

Strategic Assets & Sustainability - 2023-24 Lead Member Annual Report

Assets (Estates, Fleet & Equipment)

Context

There has been much change within the Assets service during 2023-24, taking opportunity from managerial staff turnover and set against a backdrop of a complex and congested business-as-usual programme whilst sustaining momentum with strategic planning activities. Notably, to support fresh thinking, an independent professional review was completed of the Facilities and Property Capital Projects sections and a decision taken to combine them into a single function within the Assets service. This approach puts responsibility for all the strategic assets of Estates, Fleet and Equipment (including Supplies, but less ICT) into a single area of responsibility, thereby improving consistency and quality of service, whilst realising some efficiencies and cashable benefits. A critical enabler for this approach to succeed has been the recruitment of a professionally qualified senior leader, which was achieved in November 2023.

Estates – Facilities, Property Capital Management and Sustainability

Review

Integrating the Facilities and the Property Capital Management sections commenced in November 2023, including co-location of the workplace and a team building event, culminating in the appointment of an Estate Manager on 25 March 2024. This new role is key to galvanising integration, facilitating positive change and professionalising the function to realise yet more benefits.

The Facilities team also benefitted from the appointment of a permanent fulltime Facilities Manager from 11 March 2024 along with regularising a number of temporary changes in the organisation to reduce uncertainty and help improve focus. Under new leadership, the team can continue to develop and evolve their working practices to provide a customer focussed and efficient service underpinned by assured compliance. This ethos will be supported by the professional soft services providers (principally waste and cleaning) and hard services provider (planned preventative maintenance) that have had contracts re-tendered or refreshed over

Q3/Q4 of 2023/24. Notably, the previously reported NFCC-led collaborative cleaning contract procurement did not progress satisfactorily so RBFRS ran their own competition – this was a considerable piece of work for busy teams, including sterling support from Procurement colleagues. Whilst great progress has been made in developing some parts of the estate in recent years, there is still much more work needed and this continues to drive demand across the facilities function.

The Property Capital Management team has flexed over most of the year to deal with their own long term resource gaps, with team members stepping up as required to lead on project planning and delivery, along with real estate management. The resourcing churn started to settle from January 2024 with the return of a key officer in the team. The team has also benefitted from professional multi-disciplinary consultant support to plan and deliver projects – this support is critical to help guarantee successful outcomes and to ensure RBFRS is not exposed to unnecessary risks around compliance, liability, health and safety or the like. Following on from last year the shift in strategy from large scale construction rebuild projects continues to focus on refurbishment of our existing locations in order to create affordable, sustainable and more immediate improvements areas across our estate. As a reminder, the priority areas of this estate development approach are:

- Improving equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) – creating facilities that support, encourage and promote a more diverse workforce now and into the future
- Improving contamination control – addressing the growing risk of contaminants by providing better facilities for decontamination and contamination control
- Sustainability – making the estate more environmentally friendly by carrying out upgrades and initiatives to reduce our carbon output and realise potential revenue savings by doing so
- Improving the building fabric – investing in the fabric of the buildings to ensure longevity of our current estate and to provide fit-for-purpose workplaces for our staff

A range of EDI and contamination improvements have been carried out across the estate, including providing better facilities such as upgrading dormitories and showering areas, and improvements to better control contamination. Slough in particular has had a significant amount of work done to meet optimum EDI standards and to help make the buildings more sustainable with better insulation and installation of LED lighting, along with improved water rescue facilities.

Sustainability planning work increased in tempo during the 2023/24 year; building on the carbon footprint benchmark assessment the previous year, heat decarbonisation plans have been completed for the estate portfolio. This work fed into a comprehensive bid for Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS) funding with a grant of £0.927M being awarded in March 2023. The SAIF includes additional funding to combine with the grant totalling £1.77M to help transform five of our least energy efficient stations.

The Whitley Wood Training Centre has had urgent repairs completed to the firehouse facility to ensure continuity of training, although more work will be needed to keep this critical capability operational. The major project to redevelop the training centre has progressed well with detailed planning consent submitted to the local planning authority in December 2023 and a decision expected by end-April 2024. Communications with all stakeholders has been a key activity within the project and the Management Committee approved funding at the February 2024 meeting.

Ongoing and looking forward

Over the coming year under the new leadership and organisational arrangements, the Estates team will be aiming to continue to drive forward a highly customer focussed approach to support the wider organisation and to deliver its objectives within a safe and comfortable workplace. This will be underpinned by development of improved process and procedures and assured compliance. Better team integration and increased collaboration will ensure that initiatives result in improved and sustainable working environments for our personnel by achieving the estates development objectives that are outlined within the SAIF.

The SAIF, which was approved by Members in February 2024, sets out the outline plan for estates development for the coming years. The focus of the team will be to deliver these projects (subject to the required approvals) over 2024-25. The priority projects will be:

- Completion of the new Whitley Wood Training Centre by March 2025 (subject to planning)
- Completing the improvement works at Slough fire station by end-May 2024
- Installing LED lighting across much of the estate by end-March 2024
- Planning in 2024 to deliver the joint PSDS/SAIF sustainability projects for completion by 31 March 2026.

The existing 5-year Property Asset Management Strategy covers the period 2020 – 2025, but the opportunity will be taken in 2024 to refresh it and convert it to an Estate Strategy with an increased focus on sustainability and asset management.

Fleet & Equipment

Review

The focus for fleet over 2023-24 has been to continue to consolidate the excellent progress in transforming our front-line appliance fleet and other specialist vehicles which have been delivered in the preceding years. Since 2017, 19 new front line pumping appliances have been delivered into service with the Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Services working together to design and procure a standard fire appliance that carries an aligned inventory of equipment. White fleet vehicles have been on-boarded as they are made available through the procurement process, with blue light fitting and other modifications now a well embedded process using the Hants & Isle of Wight FRS Joint Working Agreement (JWA). The Service's first electric vehicles (cars and small vans) have been receipted and deployed, with mixed feedback on their performance – the key is to ensure they are driven correctly and used for the right function, which has been communicated widely now. The mild hybrid engine response cars previously reported on are performing well, with three more awaiting delivery and fit out – these were due March 2024, but due to current global supply chain issues, lead times for vehicles remain significantly increased.

Notably, one flexible duty officer has taken on a full electric vehicle with positive feedback on efficacy and performance to date. The JWA was due for renewal by end-March 2023, but for operational and business continuity reasons it has been extended for a further 12 months on a flexible basis.

With the continued support of the Fire Authority, the Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF) was approved by Members in February 2024. This makes provision for the next phase of vehicle renewals and replacements. The intention is to continue developing the fleet, building on from the progressive and successful approach taken thus far.

On the equipment front, the Service has now fully transitioned to 'Interspiro' breathing apparatus equipment after the completion of a competitive tender process during 2022/23. The new equipment has been designed with firefighter health, safety and welfare in mind and has brought innovations such as full telemetry, wireless communications, and personal issue facemasks to our staff. The equipment is identical across the Thames Valley, further aligning our operational response with the goal of reducing the number of operational resources that need to be deployed to an incident where cross border resources are used. A notable new capability introduced in 2023 is battery operated cutting equipment for vehicle and other rescue use. The equipment procurement process included rigorous research and trials resulting in highly capable and easy to operate tools that will reduce noise on site and offer a high degree of portability for frontline firefighters.

The important (non-PPE) RBFRS Workwear Project has gained momentum over the year with an integrated project team standing up and developing a wide set of requirements based on end user engagement and feedback. The Service took the step to run its own procurement process due to challenges with the national framework approach, which has allowed for focus on EDI, quality and sustainability to better meet the needs of end users and the Service as a whole. Invitation to tenders will be issued in early-April 2024 with the intention to have agreed supplier(s) in place by Spring 2025 – this extended timeline is deemed realistic and will allow for extensive wearer trials to be completed during 2024.

Ongoing and looking forward

The CRMP projects and objectives will help clarify strategic asset requirements, to support and inform our future procurement needs for special appliances and operational equipment, along with informing the fleet strategy, which was due for renewal in 2023, but will now be produced prior to the HMICRS inspection in 2024. This coming year will include resetting the requirements for the Fleet JWA to ensure best value for money to the Service along with concluding the previously mentioned workwear project. Sustainability will continue to be thread throughout the planning process, to include increasing the use of hybrid, plug-in hybrid EVs and pure EVs where practicable along with horizon scanning the market and sector for alternative fuel options like synthetic fuel. The overall objective remains the creation of a sustainable rolling procurement plan to ensure that RBFRS has fit for purpose fleet and equipment.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Review

In accordance with the RBFRS' ICT strategy, the strategic funding model for ICT has continued to shift away from perpetual licensing of software into subscription-based services. Echoing last year there has been a myriad of events and initiatives across the ICT domains, with continual progress across this landscape. Core projects this period have largely been associated with refresh of hardware assets, notably the first phase of laptop replacement including multi-functional devices, which will allow to better leverage our systems and further move away from paper, tablets for operational officers to support further digitisation of processes, and operational communications devices such as Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs), station end and fireground radios.

Key systems' migrations and upgrades have been successfully completed, including migration of all departments' data to SharePoint enabling migration of RBFRS server infrastructure to the cloud and removal of systems necessary to manage it on premise. The move continues to enhance opportunities awarded to the organisation by retaining its data within one ecosystem, paving the way for further consolidation and increased automation. A significant amount of work has been done to establish

a path to migrating our core systems to the cloud enabling the project to go ahead in 2024/25.

Systems supporting HR, crewing, assets, and prevention and protection systems have all received upgrades and improvements aimed at reducing the effort required to complete common and repetitive processes, with desktop and mobile apps developed and more benefits to be realised during the coming months. Those already include further developments leveraging existing systems to digitise activities related to operational assets and routine asset checks, or digitised ways of reporting defects.

Notably, the procurement of a station-end mobilising system used to mobilise crews to incidents at each station has been completed. Its function is critical to enabling crews to mobilise by analysing signals coming from Thames Valley Control, displaying incident related information and sounding the alarm, printing incident information, as well as performing a number of other automated actions including opening doors on the path to the appliance bay and the bay door itself. The specification chosen prepares the Service for migration away from PSTN telephony, currently used as a backup route for mobilising signals and which has been announced end-of-life and is currently planned for switch off by Openreach at the end of 2025.

Paired with access control equipment, our newly refreshed station-end system will continue to support the crews behind the scenes by providing appropriate information on the way to the incident or guarding against contamination of “clean” areas following a return.

Ongoing and looking forward

Completion of the network infrastructure refresh, second phase of replacing our laptops and desktops, replacement of service’s mobile phones, systems consolidation and automation will be a key focus for next year.

A major project associated with our core server estate will be a delivery of the on premise-server to cloud migration. This is a key project for the service and one which

will further improve the resilience of our core asset as well as our business continuity arrangements.

In line with these activities, a new system of deploying laptops and desktops will be introduced reducing the 'hands-on' effort of engineers to the necessary minimum in support of improving our productivity and efficiency.

Efforts to leverage newly enabled functionalities within Microsoft 365 will continue as systems are reviewed at key points in their lifecycle. Cross-department collaboration efforts will increase to support staff's engagement with technology already available. This includes completion of the rollout and expanding the utilisation of recently developed asset management functionality to other areas of the organisation. Finalising Thames Valley Fire Control Service's mobilising and communication equipment refresh project will ensure continued reliability of the solution.

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Lead Member for Strategic Assets and Sustainability