



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY HELD AT THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, ON WEDNESDAY 13 OCTOBER 2021 AT 10 AM.

Present: Councillors Bagge, Carroll, Chapple OBE, Clarke OBE, Darlington, Exon, Hall, Hopkins, Hussain, Lambert, Marland, McLean, Rankine, Stuchbury, Waite and Walsh

Officers: J Thelwell (Chief Fire Officer), M Osborne (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), C Bell (Head of Protection, Assurance and Development), G Britten (Director of Legal and Governance), K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer) E Hilling (Communication, Marketing and Engagement Manager) P Casey (Station Commander HR Projects) A Carter (Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO), S Cunningham (Group Commander)

Remotely: M Hemming (Director of Finance and Assets), S Wells (Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience), S Tuffley (Head of Covid 19 Preparedness and Response)

Guests: Group Captain Arnold (Station Commander RAF High Wycombe)
Matthew Barber (Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner)

Apologies: Councillor Christensen

Recorded Broadcast:

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

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the October Meeting of the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority.

The Chairman advised that although members of the public were now allowed to attend and observe in limited numbers, following the meeting a video recording would be uploaded to the Authority's YouTube Channel.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and officers of Buckinghamshire Council for the use of the Council Chamber and the technicians that were supporting the meeting.

The Chairman was pleased to welcome to the meeting Mr Matthew Barber, the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner and Group Captain Philip Arnold, the Station Commander at RAF High Wycombe.

FA15 MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Fire Authority held on 16 June 2021, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

FA16 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

None.

FA17 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman announced that to mark the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 2001 tragic event and to raise funds for the Fire Fighters Charity, and the Stephen Siller 'Tunnel to Towers' Foundation, a team of 17 operational firefighters from West Ashland Fire Station organised a 6km run from the Blue Light Hub to the Xscape Building, Central Milton Keynes, before ascending the 198-step stairwell to a height of 140ft and descending to the finish line. The 17 Firefighters wore their full personal protective equipment, with breathing apparatus and a length of fire hose, weighing over 35kg. The team were joined by support runners and volunteers from across the Service and from Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire fire and rescue services, Thames Valley Police, and South Central Ambulance Service. The event was covered by local and regional media including ITV Anglia. The event raised over £7,809 for the Fire Fighters Charity and £605 for the Stephen Siller 'Tunnel to Towers' Foundation. This far exceeded the initial target and enabled the Service to meet the Firefighters Charity fundraising objective of £7,000 for 2021.

The United Kingdom Rescue Organisation (UKRO) held the Festival of Rescue challenge on the banks of the River Tyne in Newcastle on the 17 and 18 of September 2021. This annual event attracts competing teams from across the UK where they were given the opportunity to showcase their abilities while competing against their colleagues from other fire and rescue services. The event was split into five distinct areas, one for each of the disciplines involved in the competition. These disciplines included Rope Rescue, Vehicle Extrication, Water Rescue, Trauma challenge, and the main event that the Service competed in, the USAR challenge. A team of seven was selected from Aylesbury Fire Station and included at least one representative from each of the four

Watches. The USAR teams were marked against four gruelling two and a quarter hour challenges where they needed to break through concrete, support a coach on its side, crawl through tight and obstructed tunnels to rescue a live casualty and render trauma first aid, carry out a technical search of a simulated collapsed building and then move a quarter of a tonne concrete block around a complex obstacle course. Once the final challenge had taken place, the weary team packed up their kit and returned for a much-needed shower before attending the awards ceremony in the heart of Newcastle City Centre. What unfolded was a clean sweep for the Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) USAR team as they won all four categories after achieving the highest score amongst those taking part. The categories were, Best Incident Commander - BFRS Alan Still, Best Medic - BFRS Rhys Price, Best Technical Team – BFRS, Best overall Team – BFRS. Congratulations to everyone who took part.

Over twelve months ago, the Authority signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant. Based on its commitment to support this initiative, the Authority achieved the Bronze Award in the Employer Recognition Scheme, and after demonstrating further its commitment to support its Armed Forces Community, it had now achieved the Silver Award. The Service was working in partnership with the two Councils, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, to introduce Drop-in Centres. These were safe places for veterans to come for advice and support from a variety of partner agencies and charities or just meet up with some people who have had similar life experiences, over a coffee and sandwich. The Service ran a pilot event at Marlow Fire Station which was a huge success and there were plans to run another one at the end of this month. We aim to develop this further, continuing in partnership with the two Councils and introduce these Drop-in centre events across three locations: High Wycombe, Aylesbury, and Milton Keynes. Furthermore, we are also supporting Armed Forces Cadet associations, in partnership with Buckinghamshire Council, the aspiration is to use Aylesbury Fire Station for cadet training in the future. Where we can, we will provide facilities for 1-1 clinical advice for the veteran support network and NHS services where veterans occasionally need a room to carry out clinical consultations. Delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant will contribute toward ensuring the Service maintains its promise through the People Strategy. It gives me great pleasure to welcome the Commander for RAF High Wycombe, Group Captain Philip Arnold, who will present the Silver Award to the Authority today.

Group Captain Arnold presented the silver award to the Chairman, Vice Chairman and Lead Member for People, Equality and Diversity and Assurance, the Chief Fire Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer.

Group Captain Arnold thanked the Chairman and Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service for opening up fire stations to veterans, the Chairman responded.

(Group Captain Arnold left the meeting)

FA18

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Vice Chairman asked if the Director of Finance and Assets would update Members on Minute FA13 – Protection Update and Policy Statement.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that an update on the Financial Strategy would be brought to the December Fire Authority meeting, following the outcome of the budget on 27 October 2021. He was hopeful that this would give a clearer idea of what the Authority's funding outlook would be for the next three years.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that in terms of looking at forecasting, there would be a £700k budget deficit for next year. Members would also be aware of the rising cost of energy, the Authority was looking at a 100% increase in the cost of gas and a 50% increase in the cost of electricity which would add around a further £200k to the budget gap, giving a total gap of £900k at present.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the minutes of the last meeting noted that the Authority continued to lobby government for an increase in precept flexibility, and as part of the spending review submission, requested an additional £5 flexibility for all fire services. Members were also aware that HMICFRS reported the Service didn't have sufficient funding to provide the resources needed in its Public Safety Plan. The position hadn't changed. There had been no additional funding, and with that in mind, and the upcoming spending review, any support Members were able to give in terms of lobbying efforts would be greatly appreciated.

The Chairman advised Members that she was concerned about the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review because she did not think the Authority would be able to increase the precept by £5 and therefore suggested a letter be written, cross party, requesting an extra £5 on the precept, she hoped all Members would support this.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members there were a number of steps to be taken, firstly lobbying for a three-year Comprehensive Spending Review and then a decision regarding a referendum would come later when there was an understanding of the finances for the next three years.

Members discussed writing a letter cross-party to Ministers asking for the ability to increase the precept by £5, should the need arise. Members showed by raising their hands that they were all in agreement.

The Director of Legal and Governance having advised that a motion had been proposed and seconded, it was:

RESOLVED –

That a letter be sent to Ministers on a cross-party basis for the ability to raise the precept by up to £5 a year, should the need arise.

FA19

POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER THAMES VALLEY

The Authority received a presentation from Mr Matthew Barber, the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley.

The Police and Crime Commissioner summarised by recognising the potential change in governance, which he would not be pressing for unless it was mandated, and that he was very keen to continue with the current collaboration taking place across the Thames Valley.

The Police and Crime Commissioner was very supportive of the Authority lobbying the Minister for precept flexibility.

The Police and Crime Commissioner, having been thanked for his presentation, was asked questions by Members and responded.

The Police and Crime Commissioner agreed to stay for the next agenda item.

FA20

DRAFT RESPONSE TO THE HOME OFFICE CONSULTATION 'GIVING POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS GREATER POWERS OF COMPETENCE'

The Director of Legal and Governance advised Members that the purpose of the report was to seek approval from the Authority to the draft response to the Government's Consultation on 'Giving Police and Crime Commissioners greater powers of competence'. The prime audience for the consultation were the bodies and individuals listed in the consultation, and included fire and rescue authorities, the Local Government Association, and the National Fire Chiefs Council. The deadline for responses was 27 October 2021. As had been mentioned by the Chairman, the focus of the consultation

was distinct from the proposals that relate to a Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) taking on the governance role of fire and rescue authorities, which the Home Office had stated would be included in a future consultative White Paper.

The Director of Legal and Governance advised Members that in 2004, the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 gave stand-alone fire and rescue authorities powers to undertake incidental activities, which gave them parity with principal councils (many of which ran fire and rescue services) and parity with policing bodies. Parity between policing bodies and stand-alone fire and rescue authorities was lost when stand-alone fire and rescue authorities were given the greater wider functional powers by the Localism Act 2011. As a single purpose authority, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority had benefited from having been given wider functional powers, examples of these were cited in the draft response to Question 3, such as assisting the ambulance service, health-care providers and other bodies whose main focus was not directed to fire safety.

The draft responses were therefore premised on PCCs being likely to benefit from wider functional powers ancillary to their prime focus and these would also be likely to complement PCCs in their collaboration duties with their blue light partners, whereas general powers of competence were not appropriate for single purpose status of bodies such as PCCs and fire and rescue authorities.

Members were asked to note that in the cover report, under the section headed collaboration and consultation, the PCC's Monitoring Officer's feedback on the draft response had been included. The PCC's Monitoring Officer considered the draft response was consistent with the Home Office's aims and also consistent with respective collaboration obligations.

Members discussed the draft response, and it was agreed that additional wording would be added to Questions 5 and 9.

It having been proposed and seconded the recommendation was amended from:

'That the draft response (Appendix 1) be approved for submission by the Chairman on behalf of the Authority', to:

'That authority be delegated to the Director of Legal & Governance to finalise the response in consultation with the Group Leaders', it was

RESOLVED –

That authority be delegated to the Director of Legal & Governance to finalise the response in consultation with the Group Leaders.

(The Police and Crime Commissioner left the meeting)

FA21

PEOPLE STRATEGY 2020-2025 – YEAR ONE UPDATE

The Lead Member for People, Equality and Diversity and Assurance Introduced the report and advised Members that it was an extensive piece of work, building on previous work that had been undertaken over a number of years to really reshape and reform how the fire service looks and feels and how it works with its people.

The Station Commander HR Projects advised Members that this was a year one update on the People Strategy 2020-2025 which included a recommendation for the 'staff engagement plan' to be agreed and approved. The People Strategy 2020-2025 replaced the previous 2016-2020 strategy and was approved by the Authority on 14 October 2020 and had now been in place for one year. The strategy was produced in agreement and consultation with stake holders across each key area, trade unions and staff. The People Strategy 2020-2025 framework contained five key areas: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Employee Engagement; Organisational Development and Resourcing; Training, Learning and Development and Employee Health and Wellbeing.

The Station Commander HR Projects advised Members that the Authority was fully committed to equality and diversity. The Service recognised that fairness and inclusion was fundamental to everything it did, to achieve its vision of making Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the safest areas in England in which to live work and travel. The Service believed a workforce that better reflects the diversity of the local working population would create a stronger, more enriched and well-informed organisation, able to meet the expectations of a modern fire and rescue service. This was a key aspect of the People Strategy. The objective was to embed equality and diversity into everything it does internally and externally.

The Station Commander HR Projects advised Members that the plan over the next six months was to visit each fire station and shift system, including support staff, to engage and consult on the People Strategy 2020-2025. The roadshow would include a presentation to staff on the strategy and highlight through discussion, how the Service would meet any challenges and identify risks and opportunities. This was with the intention to raise the profile of the strategy, encourage engagement

and ensure staff from across the entire organisation were made aware of how their work contributes and supports the five key areas. The development of this strategy would continue to be supported by engagement with Organisational Development, Joint Consultation Forum, Leadership Group, EDI group, Human Resources, Health and Safety, Operational Training and Assurance and all employees. The strategy was public facing on the Service's website and work was ongoing to refresh this and to ensure it remained engaging, accessible, and practical.

The Station Commander HR Projects advised Members that a robust communication plan had been established to ensure information from within the strategy was published.

Members asked that an update on the staff engagement plan be brought back to a future meeting.

The Vice Chairman stated that he had recently written to the Chief Fire Officer, Chairman and Lead Member for People, Equality and Diversity and Assurance following the conviction and sentencing of the former Metropolitan Police Officer for the murder of Sarah Everard:

'The fire service generally had an image historically of being very male dominated, with a potentially male orientated macho masculine culture, and while the horrific circumstances that led to the abduction and murder of Sarah by the then serving police officer would be unlikely, indeed impossible perhaps, to occur within the fire service, it was worth reassuring ourselves that the service in our county was fit for purpose that these issues were consistently monitored, and any strain away from acceptable behaviour was nipped in the bud in whatever way was most appropriate immediately. Gone were the days when comments and attitudes could be dismissed as being only banter or a bit of fun, and the public and all staff have a right to expect the highest standards at all times.'

The Chief Fire Officer responded to Members by saying that the abhorrent murder of Sarah Everard, and the reports in the public domain of the culture of misogyny in public services, was a reminder to us all around the need to root out this evil and to continue on this journey. The Service would not tolerate bullying, harassment or misogyny at any level. All public authorities need to redouble their efforts and take a long hard look at themselves and ask whether the culture was fit for the future.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer assured Members that there were robust and strict procedures and processes in place and policies for anything that was outside of the Code of Conduct and any such behaviours were dealt with immediately, through the appropriate processes,

procedures, whether that be through grievance, whistle blowing, up to, and including disciplinary procedures.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the Service had for some years been undertaking Culture Survey's within the organisation to better understand and improve the culture and how the Service moved forward to reflect a 21st century fire and rescue service. All operational staff and public facing staff were vetted through the DBS procedure which should also give a level of assurance.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that he met with the employee relations team every fortnight to go through all cases, whether disciplinary, grievance etc., that were being looking into. Everything was scrutinised to a very high level. Another survey would be going out in January 2022 and the Service had just embarked upon another initiative called 'Bully versus Banter' which every staff member had access to.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that although trust levels in the fire and rescue service were very high, the Service did not seem to be able to attract a diverse range of candidates to become firefighters and that was something the Service needed to redouble its efforts on. The Service was not attracting anywhere near the people it needed to get, in terms of reflecting its community. As Members were aware, the diversity of the workforce drives change, different processes, different procedures and a different culture. Although trust in the fire and rescue service was high, it was nowhere near as reflective of the Community it served.

A Member asked how the Service was getting women's voices heard within the surveys and within the work being done, and to understand what kind of behaviour women perceive as misogynistic and what kind of behaviour was bullying versus banter, as there may be a gender divide on it.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Culture Survey was open to everyone, and everyone was encouraged to participate in it. There was also an Equality Diversity and Inclusion Group where there were female representatives and there was a Woman in the Fire Service group nationally.

A Member asked if the trade unions were involved in the promotion of the staff engagement plan.

The Station Commander HR Projects confirmed that the strategy was produced in consultation and agreement with the trade unions. A lot of

hard work went into diversity and inclusion across the Service. There was an Equality and Diversity section on the internal website and staff were signposted to this for updates and news.

The Lead Member for People, Equality and Diversity and Assurance invited any Members to attend the EDI Group meetings to see the great work that was being undertaken by them.

RESOLVED –

That the People Strategy 2020-2025 staff engagement plan be approved.

FA22

COVID-19 PRESENTATION

The Head of Covid 19 Preparedness and Response gave Members a presentation to advise how the Service had responded to the Coronavirus pandemic throughout its various phases during 2020 and 2021.

The Head of Covid 19 Preparedness and Response advised that the Pandemic Management Group was an internal team of cross-departmental managers, who were first stood-up in preparation for the repatriation to Milton Keynes of 150 UK Nationals arriving from areas affected by the Coronavirus. The group were tasked to manage the internal impacts of the pandemic, to ensure the effective delivery of all core functions with a priority for the health, safety and wellbeing of all staff. This included provision of appropriate operational and service level guidance, amending day to day activities and routines, provision of appropriate additional PPE and communicating effectively across the organisation.

The Service responded quickly, achieving Covid-secure premises at all its sites, a continued supply of PPE amidst a global shortage, priority coronavirus testing for all staff and a range of comprehensive guidance for responders to follow. In addition, the Service provided significant support to the coordinated response from the Local Resilience Forum. In the initial phase of the pandemic, this included assistance with logistics for supply of PPE to frontline workers; delivery of essential items and food packages to vulnerable people; training healthcare staff in the use of additional PPE; and seconding Emergency Response Drivers to South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) to drive ambulances. As the test and trace programme gathered momentum, the Service provided support on the ground to follow up on cases where the telephone service had not made contact.

As the Service moved out of the first lockdown, the focus remained on providing appropriate welfare support and guidance to employees and their families affected by the pandemic. The strategic focus was to

coordinate a phased recovery of all departments. The Service continued to provide coordinated and consistent communications to all staff, thereby ensuring all areas of the Service were fully involved to contribute to the recovery process.

The second wave and subsequent return to a response focus started in October 2020 when cases started to rise again across the country. The response strategy was refreshed with the continued aim of ensuring that during the pandemic, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes was the safest places in England to live, work and travel.

The Service continued to operate with an adjusted service delivery across Prevention, Protection and Response through regular risk assessments, in order to protect the public and staff from the impacts of the Coronavirus. The Service maintained continued support to the Local Resilience Forum, professional bodies and partner agencies. Most notably in providing logistical and managerial support to four mass vaccination centres across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. This work commenced during the Christmas week of 2020 and over the coming weeks. This resulted in thousands of people within the communities being able to receive their Coronavirus vaccinations.

Following a commission by the Home Secretary in the Summer of 2020, HMICFRS announced a national review of fire and rescue service Covid-19 preparations. The results of the Covid-19 inspections were published on 22 January 2021, and HMICFRS concluded that BFRS “responded well during the pandemic and provided additional support to its community. It used wholetime and on-call firefighters to respond to emergencies. Staff supported the Service’s partners, especially the local ambulance trust. This meant the people of Buckinghamshire were well supported through the pandemic.” It went on to recognise all the additional activities undertaken and that the Service was able to maintain its response, continue prevention activity, and broadly maintain all protection activity.

The Head of Covid 19 Preparedness and Response advised Members that on 22 February 2021 the Prime Minister announced the Government’s four-step roadmap back to a more normal life through the careful easing of lockdown restrictions in England, and after a short delay in June, the country moved into step 4 with a national easing of restrictions in July 2021. On 19 July 2021, most legal restrictions ended, removing social distancing and social contact restrictions, and enabling remaining businesses to reopen. A further scheme to offer self-isolation exemptions for named employees deemed as critical workers within the emergency services, was implemented from 26 July 2021, and on 16 August 2021, the rules on self-isolating changed for people who are fully vaccinated, and for under 18s. As a Service the approach

to returning to business as usual was taken with cautious optimism, and the strategy was to support the Government's five-point plan for Summer 2021, and to continue to protect the Service and the communities it served.

In August 2021 the Service continued to play a key role, when as a result of recent events in Afghanistan, the evacuation of British Nationals and former British staff eligible for relocation under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) resulted in a surge in the use of the MQS capability in Milton Keynes. This also resulted in bridging hotels being established within the area as an interim measure until longer-term accommodation was sourced.

The Head of Covid 19 Preparedness and Response advised Members that the pandemic had led to the Service supporting its NHS colleagues to establish and maintain effective mass vaccination centres across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The Service assisted with the implementation of vaccination centres at Stoke Mandeville Stadium, Wycombe Wanderers' Football Club, High Wycombe Town Hall and at Saxon Court in Milton Keynes.

The Head of Covid 19 Preparedness and Response advised Members that the Service had now taken a business-as-usual approach but was maintaining a robust contingency plan should the Government need to implement a Plan B. The Service was continuing to maintain covid secure premises, and site visits and community events were well planned, and risk assessed. Staff would continue to wear additional PPE when interacting with the public.

Members asked for their thanks to be passed on to everyone within the Service.

FA23

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To note that the next meeting of the Fire Authority will be held on Wednesday 8 December 2021 at 11am, at The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council.

The Chairman closed the meeting at 12.02 PM