

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

Held on Thursday, 15th February, 2024 at 6.30 pm

RBFRS Headquarters, Pincents Kiln, Newsham Court, Calcot, Reading RG31 7SD



- Members:** (*present)
- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| * Councillor Wendy Griffith | Councillor Tricia Brown |
| * Councillor Dave McElroy | * Councillor Jeff Brooks |
| * Councillor Owen Jeffery | Councillor Haqeeq Dar |
| * Councillor Joshua Reynolds | * Councillor Paul Gittings |
| Councillor Ishrat Shah | * Councillor Pauline Helliars-Symons |
| * Councillor Robert Stedmond | * Councillor Morag Malvern |
| * Councillor Helen Taylor | * Councillor Tina McKenzie-Boyle |
| * Councillor Billy Drummond | * Councillor Mike Smith |
| * Councillor Peter Frewer | * Councillor Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey |
| * Councillor Dennis Benneyworth | Councillor Simon Werner |

In Attendance: Wayne Bowcock (Chief Fire Officer, CFO)
Paul Bremble (Head of Corporate Services, HCS)
Graham Britten (Monitoring Officer, MO)
Paul Brooks (Head of Assets, HoA)
Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P)
Lucy Greenway (Senior HR Adviser)
Katie Mills (Assistant Chief Fire Officer, ACFO)
Nikki Richards (Deputy Chief Executive, DchEX)
Christian Riley (Communications and Engagement Officer)
Fayth Rowe (Democratic Support Lead, DSL)
Jo Watts (Communications and Engagement Lead)
Lukasz Wrona (Head of Business and Information Systems, HBIS)

Observers: Kathryn Richardson (HMICFRS Liaison Service Lead) - *virtual*
Jess Taylor (Public)

37. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Brown, Dar, Shah and Werner.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest received 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.

Action

39. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 8 NOVEMBER 2023

There were no recorded actions.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2023, be approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

40. PETITIONS AND QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDERS 19 AND 25

There were no petitions and questions from the Public under Standing Orders 19 and 25.

41. RECEIPT OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

Passing of Wayne Brown, Chief Fire Officer of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service

It is with great sadness that we learnt of the passing of Wayne Brown, Chief Fire Officer of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service. Wayne dedicated his life to the fire service, having served 28 years in London Fire Brigade before joining West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service in 2019.

The Service has offered its condolences to Wayne's family, friends and colleagues at West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service.

On behalf of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority, the Chair expressed his deepest condolences to Wayne's loved ones, friends and colleagues. The Fire Authority observed a minute's silence as a sign of respect.

Culture Update

At the beginning of the year, the Independent Culture Review into South Wales Fire and Rescue Service was published. Since then, the Senior Leadership Team has been reviewing the report to ensure any relevant learning is captured.

As the report is very comprehensive and detailed in nature, we want to make sure that we balance taking the appropriate time to thoroughly review it in order to identify the relevant learning for the Service.

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) will ensure this learning is fed back into the Service and the plans that underpin Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFPS) culture and values. The Chair assured Members that he would update as SLT continue to explore this report and its implications on both the Service and the sector.

Incident in Reading

Following an incident that occurred in Reading, the Chair updated Members on some of the outstanding work undertaken by several crews. On the evening of 1 February, firefighters from Caversham Road, Wokingham Road, Whitley Wood and Theale were sent to an incident on Southcote Road, Reading alongside one Officer. There they discovered a fire on the first and second floor of a block of flats.

Firefighters rescued five people using smoke hoods and placed them into the care of South-Central Ambulance Service before extinguishing the fire. The use of smoke hoods allowed crews to evacuate residents through areas of the building affected by smoke and into clear air.

The Chair congratulated the fire crews who acted decisively to ensure that this incident did not become a tragedy. The speed, efficiency and professionalism of their response was reflective of the quality of Service provided in Berkshire.

January Floods

Following a period of heavy rain at the start of January, the Service was called to respond to severe flooding caused by Storm Henk across the County. Working alongside partners, our teams dealt with a series of challenging incidents, including flooding in properties, water rescues and evacuations. Areas in West Berkshire and around Wraysbury were particularly hard hit and firefighters worked closely with Local Authorities, Berkshire Lowland Search and Rescue, and Blue Light Partners to support those worst affected.

During the flooding, Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) also played a key role in supporting our response. Control Staff operated a triage system for calls and ensured that incidents were filtered and responded to in an effective manner.

The Chair thanked everyone who supported the response to the floods. The collective efforts of everyone involved in the response to the adverse weather highlights how our teams work well together.

Recruitment of New Wholetime Apprentices

Throughout the winter, the Service has been hard at work recruiting the next generation of firefighters in Berkshire. Earlier this month, we welcomed 18 new Wholetime Firefighter Apprentices. These Apprentices began their journey to becoming firefighters back in the summer and underwent a rigorous selection process before being chosen to join the Service.

Currently, our newest cohort of recruits are away on a training course at the Fire Service College in Gloucestershire. However, they will return to Berkshire next month to complete the final few weeks of their training, before graduating in early May.

Over the Christmas period, we also launched another wholetime recruitment drive. These applicants are now going through the selection process, and I look forward to welcoming the successful candidates in the near future.

On behalf of the Authority, the Chair thanked everyone who worked hard in supporting the recruitment and training of our newest recruits and requested Members to join him in wishing our new Apprentices the best of luck as they embark on the first steps of their new careers.

Launch of Summer Internship Scheme

The Service has recently began recruiting our next cohort of interns as part of our Summer Internship Scheme. Now in its third year, the Scheme aims to encourage young people who may not have considered a career in the Fire and Rescue Sector to explore some of the many roles available to them.

The Service is looking for five interns who are 18, live in Berkshire and from groups that are underrepresented in our Service to join the Scheme for five weeks in the summer, from Thursday, 4 July to Friday, 9 August.

Each intern will have the opportunity to gain valuable real-world work experience and transferable skills that they can take with them into their future careers or academic pursuits. During the Programme, interns will take part in learning and development workshops to enhance their skills, as well as visits to fire stations across the County.

The application window is open until Sunday, 25 February and I would like to express my best wishes to those who are applying for this year's Scheme.
Post meeting note: applications were extended to Sunday, 24 March 2024 and age range was widened to 17 -18 year olds.

Member Development Survey

23/24 Member development survey will be circulated to Members and will be held from 16 February (tomorrow) until 23 February 2024.

All Members were encouraged to complete within the above timeframe. The results from the survey will be fed back to Member Development Working Party and Audit and Governance Committee.

42. ISSUES ARISING FROM THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

There were no issues arising from the Audit and Governance Committee.

43. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS UNDER STANDING ORDER 30

There were no questions from Members under Standing Order 30.

44. NOTICES OF MOTION UNDER STANDING ORDER 44

There were no notices of Motion under Standing Order 44.

45. RECOMMENDATIONS OF COMMITTEES

RESOLVED that it was noted agenda Items 10 (Budget 2024/25) and 11 (Automatic Fire Alarm Consultation) were recommended from Management Committee on 6 February 2024, and Items 12 (Pay Policy Statement) and 13 (Code of Conduct Consultation) were recommended from Audit and Governance Committee on 24 January 2024.

46. BUDGET 2024/25

Councillor Mike Smith, Budget and Income Generation Lead reported he had met with Budget Working Party (BWP) and Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement over a period of five months. He stated specific elements of the budget was the planning of the Authority's viable financial future to provide prudent investment, sustainable growth and value for money. He confirmed he fully supported the recommendations of the report and highlighted the following:

- 2.99% Council Tax increase from last year – providing value for money per household at £81.31 per household.
- Balanced budget of just under £46 million which was an 5.5% increase (excluding pension adjustments).
- Budget pressures
- Savings and efficiencies
- 10 additional Firefighters
- Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF) – new Training Centre, refurbishment to Langley and Slough Fire Stations, mostly funded by the Dee Road sale.
- Limited borrowing under the Authority's self-imposed limit of 2.5% of finance costs to net revenue stream.

Starting with the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP), Conor Byrne; Head of Finance and Procurement (HF&P) reported the recommended increase to council tax precept for 2024/25 by the maximum permissible by government was 2.99%. He stated the increase equated to £2.36 per annum for a Band D household, which was below the current rate of inflation. It was assumed the precept will increase to 1.99% in subsequent years.

The Authority's total funding was £45.964 million which was an increase from the draft Budget total given to Management Committee on 6 February 2024. The income from Council Tax was £29.891 million.

Conor Byrne reported the funding projection of Revenue Support Grant will increase year on year and the Funding Guarantee was based on a minimum increase 4% equating to £770K.

Moving on to efficiencies and savings, Conor Byrne reported the Service had identified £565K worth of savings in 2024/25. In referring to the Authority's budget pressures he reported $\frac{3}{4}$ of the revenue budget account for the Green and Grey Book pay awards, and pay awards are assumed to be 3.75% in 2024/25 (above the precept of 2.99%).

In relation to station budget pressures, the recruitment of additional 10 firefighters should reduce overtime costs. Staff turnover had increased over the past year, leading to increased training and recruitment costs.

Over the past decade employee contribution costs of firefighter pension schemes had increased. Employer contributions for firefighters pension scheme will increase to 37.6% up from 28.8% of salary at an additional cost of £1.3 million in 2024/25. The government has confirmed they will provide grant funding in 2024/25 to cover this additional cost but has provided no guarantee of funding thereafter.

Additional revenue funding of capital had been added to the budget for 2024/25 to fund shorter life assets. The ratio of financing costs to the revenue budget remains affordable.

In answer to Councillor Jeffery's question about the Firelink Grant reduction, Conor Byrne reported the government made a decision to reduce this grant by 20% per annum over a five-year period.

The Chair thanked Conor Byrne, Councillor Smith and BWP. He stated he was keen to support additional 10 firefighters as it would provide increased resilience and flexibility to the Service. He acknowledged the pressure on losing staff to other FRSs.

In reference to pages 31 and 32 of the Budget report, Councillor Helliard-Symons commented on the extra firefighters, ICT upgrades and safe and well visits. She urged all Members to ensure their Councils notified the Service of any vulnerable members of their community.

The Vice-Chair thanked Conor Byrne and BWP for compiling this budget, as it represented good value for money. He referenced recent incidences in Reading and commended the work of the crews and urged Members to lobby government on Settlement Funding to provide a level of certainty.

On introducing the Efficiency & Productivity Plan, Councillor Smith reported as part of the Authority's income generation, £30K will be received from renting service houses, reduction in prevention stock items will save £49K due to changes in what we do, (as safe and well visits were targeted to those who

deem high risk). There are also £142K worth of savings on contractual expenditure on contracts and on improved ways of working, all of which total £565K.

Conor Byrne reported focus will be made on productivity of operational staff, for example, how the Service respond to Automatic Fire Alarms (AFA's), the deployment of new technologies and streamlining processes.

Introducing the Strategic Asset Management Framework (SAIF), Councillor Smith listed the staff morale boost from the Authority's investment on equipment and buildings. Namely, the new training centre, upgrade to Slough and Langley fire stations, invest to save products and efficiency gains from ICT.

Conor Byrne reported the SAIF sets out the Authority's capital projects over a 10-year period which will improve the fabric and reduce the carbon footprint of the Service's buildings.

The Chair reflected on how the estate had changed over the years, in particular newer stations like Theale, Hungerford and Crowthorne and added soon the Service will receive a fit for purpose training centre.

In discussing the Treasury and Investment Strategy, Councillor Smith stated the need to ensure the security of the sum invested and investment returns within an ethical framework.

Councillor Smith reported approximately £10 million will be spent in 2024/25 on capital expenditure, 70% of which will be funded from the sale of the Dee Road fire station site. The rest will come from revenue with very little borrowing. Financing costs to net revenue streams were under what the Authority had set.

In response to a question from the Chair, Conor Byrne confirmed the Service anticipates an interest rate reduction over the next year. In referring to page 72, the table showed the anticipated capital expenditure over the next 4 years and page 73 showed the historic debt. The graph on page 74 showed the liability benchmark of the future borrowing needs will increase from 2025/26. Page 75 showed the investments falling by nearly half in 2024/25. Page 76 detailed the estimates of the increase in debts from £8.9 million in 2022/23 (actual) to £13.9 million in 2027/28 (estimate) over the next 4 years. The capital programme over the next 4 years was ambitious but affordable.

Councillor Smith presented the Reserves policy. He stated at the end of 2022/23 the Service had a revenue deficit of £733K funded from the Budget Contingency Reserve. This reserve was replenished in 2023/24 by £573,000 from the Revenue Account. As of 31st March 2024, it had been predicted the Authority will have £15 million in all reserves but will halve over the coming year.

Conor Byrne reported Section 25, Local Government Act 2003 requires reserves to be maintained and adequate for the medium-term.

In response to the Vice-Chair, Conor Byrne confirmed 45-week maternity pay had been incorporated into the budget.

In discussing Fees and Charges, Councillor Smith reported there was a 4% uplift from last year due to inflation.

In terms of Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) budget, Conor Byrne reported it was presented to the TVFCS Joint Committee and stated the revenue budget will increase by 8.9% in 2024/25, due in part to prior-year pay awards and employee contributions. The proposed capital expenditure was budgeted at £665K. Lastly, Thames Valley FRS partners contribute £50,000 each into the renewal fund, required to pay for system renewals.

The Chair moved recommendations 2.1 – 2.8 and it was seconded by Councillor Smith. On being put to the vote.

It was unanimously **RESOLVED** that:

- 1) An increase in the precept of 2.99% for 2024/25 by adopting the formal resolution in Appendix A be approved;
- 2) The Medium-Term Financial Plan in Appendix B be approved;
- 3) The Efficiency and Productivity Plan in Appendix C be approved;
- 4) The Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF) in Appendix D be approved;
- 5) The Prudential Indicators, Treasury Strategy and Investment Strategy in Appendix E be approved;
- 6) The Reserves Policy in Appendix F be approved;
- 7) The fees and charges for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix G be approved;
- 8) The TVFCS revenue and capital budgets for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix H, as well as the Authority's 2024/25 contribution of £50,000 to the TVFCS Renewals Fund be approved.

47. AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARM CONSULTATION

Paul Bremble outlined the report was seeking Members approval to commence a 10-week public consultation on unwanted fire signals. He added, the reduction of unwanted fire signals was a national drive from the Home Office, as well as His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS) on their recent inspection of Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) had also identified they wanted the Service to reduce this type of incident to increase productivity.

Priority 5 of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) was centred around how the Service intends to develop our Fire Protection service to support the

resilience of businesses. Data had shown 45% of callouts were made to this incident type and 99.3% of these calls no action was required.

Officers had researched 20 FRSs policies on their attendance at unwanted fire signals and found their responses varied. Paul Bremble reported Automatic False Alarms (AFAs) cause disruption to crews training, safe and well visits and planned tasks, all which have to be rescheduled impacting other work. He reported prevention activities would increase on the reduction of AFAs.

The consultation include three options, option 3 would bring the Service in-line with the national average of 39%. There was no proposal to change callouts to domestic / residential properties.

As requested, additional information had been included into the consultation document following feedback from Management Committee on 6 February 2024. In response to a comment from the Chair, Paul Bremble confirmed all three options in the consultation document would be considered.

Councillor Helliard-Symons requested for the Service's preferred option to be removed from the paper. She then commented on the devastating consequences on school fires and suggested the following wording is included to the consultation document '*and to schools between 6pm and 8am*'. The proposal was seconded by Councillor McKenzie-Boyle.

The Chair stated he felt the above wording from Councillor Helliard-Symons could have been suggested prior to the Fire Authority meeting, however he will put her proposals to the Fire Authority for vote. The Vice-Chair reported Councillor Helliard-Symons comments were addressed in the consultation document following Management Committee and felt the specific comments made could also reflect comments made by consultation respondents. He suggested for the wording to be included when the Fire Authority examine the consultation results and for it to be voted on then.

Councillor Stedmond expressed he was concerned the public may not be aware of the proposals that the Service will no longer attend school AFAs and stated, several schools do not have sprinkler systems installed. A discussion was held on potential arson attacks in schools as well as the absence of sprinkler systems.

Councillor Smith asked how many AFA callouts to schools did the Service receive. He clarified to Members that the proposed consultation was about reducing AFA calls and added, the Service would always attend callouts to fires.

Councillor Reynolds requested for the consultation to be sent specifically to schools for their response.

Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) thanked Members for their comments and stated in relation to the installation of sprinkler systems in schools he reported parents, teachers, pupils/ students would feel more confident knowing

their buildings had this resource and requested Members to lobby their respective Local Authority departments to install sprinklers in every school.

Members concurred with the statement and although they acknowledged continual budget pressures in schools, they reported they would lobby for sprinklers in all schools, not just new builds.

On putting Councillor Helliar-Symons proposed wording to the consultation to the vote, 4 voted for, and 11 against.

Unanimously **RESOLVED** that:

- 1) It be agreed to commence a 10-week public consultation in March 2024, at a specified date to be confirmed at the Chief Fire Officer's discretion, to inform a future decision on how it responds to Automatic Fire Alarms;
- 2) The draft consultation document, be agreed subject to delegating responsibility for any minor amendments to the consultation document to the Chief Fire Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Fire Authority and CRMP Lead Member.

48. PAY POLICY STATEMENT

Lucy Greenway, Senior HR Adviser, stated the Service are required to prepare a Pay Policy Statement each financial year and that the Statement included information on remuneration of all staff. The data was recorded as at 31 October 2023.

She stated several amendments were made to the 2024/25 Pay Policy Statement including pensions legislation with legacy Firefighter Pensions Schemes, a second options exercise for retained Firefighters, employer contribution rates for the Firefighters Pension Scheme, 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 Chair commented on a typo on page 49. Lucy Greenway reported it should read 2023/24 and it would be amended prior to publication.

The Chair proposed the recommendation and it was seconded by Councillor Shepherd-DuBey.

Unanimously **RESOLVED** that the draft Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25 be approved.

49. CODE OF CONDUCT CONSULTATION

Graham Britten, Monitoring Officer (MO) stated the Authority's Code of Conduct Consultation relates to the publication of a report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) in January 2019 into Local Government Ethical Standards.

The CSPL report made several recommendations, some aimed at central government, others at local government. The Democratic Support Lead undertook a benchmarking exercise of the Authority's ethical governance framework against the CSPL's report's recommendations. The Authority adopted the CSPL recommendations to adopt the Local Government Association (LGA) Model Code of Conduct for Members; and that the code be reviewed annually and where possible consider the views of the public and other stakeholders.

The report sets out the results of the Authority's second annual consultation, however little feedback/ responses were received. The recommendation from Audit and Governance Committee was seeking the Authority to note consultation feedback and approve that the consultation be held every three years.

Unanimously **RESOLVED** that:

- 1) The outcome of the second annual consultation on the RBFA Member Code of Conduct be noted; and
- 2) It be approved the RBFA Member 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.

50. FORWARD PLAN

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

51. MINUTES OF THE STANDING COMMITTEES

RESOLVED that it be noted the Minutes of recent meetings were published on RBFRS website.

52. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Monday 22 April 2024, 6.30pm at RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading RG31 7SD.

(The meeting concluded at 8:05pm)