

Minutes of the Meeting of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE of the BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY held remotely on WEDNESDAY 15 JULY 2020 at 10.00 AM

Present: Councillors Clarke OBE, Hall, Hopkins, Lambert, Marland, McCall, McLean and Walsh

Officers: J Thelwell (Chief Fire Officer), M Osborne (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), G Britten (Director of Legal and Governance), M Hemming (Director of Finance and Assets), A Hussain (Deputy Director of Finance and Assets), C Bell (Head of Protection and Assurance), D Norris (Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience) M Crothers (Programme Manager) J Finden (Fleet Manager) and K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies: None.

Live webcast broadcast:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWmIXPWAscxpL3vIiv7bh1Q>

The Director of Legal and Governance confirmed the webcast was live.

EX01 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

(Councillor Hopkins in the Chair)

Councillor Hopkins gave a roll call of Members, who provided their names when asked.

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Clarke OBE be elected Chairman of the Committee for 2020/21.

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Clarke OBE be elected as Chairman of the Committee for 2019/20.

(Councillor Clarke OBE in the Chair)

EX02 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN

It was moved and seconded that Councillor Hopkins be appointed as Vice Chairman of the Committee for 2020/21.

RESOLVED -

That Councillor Hopkins be appointed as Vice Chairman of the Committee for 2020/21.

EX03 MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on Wednesday 5 February 2020, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

EMERGENCY SERVICES MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMME (ESMCP)

The Programme Manager advised Members that this was a long and complex national project to deliver an emergency services network for use by all emergency services, the military and a number of other organisations. This report was the latest in a series of updates on the progress of the programme. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there had been little progress recorded for this programme, as Home Office resources had been diverted to pandemic activities. However, the main points to be highlighted were firstly, the publication of the programme full business case. This was due to be published in Spring 2020 but had been delayed due to the pandemic. A revised date for publication had yet to be released. Secondly, the South-Central Region included the three services from the Thames Valley, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Due to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight forming part of the south west fire control network, they had now chosen to move to the South West Region. This had been agreed in principle by the programme, and the process to formalise this was now underway.

The Programme Manager advised Members there was still some discussion about the date when Airwave, the Authority's existing national communications network, would be switched off as the current date still stood at December 2022. The date for the fire sector transition to the new system was Quarter 4 2024. Obviously, there was a misalignment here, and there had been no formal notification that the Airwave network would be extended to Q4 2024.

Not included in the report, but subject to discussion within the South-Central Region, was the role of the Regional Programme Manager, which was funded by the programme. In the early stages of the programme, the South-Central Region took the decision to use the funding to procure an outsourced role from Mott McDonald and this contract would expire in January 2021. The three Thames Valley Services were now working together to look at different ways of providing this role and Members would be updated in the next briefing note.

The Head of Protection and Assurance advised Members regarding Hampshire and the Isle of Wight moving to the South West Region, the Deputy Director of Finance and Assets had undertaken the financial work and thanks to his diligence and sound financial advice, the way in which the separation had been handled had been excellent. The Chairman also wished to add her thanks to the Deputy Director of Finance and Assets.

A Member asked if the impact of the Huawei decisions had been assessed and was advised that there had been little involvement from Huawei because of the confidentiality within the ESN and the high security of the programme. The government's decision had only been made this week and there had not yet been an announcement from the National Fire Chiefs Council.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted by Members.

EX05

BUDGET MONITORING PERFORMANCE AND DEBT MANAGEMENT APRIL 2019-MARCH 2020 (PROVISIONAL OUTTURN)

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that this report presented the provisional revenue and capital outturn position and debt management performance to 31 March 2020. The provisional outturn figure for the year was a net underspend of £716k. This represented a 2.4% variance against the budget. Table 1 provided a breakdown of the budget and provisional outturn for each directorate.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the recommendations were slightly different as usually the underspend would go into capital reserves, to fund future capital projects. This year it was being split, £352k was going into capital reserves and £364k was going into a Covid-19 reserve. This was because there was a lot of uncertainty around funding for future years and how the council tax and business rates would look for next year.

A Member asked the Chief Fire Officer about the £1.6M underspend for Delivery, Corporate Development and Planning and what action had been taken to fill the vacancies for on call and wholetime firefighter employment.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the issue with recruiting and retaining on call firefighters was an ongoing national issue. The budget hadn't been reduced for on call firefighters as recruitment was always on going. A working group had been set up to look at this issue. The Service needed to look at a completely different method in terms of recruiting and retaining these members of staff. The financial outlook and the unemployment situation did not look good for the future, but this might be an ideal opportunity for the Service to try a different approach. The Service would be grateful if Members of the Authority could help in terms of promoting on call firefighters.

RESOLVED –

1. That the provisional outturn forecast for the Authority as at 31 March 2020 be noted.
2. That the slippage of £1,809k on the capital programme is approved to be carried forward into 2020/21.
3. That the transfer of £84k into the future funding revenue reserve, to fund projects which have been delayed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, be approved.
4. That the underspend of £716k is split and transferred into a Covid-19 reserve and Revenue Contribution to Capital Reserve (RCCO). The split will be as follows:
 - £352k to be transferred into RCCO.

- £364k to be transferred in Covid-19 Reserve.
5. That delegated authority be given to the Chief Finance Officer, in consultation with the Lead Member, to authorise any late changes to the movements in reserves and capital slippage amounts resulting from accounting adjustments needing to be made during the year-end closedown process.
 6. That should any changes to the amounts referred to above be required, then the Chief Finance Officer will report to (i) the Lead Member in the first instance, and (ii) Members at the next available meeting.

EX06

TRANSPORT AND WORKSHOPS PEER REVIEW

The Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT introduced the report.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that workshops was a part of the service that often went largely unnoticed but was absolutely critical to operations. The Authority was always keen to improve its service, so during 2019-20, it commissioned a peer review of the transport and workshops function to gain reassurance that this area was operating effectively. This was carried out by Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service in December 2019. It was a thorough report and covered approximately thirty different areas, highlighting where there was existing good practice, but also highlighting where there may be areas for improvement. The standout area for concern, was the ability to attract and retain highly qualified vehicle technicians. This was something that had since been addressed by using a market supplement to ensure there was a full complement of staff to keep the appliances on the road. Some other key areas noted for improvement were the use of software within workshops and to also look at capacity and load planning.

The Director of Finance and Assets wanted to pass on his personal thanks to all the workshops staff who had done an excellent job throughout this difficult time keeping the fleet running.

A Member asked if contracting out workshops had been considered and was advised that yes it had been looked at and a joint facility with Aylesbury Vale District Council had been considered. It was something that would be kept under review, especially with Covid-19.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that there had been a business case presentation from Babcock to the Authority and its Thames Valley partners, predicated on all three services coming together and outsourcing transport and workshops. After the presentation from Babcock, it wasn't deemed as a way forward, firstly in terms of the governance issues, for example Oxfordshire don't just service fire appliances, they service Oxfordshire County Council fleet. It was investigated and discounted for these reasons.

Following on from this, the peer review agreed to look at this service's own workshops and how well they were operating. The workshop staff had done a remarkable job especially over the last couple of years with the difficulty of retention of staff, but they had kept going and it was now an area of investment for the future. It was also important to remember that the workshop staff not only service the fire engines, but they also service a whole range of specialist equipment onboard.

A Member asked about planned and reactive maintenance and how often this was carried out.

The Fleet Manager advised Members that as far as the servicing schedules were concerned for the fleet, they were meeting the minimum DVLA requirements. Vehicles were inspected on a quarterly basis (13 weekly inspections) which was the minimum period and that could only be adjusted shorter if the use is deemed greater than the current requirement.

A Member asked about the transport replacement scheme and the vehicle life policy, would that require the Authority to re-profile its capital expenditure in later years.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that in terms of the replacement programme, the Authority was out to tender for the joint Thames Valley fire appliances as the existing contract was coming to an end. The Authority already allowed for two or three fire appliances a year in the capital programme and was working on an updated financial and capital strategy that would look at a much longer term capital programme, 15-20 years, which was the expected life cycle of an appliance.

A Member asked about the brake roller tester that would require capital investment, was it mobile or built into the building.

The Fleet Manager advised that it was built into the building. However, if workshops were to move, it could be uplifted and moved. It would be much more useful to have the brake roller tester on site, because the requirement from the DVLA was that at every safety inspection a brake roller test should be carried out. A brake roller test gave a much better idea that all components were working. Having it on site would mean less reliance on a third party.

A Member asked about the timescales for the Peer Review, was some of it prearranged, as it seemed a lot of work was done in one day. Also, it seemed at present that some inspections were carried out by technicians going to fire stations, was the proposal in the longer term for all vehicles to be brought to HQ for testing?

The Fleet Manager advised that there had been a number of communications with Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service over a period of time and information provided to them before the face to face meetings. Although the report looked like it was completed in one day, it was over a number of weeks.

The Fleet Manager advised that in the past safety inspections were carried out on stations and the vehicle would only come into workshops for its annual service or major repair work. However, with the latest best practice and recommendations from the DVLA, it was now a requirement to bring the vehicle into workshops.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

EX07

EXEMPTION FROM STANDING ORDERS RELATING TO CONTRACTS – FIREFIGHTER PENSION ADMINISTRATION

The Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT introduced the report.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that following a competitive tendering exercise undertaken in October 2015, the Authority moved the administration of the firefighters pension schemes from Buckinghamshire County Council (as was) to West Yorkshire Pension Fund with effect from January 2016. The contract was awarded for 65 months and was due to end on 3 May 2021. The quality of the service and support provided was very good and it was recommended that the Authority entered into a new contract for a further three years. This would align with Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service's intention to also extend this joint contract for three years.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the firefighters pension was extremely complex, there were a lot of rules which covered many variations of schemes, and it was outsourced to get the best expertise available. When the Authority went out for competitive tender last time, there were only two main bidders and West Yorkshire was the best priced and since they had been in place, the service received was excellent. Another point to note was that this was a joint contract awarded alongside Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, who were also taking a similar report to their Members, seeking to extend their contract for three years and if the Authority does the same, it allows continuation of the collaborative contract to get the best value and to share expertise. Over the life of the contract, the Authority was expecting it cost approximately £60k which took it over the delegated authority of the Director of Finance and Assets (£50k) hence the reason for bringing it to Members.

RESOLVED –

That the Authority's contract with West Yorkshire Pension fund be renewed for a further three years commencing on 4 May 2020 in accordance with Standing Order 4(a).

EX08

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Mr David Tooley, a local democracy reporter had requested in writing to the Monitoring Officer, in advance of the meeting, to be allowed to speak. This request was granted by the Chairman:

Mr David Tooley:

"The exclusion motion before you invites you to make a judgement call and I quote 'the need to keep information exempt, outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.' I am here to ask you have Members considered the public interest balance and the other side of the scales. 1. The public interest in the Blue Light Hub in Milton Keynes over the years, 2. The public interest in the Fire Authority strategy, 3. The local interest in the Great Holm Fire Station site and 4. The financial standing and strategy of the Fire Authority. We have already heard some statements made about the potential of an uncertain budget in the future, so for those reasons I respectfully ask you to consider the public interest and your officers assertion that the need to keep information exempt outweighs this. Thank you for the opportunity to speak and your consideration of this matter. Thank you."

The Director of Legal and Governance as Monitoring Officer, advised Members that his response was as follows: "there is a strong public interest in residents knowing how public money is spent and the allocation of its resources. There is also a strong public interest in ensuring that the Authority maximises the capital receipt from the sale of Great Holm Fire Station. If the Committee were to decide not to exclude the press and public, the report and its appendices would be published and made available for public inspection. As a consequence of this, the Authority's commercial advantage, while trying to find the maximum financial return, for the council taxpayers of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, would be severely prejudiced in any negotiations with prospective purchasers."

The Chairman advised Members that they had heard the response from the Monitoring Officer, and she supported what he said, some information had to be kept exempt, especially when it was commercially sensitive.

Members discussed the resolution below and voted on it as follows:

	For	Against	Abstained
Clarke OBE	✓		
Hall	✓		
Hopkins	✓		
Lambert	✓		
Marland	✓		
McCall	✓		
McLean	✓		
Walsh	✓		

RESOLVED –

It was moved and resolved that the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972 as the report contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of a person; and on these grounds it is considered, at this moment in time, that the need to keep information exempt outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

The Chairman advised viewers of the live webcast that the meeting would now go into private session to hear the report and discuss the recommendations.

J Finden (Fleet Manager), M Crothers (Programme Manager) left the meeting.

EX09 SALE OF GREAT HOLM FIRE STATION

The Committee considered the report and appendices, details of which were noted in the confidential/exempt minutes.

EX10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted that the date of the next Executive Committee meeting would be held on Wednesday 16 September 2020 at 10.00am.

THE CHAIRMAN CLOSED THE MEETING AT 11.20 AM