCH 2024
SUBJECT	ANNUAL REPORT ON GOVERNANCE
LEAD OFFICER	PAUL BREMBLE, HEAD OF CORPORATE SERVICES
LEAD MEMBER	COUNCILLOR TRICIA BROWN
EXEMPT INFORMATION	NONE
ACTION	DECISION

1. **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 To consider the Annual Report on Governance detailing Member Attendance and Allowances in 2023/24 for submission to the Fire Authority in June 2024.
- 1.2 For the purpose of this report, appendices A and B (Members Allowances and Attendance) are shown from 1 June 2023 to 29 February 2024. As outlined in recommendation 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, the appendices will be updated to the end of May 2024 for submission to the Fire Authority in June 2024.

2. **RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 **NOTE** the report; and
- 2.2 **RECOMMEND** that the Fire Authority:
 - 2.2.1 **NOTE** the report;
 - 2.2.2 **NOTE** Members' Allowances received from 1 June 2023 – 31 May 2024; and
 - 2.2.3 **NOTE** the 2023/24 attendance record of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority Members from 1 June 2023 – 31 May 2024.

3. REPORT

- 3.1 At the beginning of this municipal year, the Committee was presented with 12 Areas For Improvement (AFI) that were identified following the graded judgment of 'Good' by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection in January 2023. I am pleased with the workforce planning on the AFI action plan on areas of effectiveness, efficiency, and people. This has been demonstrated by the number of recruitment Firefighter Apprentice campaigns held in the last year and efforts have been made to create positive action opportunities to increase the diversity of the Service.
- 3.2 We received a positive annual report from the Pension Board and learnt of the complexities associated with the age discrimination remedy to the McCloud and Matthews cases. We were reassured to hear from the Head of Human Resources and Learning Development that the Service was working hard to ensure they were on top of resolving matters within the allocated timeframe to Firefighters Pensions.
- 3.3 We were also informed that regular contract meetings were held with Pension Administration providers, Pension Board Chair and HR Advisers to review performance targets.
- 3.4 RSM (Internal Auditor's) 2022/23 audit for Governance and Risk Management found consistent controls within Governance and Risk Management. The overall audit opinion was positive, and their annual report detailed the Service as having an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance, and internal control. There was a low management action on Member Development skill-based questionnaires. The auditors found only 11 members had completed the skills questionnaire and identified this as a risk that group leaders may not be able to match appropriate skills and interests ahead of Fire Authority annual meeting and equally, Democratic Support Team would be unable to signpost members to specific training. I hope the 23/24 Governance and Risk audit will show an improvement in this area. However, the onus is on all Fire Authority Members in assisting Group Leaders and Democratic Support Team by completing this form (skills-questionnaire).
- 3.5 The 2020/21 Statements Accounts were signed off by this Committee in October 2023 following delays in Deloitte's audit of the Royal County of Berkshire Pension Fund along with a change in calculation of property valuations. The Committee has continued to seek regular updates from our External auditors (Ernst and Young (EY)) on the additional delay of signing off 2021/22 and 22/23 Statement of Accounts. The Committee has acknowledged that this Authority is not alone, and as of 30 October 2023, 475 local authorities were also affected and only five authorities' 2022/23 Statement of Accounts were audited by the required deadline of 30 September 2023.
- 3.6 The Quarterly Performance reports highlighted fire risks associated with e-bike scooters, progress made against our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

objectives, road and water safety education programmes and the cost-of-living crisis identified as part of the Corporate Risk Register, to name but a few. We learned that the Erleigh Road fire incident in Reading impacted the target of zero fire deaths. The positive news following this tragedy was the Service were able to reach approximately 600-700 members of the community and gathered 43 referrals for Safe and Well visits.

- 3.7 The Service has made a good start against our six priorities of our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) commitments published in our 2023/24 Annual Plan. A series of well received staff conferences were held in quarter two to launch the Service's purpose and vision as well as engaging staff in Active Bystander training.
- 3.8 In January 2024, an internal audit update confirmed that over half of the audits have now been finalised. The low statistic for the completion of the Protecting Information by all staff is a concerning 53%. Although this has since increased, it is still way off 100%. All staff need to complete this training asap to ensure our security measures are as robust as possible. Fire Authority Members are also required to demonstrate they have read relevant policies around Protecting Information, of which I have been assured by Information Governance Manager she has received confirmation from all Members. This is an annual requirement; therefore, it will not be too long before we are requested to complete this task again.
- 3.9 We were given an in-depth report of the Pay Policy Statement and Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap report. This showed there is a lack of diversity within the Service, however in referring to paragraph 3.1, it was pleasing to hear of the many ways the Service are actively looking to improve this.
- 3.10 This year saw the appointment of three out of eight newly appointed Fire Authority Members onto this Committee of which they have made a valuable contribution. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all Audit and Governance Committee Members for their commitment to this Committee and the Fire Authority as a whole.

Governance

- 3.12 No formal complaints have been received against Members this year. It is reassuring that the Authority have potentially six Independent Person (s) on standby, should we need them to investigate complaints against Members, alongside our Monitoring Officer, Graham Britten.

Member Allowances

- 3.11 During the year (from 1 November 2023) Members Allowances were increased following National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Government Services pay agreement for Green Book staff. Members Allowances are indexed to Green Book pay conditions. Allowances were increased to 3.88% and this percentage was backdated to 1 April 2023.

- 3.12 In addition, Audit and Governance Committee recommended the Independent Review of the Scheme of Allowances to the Fire Authority which was approved on 8 November 2023 (minute reference 31). The Independent Review recommended an increase of the average day spent on Fire Authority business from 18 to 19 days per year, therefore a small increase will be made to allowances from 1 April 2024.
- 3.13 Member Allowances for the period of 1 June 2023 – 29 Feb 2024 are shown in **Appendix A**. The increase in allowances recommended by the Independent Review is not reflected in Appendix A, however will be reflected when this report is presented to the Fire Authority in June 2024.

Member Attendance

- 3.14 The attendance record of Members in 2023/24, is shown in Appendix B of this report. The Appendix include all meetings up to the 29 February 2024. Like Member Allowances, these attendance figures will be updated and reported to the Fire Authority in June 2024. Member attendance has been good with no meetings being inquorate, and all business being able to be conducted. Committee meeting absences have often been due to Unitary Authority meeting clashes, and apologies, when received, have generally been in good time.
- 3.15 Meeting clashes with Unitary Authority committees are unavoidable, however the Democratic Support Team liaise annually with their counterparts in each of the six Councils to ensure Fire Authority meetings do not clash with respective full Council meetings.
- 3.16 Appendix B details Committee meeting attendance only (meetings which have been held in public) and does not include Member attendance at Member briefings and events held during the year. These include Working Groups, Fire Liaison Group meetings, briefings, Armed Forces meetings, Thames Valley Collaboration Steering Group meetings and Member Development courses.

3. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC COMMITMENTS

- 4.1 Commitment 5 – We will ensure that Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service provides good value for money.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Member Allowances and expenses (Appendix A) outline the cost to the Fire Authority.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no legal implications in this report.

7. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no Equality and Diversity implications in this report.

8. RISK IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no risk implications in this report.

9. CONSISTENCY WITH DUTY TO COLLABORATE

9.1 None for the purpose of this report.

10. PRINCIPAL CONSULTATION

10.1 Consultation has been undertaken with the Chief Fire Officer, Chief Finance Officer and Monitoring Officer.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 Audit and Governance Committee meetings in 2023/24.

11.2 Fire Authority – 8 November 2023 agenda and minutes.

12. APPENDICES

12.1 Appendix A – Members' Allowances.

12.2 Appendix B – Members' Attendance.

13. CONTACT DETAILS

13.1 Fayth Rowe, Democratic Support Lead rowef@rbfrs.co.uk

13.2 Michaela Smith, Democratic Support Assistant smithmj@rbfrs.co.uk