

# Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

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Minutes of the Meeting of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE of the BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY held on THURSDAY 8 FEBRUARY 2024 at 10.00 AM.

**Present:** Councillors Adoh, Christensen, Fuller (substitute), McLean (part) and Rouse (Chairman)

**Officers:** L Harrison (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), A Carter (Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO), A Stunell (Head of Human Resources), P Scanes (Head of Prevention and CRMP), S Tuffley (Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience), M Hussey (Principal Accountant), C Newman (Data Intelligence Team Manager) and K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer)

**Apologies:** Councillors Darlington, Hall, Lambert (joined online) and Walsh (joined online)

The Chairman advised the Committee that the meeting was being recorded and would be uploaded on to the Authority's YouTube channel after the meeting

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWmIXPWAscxpL3vliv7bh1Q>

#### **EX41 MINUTES**

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on Wednesday 15 November 2023, be approved, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

#### **EX42 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The Chairman advised on the following matters arising:

**EX33 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT APRIL 2023 – SEPTEMBER 2023**

The Chairman and Chief Fire Officer to resend the letter outlining the case for precept flexibility to the new Ministers who had changed recently – the Chairman advised Members that the advice received from the Home Office was not to resend the letter. It then transpired that the letter had not been seen by the new Minister, so it was resent.

The Chairman asked that a clearer authorisation framework be looked at which triggers when in growth bids were of a magnitude and importance that Members should have the ability to look at before they went through final sign off – The Director of Finance and Assets advised that the process would be clarified for 2024/25 (it was not required before then as there would be no more in-year bids determined at officer level within the current year).

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that at the last meeting, a question was asked around the HMICFRS report and what was the spend per head of population versus the average spend per head. The question was asked as to how much the budget would need to be increased by for the average spend per population. The figure given was incorrect and too high. To bring the Service up to the average spend per head, it would need to increase its budget by around £5.4M.

#### **EX43 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS**

There were no disclosures of interest.

#### **EX44 THAMES VALLEY FIRE CONTROL SERVICE (TVFCS) CONTRACTS**

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) budget for 2024/25, was presented to the TVFCS Joint Committee on 14 December 2023. This set out a range of recommendations, including contract arrangements relating to recommendation one and two of this report, that required respective Authorities' approval pursuant to Clause 17 of the TVFCS Inter-Authority Agreement.

The full recommendations and supporting report for the 2023/24 budget were attached as Appendix 1, which comprised of two reports prepared for the TVFCS Joint Committee meeting on 14 December 2023. This report also sets out a retrospective matter relating to a TVFCS contract that required Joint Committee, and respective Fire Authorities' approval. Specifically, this report related to awarding a contract for an ancillary video monitoring system used within the TVFCS control room.

(Cllr McLean joined the meeting)

A Member asked about the retrospective approval, and if this was the accepted process.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that usually contracts were authorised in advance, but with this agreement, the timings did not line up, but it was something to be looked at in the future.

The Chairman would ask to have this put on the agenda for the next Joint Committee to discuss with the other authorities.

A Member asked a question regarding Section 3.2 of the Joint Committee report - pay award which was budgeted for 5% this year.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that in terms of the process, the Grey Book negotiations had not yet started. The Gold Book award had been agreed, effective from 1 January 24 at 3%. Members would be kept updated.

RESOLVED –

1. Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (RBFA) be authorised to progress a variation of the maintenance and support contract, including the ICCS hardware refresh, between Royal Berkshire Fire Authority and SSS Public Safety Ltd in line with the latest estimated value of the new contract value of £1,240,977 (subject to annual inflationary uplifts).
2. RBFA be authorised to extend the contract between RBFA and Securitas Security Services (UK) Ltd for contingency call handling services for one year from 30th April 2024 to 30th April 2025, being the final extension option of the current contract.
3. That the decision by RBFA to extend the contract between RBFA and Whitwam Ltd for the supply and support of a video monitoring solution in the TVFCS control room from 1 September 2023 until 1 September 2028 (with options to extend to 10 April 2030) be ratified.

Chairman

#### **EX45 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP) 2024/25 TO 2028/29**

The Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT introduced the report and advised Members these were the Executive recommendations to the Fire Authority at its meeting next week. There were three elements, the report and statement of the Chief Finance Officer to be noted, the Council tax precept of £79.46 for a band D equivalent property which was the equivalent of 4 pence per week, and the revenue budget and capital programme to be approved. There were some revised figures from the partner councils, and the Deputy Director of Finance and Assets would take Members through these.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that as mentioned, the funding figures in the existing report were provisional figures and since then, the Authority had received the final settlement figures and the NNDR figures and therefore the tables in Appendix 1 and 2 had been revised. The first change was the expenditure budget had increased from £38.2M to £39.4M, an increase in the region of around £1.2M. This was due to the increase in employer pension contributions in the Firefighter Pension Scheme. To mitigate these additional costs, the Service had been provided with a Fire Pension Grant in the region of £1.1M. In future years, a reduction in this grant, similar to the pressure seen in previous pension grants, had been forecast.

The Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA) for 2024/25 had also been revised downwards from £10.5M to just over £10M, following receipts of updated NNDR figures earlier this week. For 2024/25 this reduction was offset with a one off grant of just under £600K, received as part of the Minimum Funding Guarantee. For future years, the SFA forecast had been updated to reflect this reduction in NNDR funding. Previous figures used were an estimate and more accurate figures were provided when billing authorities confirmed them and this was only after the 31 January, and why the figures were only revised earlier this week.

The previous pension grant line of £1.2M had now been merged into the SFA line on a flat cash basis as going forward, this grant would be included as part of the SFA funding stream. This brings the total SFA figures for 2024/25 to just under £11.3M. With the council tax surplus there was a slight increase from £94K to £101K, an increase in £7K.

With the services grant allocation there was a slight increase in funding of £3k and that had been revised upwards. Taking into account all these changes, the revenue contribution to capital budget in Appendix 1A and 1B for 2024/25 to 2028/29 had been

revised in order to balance the budget. All usable reserves as at the end of 2028/29 were now forecast to be just under £8M, a reduction of £2M from the figures that were in the original paper.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that with the revised Appendices 1 and 2, Appendix 1 was the revised budget and the only change to Appendix 2, was how the revenue contribution to reserves had reduced over the MTFP.

A Member asked if there was a recommended level as a percentage of the overall budget.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised that for the current year, the reserve balance was around 30% of the net budget requirement.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised there was not a recommended figure, last time there was a sector wide survey, the average was 43%, which was very high. Somewhere between 15% - 20% seems a comfortable level in terms of a good balance.

The Chairman asked when officers considered the USAR funding timetable would start.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that there were on going discussions in the background all the time. It felt more positive now than it did this time last year. He was hoping the Authority would get some funding, but it may not be exactly the same.

A Member asked that as USAR was interlinked with the day-to-day service, had officers started to do an assessment on the risk profile of the Service.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that in terms of risk management, as the Authority was receiving funding this year, that funding was going into a USAR reserve which would give the Service flexibility. Worse case scenario, if the Service lost the grant, it would give it time to unpick some of the things mentioned. If the Service did get funding, it would allow money to be invested to ensure the USAR capability was the best it possibly could be.

A Member asked that looking at the figures, the services grant of £483M to the sector last year has now been reduced to £77M and this Service would get £33k of it, was that the correct understanding.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that there was a huge reduction in the Services Grant this year. Officers had forecast it would go down 50%, but it had actually gone down 84%. Additional funding had been made available via the Minimum

Funding Guarantee.

RESOLVED –

That the recommendations below be approved for submission to the Authority:

1. It is recommended that:
  - (a) the report and Statement of the Chief Finance Officer (see section 8 of Annex A) be noted.
  - (b) a Council Tax precept of £79.46 for a band D equivalent property (equal to an increase of approximately 4p per week) and the revenue budget as set out in Appendix 1 be approved.
  - (c) the capital programme as set out in Appendix 2 be approved.

#### **EX46 2025-2030 SERVICE PLANNING UPDATE**

The Chairman advised Members that this was recommending a small change to the timetable that had been set out for the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that on 7 December 2022, the timetable for the Community Risk Management Plan was presented for Members approval. It was noted at the time that one of the risks to delivering to the timetable was competing pressures which would divert resources to other projects. One of the big competing pressures, as Members were aware, was HMICFRS had advised that the Service was going into enhanced monitoring. That had obviously consumed a lot of the same time resource that would have been used to deliver the original CRMP timetable. This report was asking Members to approve a revised timetable, but it would still come to Members in December 2024, so well in advance of the implementation date of 1 April 2025. There were no plans to delay the Corporate Plan any further than the original timetable February 2025, well in advance of when it would start in 2025.

RESOLVED –

That the Executive Committee approve the changes to the timing of the 2025 – 2030 planning process.

#### **EX47 RESPONSE TO THE PROVISIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE SETTLEMENT 2024-25: CONSULTATION**

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that this

report had been brought to Members to note due to the timescales of the Consultation. Officers had already submitted the response after discussions with the Chairman and Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT. The key points raised were that officers expressed their disappointment with precept flexibility, and the ability to raise it up to £5 was not available this year for Fire Authorities. The Authority expressed its disappointment about the large reduction in the Services Grant of 84%. Also, it emphasised that fire and rescue services would see the lowest increase in core spending power of all classes of local authorities. Officers also mentioned that 31 out of the 44 fire and rescue authorities had hit the Funding Threshold Guarantee.

RESOLVED –

That the response to the consultation be noted.

**EX48**

#### **THE PRUDENTIAL CODE, PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS AND MINIMUM REVENUE PROVISION**

The Principal Accountant advised Members this was a technical paper and was presented annually to this Committee to approve the recommendations, with final approval at the Authority meeting next week.

The Prudential Code was established to ensure the capital investment plans were affordable, prudent and sustainable, and that treasury management decisions were taken in accordance with good professional practice.

The Prudential Indicators presented here demonstrated that the current plans for capital investment meet those criteria and present an acceptable level of risk to the Authority.

Minimum Revenue Provision was a statutory charge to the General Fund (revenue budget), which ensured the Authority had sufficient cash balances to repay borrowing upon maturity, reducing the refinancing risk.

Since 2015/16, there had been sufficient funds set aside to cover the repayment of the long-term borrowing, this could be seen in the background paper. Historically, due to prohibitive penalties the early repayment of this borrowing had not been an option. However, due to the recent rises in interest rates during 2022/23, the Authority took the opportunity to make early repayment on a loan totalling £627K, achieving a discount of £46K. According to the MTFP, there were no plans for additional borrowing.

The Chairman asked officers to explain the finance lease at Gerrards Cross.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that it was the option to nominate firefighters as tenants for housing association properties related to day crewing. It was accounted for as a finance lease.

RESOLVED –

That the Executive Committee approve the recommendations below for submission to the Fire Authority.

That the Authority be recommended to approve:

1. the Prudential Indicators for 2024/25
2. the Minimum Revenue Provision policy statement

#### **EX49 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT APRIL 2023 – DECEMBER 2023**

The Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT advised that the budget remained on track, with a forecast underspend.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the budget of £36.45M compared to a forecast outturn of £36M gave a forecast yearend underspend of £250K. Furthermore, the level of funding was showing a favourable variance of £24K, which had resulted in an overall net underspend of £274K, against the expenditure budget.

The underspend was predominantly due to a favourable variance being reported under employee costs due to vacant positions. Furthermore, due to the significant increase in the Bank of England base rate since the budget was approved, the investment returns had been revised upwards and were currently projecting at least £550K additional interest in investment returns than originally budgeted.

The Chairman asked about the wholetime establishment and the leaver number, his recollection was that it was working on the assumption of an average of three leavers per month, when looking at the report, it seemed to be suggesting that the leaver rate was slowing.

The Head of Human Resources advised that the Service was originally looking at three leavers per month, then it was revised to two leavers per month, and now it was looking at one leaver per month. There were not as many leavers as originally expected and the figures had been revised. There was a slowing down in the attrition rate.

The Chairman asked that with the run rate of recruitment, was the



Service confident that in 2026/27 it would start to see a reduction in headcount and also, was the pipeline of recruitment strong enough.

The Head of Human Resources advised that with the current cohort 12, the Service had originally looked to take on 18 apprentices, but this had been amended to six. It was being kept under review by the Workforce Planning Group and the start date had also moved from June to September.

RESOLVED –

That the provisional outturn forecast for the Authority as of 31 December 2023 be noted.

**EX50 HIS MAJESTY’S INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY AND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES (HMICFRS) – BUCKINGHAMSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (BFRS) 2023 UPDATE**

The Chairman advised Members that yesterday, he and the Chief Fire Officer had attended their first Fire Performance Oversight Group meeting. The Chairman felt that the Chief Fire Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer had done an excellent job in setting out the action and progress. It had been a very good supportive session. The Service had received support from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), the Home Office and the Local Government Association. The headline feedback was that the Inspectorate were very impressed with the way the Service had responded to the report and the progress being made and they explicitly noted the Fire Authority’s support in terms of the transformation budget.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the Inspectorate noted the good progress and acknowledged the huge amount of work to get to the position the Service was now in. Whilst the Service remained in the engaged process, the Inspectorate were really pleased with the direction of travel and were very complimentary about the fact that it was clear the Service was focused, had a really good plan in place, and knew what needed to be done next.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that in October 2023, the Service received its 2023-2025 Round 3 HMICFRS Inspection report. The Round 3 report was presented to the Extraordinary Fire Authority meeting on 24 October, with input from HMI Roy Wilsher. An HMICFRS Action Plan was developed and submitted to HMICFRS on 15 November and presented to the Authority on the 6 December. This report showed high level progress against the Action Plan. Four actions were completed as at the end of December 2023. A more detailed

update would be presented to the Overview and Audit Committee. In November 2023, HMICFRS informed the Service that it would be entering the supportive engage process. The focus of the engage process was to assist the Service in finding ways to improve and resolve the identified causes of concern and provide a better service for the public.

To ensure focus on the HMICFRS action plan and to support the engage process, the Service had set up a HMICFRS Improvement Board chaired by the Chief Fire Officer. The terms of reference could be found at Appendix 1. Alongside delivering the Action Plan and preparing for the Fire Performance Oversight Group, officers were starting to focus on the HMICFRS Revisit in May 2024.

Officers had continued to engage with a wide range of key partners and peers to provide scrutiny over the last 8 months and the Service thanked them for their continued support.

The Chairman advised that he had seen some press comment on the progress of the equality, diversity and inclusion actions, specifically the 12 that had not yet been started, why was this and what does it relate to.

The Head of Human Resources advised Members that when the plan was put together, officers needed to map out that not everything could be done at the same time. To be realistic, dates were added. Although some of the things had not yet been started, the work towards them had been started. Where they were not yet started, it did not mean they were delayed. The more significant actions were prioritised in the plan.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that there were a lot of actions within the Action Plan and some of the actions that looked like they have not been started could actually be consolidated into other subheadings, because the work had been done, it had just not been recognised or had not been included in the plan yet. Buckinghamshire Council had very kindly given the Service a Secondee for one day a week, to help consolidate some of those plans.

The Chief Fire Officer also advised that the Service had been given the opportunity with some transformation money to look to put in a more fulltime position to support some of the ED&I and people and culture work that the Service wanted to do.

RESOLVED –

That the Authority note the BFRS HMICFRS 2023 update.

EX51

**PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT – Q2 2023/24**

The Data Intelligence Team Manager advised Members that this was the Quarter 2 report, July to September, so it was slightly behind due to the timeline of meetings. Officers were already working on Quarter 3. There were some good news stories in the report which were highlighted, the first one being the number of accidental dwelling fires, being the lowest the Service had on record. The second one was the fire safety audits, the reason this was highlighted, was to try to show the actions going forward and how officers were trying to improve the numbers and how across the board it had been a lot more positive than sometimes in the past.

The Chairman asked about the appraisal objectives completion, it looked like a not great position, but he had heard the more up to date position was positive.

The Data Intelligence Team Manager advised Members that appraisals went up to 86% in December 2023 and objectives set was 93% and back on track.

The Chairman asked for an update on the carbon emissions target and baseline.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that a new piece of Facilities Management software was being introduced from 1 April, that would allow it to be monitored on a regular basis through the system and regular updates would be able to be brought to Members.

A Member asked about the new on call recruits and when their training was taking place, and when they would be in service.

The Head of Human Resources advised that alongside wholetime recruitment, there were 13 new on call starters who had already commenced and were going to different stations across the Service. In addition, there was another on call intake planned to commence in August 2024.

A Member asked if there was a way of working with Prisons to help reduce prison fires.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer advised that in terms of prisons, as a result of seeing these figures and separating them out, the Service had engaged with the prisons and undertaken a lot of work with them. It was early days, but the Service had started to see a significant reduction in the number of incidents at prisons. In future reports, officers were hopeful that a significant improvement would be shown due to some of the measures put in place.

The Chairman asked that it be put on record that the social media for National Apprenticeship week had been excellent.

RESOLVED –

That the report and recommendation below be approved for submission to the Authority:

1. It is recommended that the Performance Management – Q2 2023/24 be noted.

**EX52**

**EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

RESOLVED –

It was moved and resolved that the public and press representatives be removed from the meeting by virtue of Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972, as the minutes contain information relating to any individual; and Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972, as the minutes contain information relating to the financial or business affairs of a person (including the Authority); and on these grounds it is considered the need to keep information exempt outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

**EX53**

**EXEMPT MINUTES**

RESOLVED -

That the Exempt Minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on Wednesday 15 November 2023, be approved, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**EX54**

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The Committee noted that the next Executive Committee meeting would be held on Wednesday 20 March 2024 at 10am.

THE CHAIRMAN CLOSED THE MEETING AT 10.54AM