

ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY



COMMITTEE	AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
DATE OF MEETING	24 MARCH 2025
SUBJECT	ANNUAL REPORT ON GOVERNANCE
LEAD OFFICER	ANNIE PRATT, 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 2024/25 for submission to the Fire Authority in June 2025.
- 1.2 For the purpose of this report, appendices A and B (Members Allowances and Attendance) are shown from 1 June 2024 to 28 February 2025. As outlined in recommendation 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, the appendices will be updated to the end of May 2025 for submission to the Fire Authority in June 2025.

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 2024 – 31 May 2025; and
 - 2.2.3 **NOTE** the 2024/25 attendance record of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority Members from 1 June 2024 – 31 May 2025.

3. REPORT

- 3.1 We received a positive annual report from the Pension Board. The volume and complexity of work required to address the age discrimination remedy for wholetime and on-call firefighters (some of which had retired) was discussed and it was good to hear that all Firefighters were now in the same pension scheme.
- 3.2 RSM (Internal Auditor's) completed the final three audits for 2023/24 - Governance and Risk Management; IT General Controls; and Key Financial Controls. Their annual report found the Service had an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance and internal control.
- 3.3 Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement) informed the Committee about The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). CIPFA published The Financial Management Code (FM Code) in October 2019 and this code provides guidance for good and sustainable financial management in local authorities, giving assurance that authorities are managing resources effectively. The CIPFA Financial Management Code Report 2023/24 covered 17 sections, and it was positive to see the Services green RAG status for 16 sections. The amber section related to the statement of accounts. Due to capacity issues in the audit sector and delays in the audit of the Berkshire Pension Fund, the financial statements since 2021/22 remained unaudited when the report was published, however I am pleased to confirm this issue has now been closed.
- 3.4 As part of the Quarterly Performance update, Head of Corporate Services Paul Bremble confirmed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Objectives were on track. The number of accidents reportable under RIDDOR continued to fall with zero reportable in Q1, and there was a successful prosecution within the fire protection area – all very positive news.
- 3.5 High risk safe and well referrals were either on or above target this year but remained challenging. It's been identified that Slough is a high-risk area for the county due to low numbers of safe and well referrals, and the east hub teams have been working with partner agencies and communities to try and further reach those most vulnerable to receive this vital service.
- 3.6 It was sad to hear of a recorded fatality in Q2, but the Service have taken positive action on the back of this event, including a hot strike which is a series of safe & well visits around the incident area.
- 3.7 Sickness levels recorded this quarter were higher than the same period last year, mainly attributed to mental health. HR have established several initiatives to support staff including upgrading the employee assistance programme.
- 3.8 EDI objectives continue to progress well, with multiple initiatives making headway including webinars, cultural awareness training and a third successful Summer Internship Scheme. All interns expressed an interest in a

career with RBFRS and one intern is now working as an apprentice within the Business Support Team, which is a fantastic result.

- 3.9 The Service continued to make good progress against our six priorities of our CRMP. Work priority areas had progressed well and People Strategy reporting under the People Pillar was positive with most measures being reported as green and on target. Work continues on the audit plan findings - there were 35 actions in total and 29 were either completed or on target, good progress so far.
- 3.10 We were given an update on the external audit from EY in relation to the Authority's Value for Money arrangements for 2021/22 and 2022/23. It was positive to hear that EY did not identify any risks of significant weaknesses nor any actual significant weaknesses in Value for Money arrangements.
- 3.11 In the second half of 2024 we welcomed our new External Auditors, Grant Thornton. In presenting their audit of the 2023/24 accounts they were pleased to confirm no areas of weakness had been found and no statutory or key recommendations needed to be raised, meaning this was a positive report.
- 3.12 After being given a presentation of the Equal Pay Audit and Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap report the Service is satisfied that staff are paid equally for equal work and have access to the same opportunities. Although cultural barriers still exist, it was positive to hear RBFRS are taking steps to identify trends and address this. The in-depth data content within the reports has provided assurance that RBFRS is a responsible employer, and good practices are in place.
- 3.13 We welcomed seven new members onto the Fire Authority and four of those new members were appointed onto the Audit & Governance Committee. Many thanks to all Members for the contribution they have made to the Committee.
- 3.14 In late 2024, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) concluded the recent Inspection into RBFRS. The Inspection which spanned several weeks, known as 'Round 3', and focussed on three principal questions on effectiveness, efficiency and people. Over the course of the inspection several members of RBFRS staff spoke to the Inspectors through desktop assessments, interviews, focus groups and visits. We anticipate the outcome of the inspection will be published during spring 2025, and we will share a further update closer to the time.

Governance

- 3.15 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

- 3.16 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 2.5% and this percentage was backdated to 1 April 2024.

Member Attendance

- 3.17 The attendance record of Members in 2024/25, is shown in Appendix B of this report. The Appendix include all meetings up to the 28 February 2025. Like Member Allowances, these attendance figures will be updated and reported to the Fire Authority in June 2025. 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.
- 3.18 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.
- 3.19 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, Member Development courses and other planned events at station locations.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC COMMITMENTS

- 4.1 Sustainability: We are committed to ensuring that we provide a financially sustainable Service and take meaningful action to help address the climate emergency.

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. SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None.

10. CONSISTENCY WITH DUTY TO COLLABORATE

10.1 None for the purpose of this report.

11. PRINCIPAL CONSULTATION

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

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1 Audit and Governance Committee Agenda Pack and Minutes in 2024/25.

13. APPENDICES

13.1 Appendix A – Members' Allowances.

13.2 Appendix B – Members' Attendance.

14. CONTACT DETAILS

14.1 Michaela Smith, Democratic Support Assistant, 07799 287706.