

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY



Held on Tuesday, 9th July, 2024 at 6.30 pm

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

Members:
(*present)

* Councillor Greg Bello	* Councillor Dave McElroy
* Councillor Dennis Benneyworth	* Councillor Owen Jeffery
* Councillor Tina McKenzie-Boyle	* Councillor Neel Rana
* Councillor Jeff Brooks	Councillor Joshua Reynolds
* Councillor Tricia Brown	Councillor Zafar Satti
* Councillor Billy Drummond	* Councillor Wayne Smith
* Councillor Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey	* Councillor Helen Taylor
Councillor Peter Frewer	* Councillor Lou Timlin
* Councillor Paul Gittings	* Councillor Simon Werner
* Councillor Wendy Griffith	

In Attendance: Mark Antell (Senior Communications and Engagement Officer)
Wayne Bowcock (Chief Fire Officer, CFO)
Tom Brandon (Area Manager Response and Resilience, AM R & R)
Graham Britten (Monitoring Officer, MO)
Paul Bremble (Head of Corporate Services, HCS)
Paul Brooks (Head of Assets, HoA)
Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P)
Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources and Learning and Development, HHR&L&D)
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)

15. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Josh Reynolds MP, Zafar Satti and Peter Frewer.

16. 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

17. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 JUNE 2024

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

18. 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.

19. RECEIPT OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

Fire Authority Live Streaming

The Chair reported starting from this meeting, Fire Authority meetings will be live streamed on the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) YouTube Channel.

The provision of live streaming is intended to improve access to the Fire Authority, enabling people to follow the meetings remotely in real time. As with previous meetings, subtitling will be added to meeting recordings that are published within five working days.

He requested Members contact Communications and Engagement Team if they had any concerns, who were located at the back of the room.

Welcome to Cllr Rana and Tom Brandon

The Chair, on behalf of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority welcomed Councillor Neel Rana. He stated he looked forward to collaborating with him in the future and extended a warm welcome to Tom Brandon who has joined our Senior Leadership Team.

Tom had joined us from Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, having been with them for 18 years. He has held a range of roles within service delivery and will join us as our new Area Manager Response and Resilience, replacing Ben Cairns.

The Chair took the opportunity to say goodbye to Ben Cairns and wished him well in his new role with Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

General Election 2024

Following last week's General Election, the constituencies of Newbury, Wokingham and Bracknell all have new MP's whilst two new constituencies, Earley and Woodley, Reading West and Mid Berkshire, have also been created.

One other constituency also changed hands in this election, and congratulated Fire Authority Member, Joshua Reynolds, on his successful campaign to

become Member of Parliament for Maidenhead. He asked Members to join him on wishing him all the best in his parliamentary career.

The Chair offered his commiserations to Councillor Dave McElroy who, whilst unsuccessful in becoming the MP for Reading Central, ran an incredibly good campaign over the past month.

HMICFRS Workshops

The Service is due to be inspected by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services, or HMICFRS for short, later this year.

This year's inspection will take place from Monday, 7 October to mid-November. Ahead of the inspection, a Member's workshop will be held on HMICFRS Inspection on Thursday, 12 September.

If you would like to find out more about the Inspection process and how the Service has been preparing, please speak to Fayth about signing up for this workshop.

Royal Ascot

In June, staff worked alongside emergency services partners, local authorities, and event organisers at Royal Ascot to help keep thousands of racegoers safe.

Although the event passed without incident, fire crews were called to action when a car fire broke out on Ascot High Street, close to the Racecourse. Firefighters from Mortimer Fire Station equipped with breathing apparatus used two hose reels to quickly extinguish the fire. Within half an hour, the fire was out, and the scene was handed over to Thames Valley Police.

The Chair thanked firefighters from Mortimer, as well as all the other staff who supported the Service and partners at this year's Royal Ascot.

Fire at Broadmoor Hospital

Members might be aware of an incident at the old Broadmoor Hospital that occurred towards the end of June.

At the height of the fire around 40 firefighters from Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey responded to the fire. These crews worked alongside three Officers, Thames Valley Police and Berkshire Lowland Search and Rescue to help quickly and effectively extinguish the fire.

The fire was significant and required a large response from our Service and our partners. Although there was substantial damage to the old building, crews worked quickly to contain the fire and prevent it from spreading.

On behalf of the Authority, the Chair thanked everyone involved in the incident for their effective and diligent response to this fire.

Councillor Mckenzie-Boyle requested for further detail regarding the entrance the crews used when attending this incident.

ACFO

Whitley Wood Training Centre

Plans to redevelop the Service's Training Centre in Whitley Wood was recently approved by Reading Borough Council.

The facility was originally scheduled to be redeveloped in 2025 but was brought forward following a significant internal flood in 2022, where the damage to the building was beyond economical repair.

The approved plans will see the demolition of the existing Training Centre and an aging office cabin. These will be replaced by a single two-storey, modular building.

Work on the new Training Centre is due to begin imminently with completion and opening expected in summer 2025.

Disability Confident Leader Status

The Service has maintained its status as a Level Three 'Leader' in the Disability Confident scheme.

The Disability Confident Scheme includes over 20,000-member organisations from across the country and, as a Leader, the Service ranks amongst the top 600 organisations in the Scheme.

Over the past three years, the Service has proven its commitment to disability inclusion by undertaking several initiatives. This certification reflects all the excellent work that our staff have been doing to make our Service more welcoming and inclusive.

Fire Cadet Graduation

Our Fire Cadets will be graduating tomorrow evening at Maidenhead Fire Station. The Chair stated he looked forward to attending on behalf of the Authority and hoped to see Members there to as wish our cadets well.

Wholetime Firefighter Graduation

This week, we are once again accepting applications for a new cohort of wholetime firefighter apprentices.

This new group will follow our previous cohorts, the last of which graduated on Friday, 10 May 2024 where we welcomed 17 new Wholetime Firefighters in a Graduation Ceremony at Maidenhead Fire Station.

It was a pleasure to attend the ceremony, speak to the graduates and take part in an inspection of the new cohort alongside the Chief Fire Officer.

As part of the apprenticeship, the recruits were asked to organise an event to raise money for The Fire Fighters Charity. Graduates have raised around £7,000 by collectively cycling 488 miles, the area of Berkshire in square miles, on static bikes at the Lexicon in Bracknell. Following the Graduation Ceremony, the Apprentices have now taken up their station placements across the County.

20. ISSUES ARISING FROM THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

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

21. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS UNDER STANDING ORDER 30

There were no questions from Members under Standing Order 30.

22. NOTICES OF MOTION UNDER STANDING ORDER 44

There were no notices of Motion under Standing Order 44.

23. RECOMMENDATIONS OF COMMITTEES

There were no recommendations of Committees.

24. AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS CONSULTATION 2024 - RESULTS AND SUMMARY REPORT

The Vice-Chair, Councillor Paul Gittings introduced this item as Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) Lead Member and thanked everyone who had worked on the consultation.

He stated false alarms account for 45% of incidents attended and the majority of these were the result of automatic fire alarm (AFA) systems, of which 99% require no action by the Service. This had caused significant disruption to the delivery of essential services and training. The consultation has ended, and the public have chosen option 2. He reported that the consultation results had indicated Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) staff had opted for option 3.

The Chair suggested the Fire Authority may wish to consider an adjournment after receiving answers to their questions.

Paul Bremble; Head of Corporate Services (HCS), stated the Authority launched a consultation asking people across Berkshire to consider how RBFRS respond to AFAs. Paul Bremble then introduced Tim Readings, Group Manager (CRMP) to present the consultation findings.

Tim Reading apologised for an error in the report and confirmed that it would be amended. In answer to a question from the Chair on the meaning of '*attended by invitation*,' Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) explained this was when a Berkshire appliance is closer to the incident location. Incidents attended by RBFRS in Surrey and Hampshire were by invitation.

Tim Readings Group Manager (CRMP) explained a Member's Task and Finish Group was held to discuss the consultation results and recommended option 3, which proposed fire appliances do not attend fire alarm notifications at category A and B buildings 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. After explaining the definition of category A and B buildings, Tim Readings reassured Members that irrespective of the decision made today there were no plans to change the response to domestic alarms and confirmed the Service will always respond to any call where a fire is present. Tim Readings stated the change would only affect premises that have a commercially installed fire alarm system.

He added, Fire and Rescues Services (FRSs) around the country were also looking at ways they respond to AFAs and went on to explain each consultation option in detail. He provided examples of each option if they had been implemented last year. There were 390 responses to the consultation. It had been recognised a low consultation response had been received from Slough. The public's preferred option was option 2, with option 3 in second place.

Tim Readings confirmed that the Member Task and Finish Group recommended that the Fire Authority consider option 3.

Paul Bremble (HCS) reported the consultation results found that the public preferred Option 2, and Thames Valley Control Service (TVFCS) and RBFRS staff preferred Option 3. He added, to address any concerns, the Service would conduct a comprehensive communication and engagement plan with schools and businesses the change would affect. He reported Oxfordshire County Council agreed their AFA policy following their consultation and Buckinghamshire FRS were in line with option 3, due to be implemented within six months.

The Chair queried how would TVFCS cope with different AFA options amongst Thames Valley FRS partners. Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) reported TVFCS uses Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) to mobilise appliances and each Thames Valley FRS partner has worked on standardising processes and procedures, however the software would recognise policy differences between each Service.

Option 2 would create a 1,000-hour improvement in efficiency, Option 3 a 1,200-hour improvement in efficiency. Any change in hours would be beneficial to a lean organisation like RBFRS and with less appliances on the road attending AFA incidents, road risk and road use would be reduced. Oxfordshire Fire Service took a similar approach to option 3 and this has been in place for

several years, with no known issues. He suggested Members may wish to amend the recommendation if there was concern around schools / option 3.

The Chair expressed the concerns previously made by Members around schools, in particular the disruption caused during COVID and the similar effect to schools if an incident occurred. He suggested an adjournment to the meeting.

In response to Councillor Drummond, Wayne Bowcock (CFO) explained that in his experience there was little press attention regarding reduced attendance to AFAs and that it does not result in an increase of fires.

In response to Councillor Griffith, Wayne Bowcock (CFO) in referring to page 65 of the report stated that RBFRS AFA consultation response rate was higher than London Fire Brigade's 2023 AFA Consultation and advised that this type of consultation does not attract a high response rate.

Paul Bremble, HCS reported that His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS) had made a positive comment on the way RBFRS deliver its consultations.

Additional questions were received from Councillors Brown, McElroy, Taylor, Benneyworth, Shepherd-DuBey and Bello about the contents of the consultation papers.

The Chair summarised the discussion by stating that the volume of false fire alarms has been an issue for decades, and although a recent policy change was made, it made a minor impact. He added that the Authority were keen to make a difference.

The Vice-Chair stated he was disappointed on the low response from Slough and expressed his belief that Royal Berkshire should align with Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service by approving option 3. He added he was interested in the pilot Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service was running as he felt this may impact RBFRS. Tim Reading confirmed that Buckinghamshire were trialing for six months prior to the release of their next CRMP process and that the trial is like option 3.

Councillor Benneyworth asked for reassurance around schools.

The Chair thanked all the members for the detailed questions and proposed an adjournment to the meeting, reconvening at 8pm. The adjournment was seconded by the Vice-Chair. *(the time was 7.37pm)*.

On returning the Chair proposed option 2 - but in relation to the section 'excluding category B buildings between 6pm to 9am' schools were to be excluded from this, meaning RBFRS will continue to attend all AFAs at schools 24 hours a day.

The Chair proposed an amendment to the recommendation. After much deliberation on an amendment to the recommendation, the proposed amendment was seconded by the Vice-Chair.

Councillors Jeffery, McElroy and Griffith said they felt this was the right approach. Councillor McKenzie-Boyle stated that she expects a comprehensive communication plan to maintain public confidence in the Service and that due diligence had been done to identify the Responsible Person for each premises. Councillor Taylor added she was very relieved and happy that Member concern around schools were highlighted, and she supported the amended recommendation. Councillor Brown agreed with the proposal and suggested the issue be revisited later in the year to ensure the right decision was made.

The Chair confirmed following implementation, the AFA policy will be reviewed and brought back to the Fire Authority in February 2025.

On being put to the vote, it was unanimously **RESOLVED** that it be approved *'We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification at buildings in Category A when there is no confirmed fire, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification at buildings in Category B when there is no confirmed fire, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, excluding schools'*.

25. ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23

Paul Bremble (HCS) outlined the Annual Report summarised the performance of the Service in 2023/24 and highlighted achievements and challenges in delivering services for the people of Berkshire. The report sets out delivery against the Corporate Plan. He listed achievements such as Wholetime Firefighter apprentice numbers joining the Service in May and November, Maidenhead Fire Station refurbishment and enhanced water rescue capability. He also outlined significant incidences in Erleigh Road and Station Hill, Reading and the success in achieving a decarbonisation scheme grant.

In conclusion, Paul Bremble thanked the Authority for their continued support throughout the year. He stated he would include additional clarity in future reporting of incident data following a request from Councillor Brown.

HCS

RESOLVED that the Annual Report 2022/23 be noted.

26. FORWARD PLAN

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

27. MINUTES OF THE STANDING COMMITTEES

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

28. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Wednesday 13 November 2024, 6.30pm at RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading RG31 7SD.

Post meeting note – The next meeting will be an Extraordinary meeting on Thursday 12 September 2024, 5.30pm at RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading RG31 &SD.

(The meeting concluded at 8.31pm)