

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE



Held on Thursday, 28th March, 2024 at 6.30 pm

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

Members:
(*present)

Councillor Dennis Benneyworth	*	Councillor Morag Malvern
* Councillor Tricia Brown	*	* Councillor Dave McElroy - <i>virtual</i>
* Councillor Haqeeq Dar	*	* Councillor Joshua Reynolds
Councillor Billy Drummond	*	* Councillor Robert Stedmond
* Councillor Owen Jeffery		

In Attendance: Wayne Bowcock (Chief Fire Officer, CFO)
Graham Britten (Monitoring Officer, MO) – virtual
Paul Bremble (Head of Corporate Services, HCS)
Paul Brooks (Head of Assets, HoA)
Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources and Learning Development, HHR&L&D)
David Crease (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)
Fayth Rowe (Democratic Support Lead, DSL)
Michaela Smith (Democratic Support Assistant, DSA)

Observers: Kathryn Richardson (HMICFRS Service Liaison Lead)

42. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors Benneyworth and Drummond.

43. 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.

44. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 JANUARY 2024

Action

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting on 24 January 2024, be approved as a true record to be signed by the Chair.

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

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

46. ANNUAL REPORT ON GOVERNANCE

Paul Bremble (Head of Corporate Services, HCS) presented the Annual Report on Governance for members consideration and recommendation to the Fire Authority in June 2024. He stated the appendices include members allowance and meeting attendance from June 2023 to February 2024, which would be updated to the end of May 2024, prior to submission to the Fire Authority.

In listing some of the items discussed during the year, starting at paragraph 3.2 he stated, the Committee 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. During this meeting, Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources and Learning Development, HHR&L&D) reassured members that the Service was working hard to ensure they were on top of resolving matters within the allocated timeframe to Firefighters Pensions whilst noting that progress was subject to the availability of related Government guidance.

This year saw the appointment of three new members to this Committee and the Committee discussed issues relating to pension, gender and ethnicity pay gaps. Although these reports showed there is a lack of diversity within the Service, the Service is working hard to address this and are part of the Five Shires working group which share learning and experiences across other Services.

The report also included the Statement of Accounts for 2020/21 had been signed-off, and it was acknowledged there was an additional delay of signing off 2021/22 and 2022/23 Statement of Accounts. It is anticipated the above Statement of Accounts and Statement of Assurance will be signed off by this Committee in the latter part of 2024.

The Committee received updates on internal and external audits. Results were positive and areas of improvement brought by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection last year were also raised. No formal complaints were received this year, and the Chair thanked all members for their contributions over the past year.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The report be noted; and

(2) The Fire Authority note recommendations 2.2.1 to 2.2.2 of the report.

47. RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON ADDRESSING THE LOCAL AUDIT BACKLOG IN ENGLAND

Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) reported the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) had sought Fire Authority comments on its proposals to address the local government audit backlog in England. He confirmed the Audit and Governance Chair had responded to the consultation on behalf of the Fire Authority.

The delay in signing off accounts was due to demand as well as changes in guidance and regulation. Wayne Bowcock reported this issue had been identified as a risk on the Corporate Risk Register and stated several local authorities across England were also affected with this issue.

The DLUHC consultation made suggestions on ways this issue could be resolved and in response, the Fire Authority expressed their concerns with some of the proposals, attached as Appendix A. The Fire Authority were currently waiting for the consultation findings.

In response to a question raised by Councillor Reynolds, Wayne Bowcock said there was no definitive date when the Fire Authority will receive a response from DLUHC.

The Vice-Chair stated he found the increase in the cost for an external audit from £33K per annum to £101K per annum detailed in paragraph 5.1 disgraceful.

Councillor Malvern asked whether the Government realised the effect the delay was having on the country. Wayne Bowcock reported he believed they were well sighted of the impact due to discussions at National Fire Chief Council (NFCC) meetings and discussions Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P) had with relevant departments and local government Heads of Finance. He stated, as demand now outstrips supply, this has led to the increase in external audit cost, as pointed out by the Vice-Chair.

The Chair expressed that it was her hope the Fire Authority would not be penalised for the audit backlog and delay in signing of accounts.

In response to a question from Councillor Dar, Wayne Bowcock reported that he was unaware whether external auditors were invited to respond to DLUHC consultation.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The Authority's response to the Government Consultation on proposals to deal with the local audit backlog in England be noted.

48. MEMBER DEVELOPMENT ANNUAL REPORT AND PROGRESS AGAINST ACTION PLAN

The Vice-Chair introduced this item, as Member Development Champion and stated the comments throughout the report was good news. He stated Member Development training sessions and workshops were well attended and feedback from the survey indicated members interest in topics discussed. He highlighted 20% of the Fire Authority responded to the survey which was a positive response rate (Appendix B). Issues relating to diversity were moving in a good direction.

In referring to the action plan (Appendix A) RAG status (Red, Amber, Green) Paul Bremble (HCS) reported Modern Gov training had been identified as red as the demand for this course had reduced over a number of years and this training will be removed from the action plan. This training will still be available, however, upon request.

The Chair requested for the font / charts in future appendices to be increased.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The Member Development Annual Report be noted;
- (2) The progress against Action Plan be noted;
- (3) The results of the Member Development Survey be noted; and
- (4) The 2023-2027 Member Development Strategy and protocol for Station visits be noted.

49. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24 QUARTER THREE (OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2023)

Paul Bremble (HCS) outlined the quarter three performance report detailed the performance against Service Provision and Corporate Health measures agreed by the Fire Authority.

Quadrant 1 Service Provision – monitors the delivery of statutory obligations and the services provided by Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS). The case study within this quadrant outlines the Adults at Risk programme which assists partner agencies to identify those at risk in the community. There is a continued decrease in deliberate primary fires, and the target relating to safe and well referrals had been met. Wholetime availability was higher than other quarters, however the Service are not quite meeting the set target. The operational support team continue to work hard in closing gaps to ensure maximum appliance availability, and there was an uptrend of visits from operational risk sites.

In referring to *Increase the number of Referrals for Safe and Well visits received from our partners* (page 76 of the report), Councillor Reynolds queried the

increase in the *2023/24 Percentage Change* in quarters 1 and 2, and highlighted quarter 3 was below target.

Dave Crease (Area Manager Prevention & Protection, AM P&P) reported some of the challenges in reaching safe and well targets. For example, the Service relied on referrals from partner agencies, particularly adult social care. Other challenges were due to hospitalisation of at-risk adults; therefore, a visit could not be arranged within the target timescale of 72 hours.

Quadrant 2 - Corporate Health – Paul Bremble reported this quadrant monitored how key resources were managed, which include measures relating to staff, finance, and performance against Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) objectives. The case study showed how the Service were utilising Wokingham Fire Station to provide support for most vulnerable in the community. There was an increase in sickness levels to 6.9%, and Human Resources (HR) have worked with Managers to support them managing sickness. Finance measures were on track for this quarter.

Quadrant 3 Priority Programmes – indicate progress against key programme activity such as Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) priorities, current Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) consultation and the progress of Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF). He stated the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP) will remain in red due to the national status of that project.

Quadrant 4 Assurance – monitors corporate risk management and other assurance activity including internal audit and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS) action plan. Paul Bremble highlighted two key risks in:

- (1) **On call availability, crewing and capabilities** – proactive recruitment and support activities have increased a total of 17 applicants and were currently going through the selection stages. The CRMP Priority 6 is a pilot to utilise on-call as a minimum of 14 appliance availability.
- (2) **Capital Projects – Effective Estate Management** - Paul Brooks (Head of Assets, HoA) recently integrated Capital Projects and Facilities into a collaborative Estates department.

In addition, this quadrant outlined progress against HMICFRS action plan in preparation for an inspection planned for later this year and the implementation of 19 Fire Standards.

In referring to *Risk ID 914 Training Delivery*, Councillor Reynolds highlighted the *current score* (21) was higher than the *Inherent score* (18). Paul Bremble reported he would confirm outside of the meeting.

In response to the Chair, Paul Bremble confirmed the Fire Standard table on pages 125 – 128 was an on-going gap analysis until each standard had been implemented.

RESOLVED that:

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

50. FORWARD PLAN

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

51. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 16 July 2024, at 6.30pm, RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading, Berkshire RG31 7SD.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank Councillor Morag Malvern as she will be stepping down as Councillor at the next local elections in May 2024. She also thanked all committee members for their support and assistance during the year.

(The meeting concluded at 7.03pm)

Post meeting note – Paul Bremble, Head of Corporate Services confirmed the current score and inherent score to risk ID 914 Training delivery via email to Councillor Josh Reynolds.