



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Minutes of the Meeting of the OVERVIEW AND AUDIT COMMITTEE of the BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY held on WEDNESDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2021 at 10.00 AM.

Present: Councillors Bagge, Carroll, Chapple OBE, Darlington, Exon, Hussain, Rankine, Stuchbury and Waite

Officers: J Thelwell (Chief Fire Officer), G Britten (Director of Legal and Governance), C Jordon (PA to Director of Finance and Assets),

Remotely: M Hemming (Director of Finance and Assets) S Connolly (Station Commander Resilience and Business Continuity), A Hussain (Deputy Director of Finance and Assets), M Hussey (Principal Accountant), C Bell (Head of Protection, Assurance and Development), S Wells (Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience), S Tuffley (Head of Covid-19 Preparedness and Response), S Cunningham (Group Commander Head of Operational Training and Assurance), S Hawkins (Group Commander Technical), C Newman (Data & Intelligence Team Manager), A Burch (Station Commander West Ashland), J Cook (Community Safety and Safeguarding Manager)

S Harlock (Internal Audit Manager, Buckinghamshire Council), N Harris (External Auditor Ernst & Young), A Kennett (Assistant Manager Ernst & Young)

Apologies: None.

The Director of Legal and Governance welcomed Members to the November Meeting of the Overview and Audit Committee of the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority and confirmed that following the meeting, a recording would be available:

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

OA17 MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Audit Committee held on Wednesday 21 July 2021, be approved, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

OA18 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

In respect of Minute OA11 – Corporate Risk Update and environmental risk – the Chairman directed Members to Agenda Item 12 (Climate Action Plan).

OA19 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

OA20 RIPA POLICY (MINUTE OA39 – 090316)

The Director of Legal and Governance advised Members that the Authority was the enforcing authority under the Regulation Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and confirmed that in the last reporting period no covert surveillance had been undertaken.

RESOLVED –

To note that there had been no covert surveillance conducted by officers since the last meeting of the Committee.

OA21 CORPORATE RISK MANAGEMENT

The Station Commander for Resilience and Business Continuity presented the report and confirmed that the Risk Register had been reviewed regularly by the Performance Monitoring Board, and updated by the Strategic Management Board, most recently on the 19 October 2021.

Changes to the Risk Register since the last meeting included transfer of the EU transition risk from the Corporate Risk Register to the Prevention, Response and Resilience Risk Register, which would be monitored by officers as agreed by the Committee in July. A Climate Change Action Plan had been prepared and would be discussed later which sets out how the Authority would respond to climate change.

There had been no changes to the remaining risk scores and associated rag status since the last meeting. Updates on the status of all the risks had been explained and the relevant risk owner had added information when required.

The staff availability risk had been updated to include the upcoming firefighter recruitment initiative to employ between 15 to 18 new firefighters. The potential impact of the government's increase of National Insurance costs and the impending comprehensive spending review, had been added to the funding and savings risk.

Viruses and malware remained a potent risk to information systems due to the increase in the number of attacks on high profile companies. Staff had been reminded of the mandatory e-training packages. The resurgence of Covid-19 still remained a risk and was reviewed regularly. Covid-19 controls were in place in all premises and staff absence due to Covid-19, remained low.

The McCloud/Sargent detriment case still posed a risk. A mutually acceptable agreement regarding the handling of the immediate detriment had been agreed by the LGA and FBU. A report would be going to the Executive Committee Meeting on the 17 November which outlined the situation.

A Member asked if Covid-19 had affected recruitment and the staffing and operations of appliances. The Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience confirmed that Covid-19 had created challenges, but the Service had responded to all incidents effectively. Going forward, the Service was looking to recruit 15 to 18 new firefighters to enhance operational staff numbers.

A question was raised regarding the funding of pensions and the effect on budgets. The Director of Finance and Assets informed Members that Firefighter pensions were funded differently from many other schemes. The Authority would pay the pension and receive a top-up grant of 80% of the net costs, and then receive 20% at the end of the year for the remaining amount. The budget would not be affected but the flow of cash would need to be monitored by the treasury team.

A Member asked if there were plans for 'normal' working and training to be reintroduced. The Head of Covid-19 Preparedness and Response confirmed that this had been discussed recently, but due to the onset of autumn and winter, the high rates locally, and the potential of new variants, caution was still required.

A Member asked why the Service was employing 15 - 18 firefighters and not a set number. The Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience explained that at present the exact number of firefighters who may retire/leave was uncertain, and this range gave the Service some flexibility.

A Member asked if a risk should be added regarding the potential for the Authority to come under the Police and Crime Commissioner and should the Authority not be working through potential risks now. The Chief Fire Officer explained that a White Paper was imminent, but this had been the case for the past 12 months. Following the White Paper, the Authority would respond to the consultation, and if legislation were passed, the Authority would move to prepare for changes. All Group Leaders had been briefed regarding the current position, and Chief Fire Officers from other Services who now come under a Police and Crime Commissioner had spoken to the senior management team about the experience.

Members discussed the risk and agreed it was too early to add to the risk map.

A Member asked about the uptake rate of the Covid-19 vaccination. The Head of Covid-19 Preparedness and Response informed the Committee that data had not been collected regarding the vaccination

uptake, but he was confident that it was quite high. He emphasised that well embedded welfare arrangements were in place to deal with Covid-19.

A Member asked about the recruitment process and if standards were being maintained. The Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience confirmed that standards would not be lowered during the process. More people would be tested and interviewed than required to cover dropouts. It was hoped that moving forward, the Service could create a pool of people that could be invited back, as vacancies arise.

RESOLVED –

1. That the status on identified corporate risks at Annex C be reviewed and approved.
2. That comments be provided to officers for consideration and attention in future updates/reports.

OA22 AUDIT RESULTS REPORT 2020/21

The External Audit Manager gave Members a verbal update regarding the external audit and preparation for the 2020/21 accounts. He thanked officers for the work that had been carried out in preparation for the audit.

The External Audit Manager explained that a draft copy of the external report had been drawn up, but a number of issues were still outstanding. It was intended that the audit would be completed by the 8 December 2021 in time for the Fire Authority meeting.

Based on procedures to date, it was anticipated that an unqualified opinion on both the financial statements, and reporting that no significant weaknesses in value for money would be found. One area for concern was valuing of the sale of Great Holm Fire Station. It was valued at a fair price, but this does not include the costs to sell in the financial statements. The estimated difference was £55,000. Another area of concern was the valuation of the Blue Light Hub and this needs to be reviewed. The final assurance letter from Grant Thornton regarding the Local Government Pension held by Buckinghamshire Council was also still outstanding.

OA23 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT – UPDATE ON PROGRESS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Internal Audit Manager presented the report and explained to Members that there were 63 recommendations still outstanding, and 18 past their due date. Nine outstanding actions related to the Asset Management Audit that was undertaken last year. The auditors would be auditing this area again and looking at process mapping to help to ensure adequate implementation of the findings. Six actions related to the Resource Management System, and at the present time, there was

no update. A change of personnel had occurred, and these actions had been reallocated.

A Member expressed concern that pieces of equipment could not always be found and the rate in which recommendations were being implemented. The Auditors were asked for assurance that the speed in which the recommendations were being implemented were adequate. The Internal Audit Manager confirmed that one of the reasons for non-implementation was that the end-to-end processes within the Asset Management system were not in place. Therefore, it was recommended that the Auditors do a process mapping exercise for the whole system to identify any gaps and loopholes which would enable them to give improved assurance.

The Director of Finance and Assets also assured Members that following the process mapping of the Asset Management System, the outstanding recommendations could be implemented with more confidence.

A Member raised concerns over procurement processes and unauthorised accounts being set-up. The Director of Finance and Assets explained that some test accounts had been set-up and not been deactivated. This had been rectified and processes put in place to prevent this happening again.

A Member asked if Red Kite was a reactive system, and if it highlighted when equipment was not scanned. The Director of Finance and Assets explained that Red Kite runs exception reports to show equipment that needs testing and/or missing equipment. Some problems had arisen not due to the software, but the hardware being used. New hand scanners were being tested, which would be more efficient and help to resolve some of the missing equipment issues. The Director of Finance and Assets emphasised that there would always be items that may be in the wrong place after an incident, but these were usually found.

A Member raised concerns about the consequences of not scanning correctly and if a more rigorous management culture was required regarding this issue. The Director of Finance and Assets explained that the Red Kite system was put in place about six years ago, and with the introduction of the new hand scanners, it was a good opportunity to revisit station training and knowledge of Red Kite.

A Member felt that an information sheet on Red Kite would be useful. The Director of Finance and Assets confirmed that it was possible, and it would be prepared for the next Committee meeting

RESOLVED –

That the progress on implementation of recommendations be noted.

OA24 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT – UPDATE ON THE 2021/22 ANNUAL AUDIT PLAN

The Internal Audit Manager updated the Committee on the current Audit Plan for this financial year and confirmed that draft reports were being written for Human Resources People Management, and the Blue Light Hub – Post Evaluation and Programme Management and would be available at the next Committee meeting. Draft terms had been agreed for the Asset Management System – Process Mapping and the Procurement Audit. The Core Financial Controls, HR/Payroll Mapping Audits were due to start in January 2022.

RESOLVED –

That Members note the progress on the Annual Internal Audit Plan

OA25

APPOINTMENT OF EXTERNAL AUDITORS

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the current agreement with Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) would expire in 2023 and a decision was required as to whether the Authority opt into another national agreement or appoint its own auditors locally.

The Director of Finance and Assets highlighted that problems had arisen over the last few years regarding external audits, but these were industry wide, and not just with the current auditors, so would not be solved with appointing external auditors locally. By opting for a national agreement, the Authority would get a collective procurement process which would reduce costs and give added support from the PSAA.

RESOLVED –

That the Authority be recommended to accept Public Sector Audit Appointments' invitation to opt into the sector-led option for the appointment of external auditors to principal local government and police bodies for five financial years from 1 April 2023.

OA26

CLIMATE ACTION PLAN

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that following the debate at the last Committee meeting, a Climate Action Plan had been written to help put a framework in place. The plan was not the final answer, but a starting point to embed within the organisation, the question of the environment, and our impact on it. The report looked at the adaptation and mitigation of the plan within the organisation.

The Plan also showed actions that the Authority had already implemented, for example, the introduction of electric cars and the use of advanced heating systems at the Blue Light Hub.

A Member raised concerns that there was nothing in the report regarding affordability and performance tests of equipment. The Director of Finance and Assets agreed that going forward equipment did need to meet the two criteria mentioned, and the plan was to

embed the cost considerations and performance within strategies for different departments.

A Member expressed concern about the amount of printed paper that was generated for meetings and Members could opt to receive papers electronically. The Director of Legal and Governance informed Members that if they wished to receive electronic copies instead, Members could provide their consent to this in writing, otherwise, Committee papers would continue to be printed and sent to Members.

A Member questioned the name of the plan and thought it would be better to call it the Environment Plan due to the amount of diversity of issues within the plan. A debate followed, and it was suggested the plan be renamed the Environment and Climate Action Plan.

It being moved and seconded it was resolved that the draft Climate Action Plan be re-named the Environment and Climate Action Plan.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Environment and Climate Action Plan be recommended to the Authority for approval;
2. That the Authority be recommended to nominate and appoint a Lead Member for climate change.

OA27

2020/21 COMPLIMENTS, CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS

The Director of Legal and Governance informed Members that the report was brought to the meeting in the interest of transparency, to demonstrate that the Service treats expressions of dissatisfaction seriously, and as a learning organisation, will investigate and where necessary, take corrective action.

The level of complaints remained virtually the same over the last reporting period. It was harder to ensure that compliments were captured centrally as compliments come through different media and an array of channels.

The report is in the standard format as presented over the previous 3 years; and has been approved by the Lead Member for People, Equality and Diversity and Assurance for submission to this Committee.

Members were directed to the overview of feedback from the 'After the Incident Survey', which was a questionnaire posted to members of the public who have experienced an emergency incident either in the home, or in non-domestic settings such as workplaces, retail premises or public buildings.

It was explained that responses could be returned either using a freepost facility or online; but respondents tended to favour the paper-based freepost method

Overall satisfaction with emergency response had remained high in both the domestic and non-domestic survey findings over the three-year period shown in the tables. In addition to asking respondents to rate our services, the questionnaires also provided an opportunity to provide qualitative feedback and a representative flavour of these were included in the report.

It was explained that the survey responses were collected and processed by Opinion Research Services, an independent social research practice, which provided a detailed annual report of the survey findings which was reviewed by the internal Performance Monitoring Board and used by officers to identify service improvement opportunities.

A Member raised concerns about the spike in staff conduct complaints 2020/21 and asked if there was a link with Covid-19, for example, not wearing masks. The Director of Legal and Governance did not have details about the complaints, but perhaps with the current situation, people's levels of tolerance was less. The Director of Legal and Governance undertook to look at the background data and to provide a response to the Member.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

OA28

2020/21 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Data and Intelligence Team Manager advised Members that this year's report needed to be scrutinised differently due to the impact of Covid-19 as people's behaviour changed and it was difficult to attribute declining figures directly to things the Service had done. The number of domestic incidents were down but call outs to "special service instances" had increased as work with partner agencies increased.

A Member asked where figures relating to non-fire incidents i.e. flooding could be found, and if the Service had received more non-fire callouts due to winter pressure on South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS). The Data and Intelligence Team Manager confirmed that the non-fire incidents were recorded on page 22 of the report but recording of flooding was difficult as it was monitored centrally. A recorded flooding incident could be anything from a tap being left on, to an environmental flood, so the flooding figures were probably the least accurate. The Service was lobbying government to revise how flooding was recorded, but at the present officers had to look at every flooding incident manually.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that during the past 12 months, some firefighters had been seconded to SCAS to help with their additional work. Co-responder cars were also available and were used in conjunction with SCAS.

A Member asked about attendance times in Milton Keynes since the opening of the Blue Light Hub (BLH). The Data and Intelligence Team Manager confirmed that work was being carried out to investigate responses times, but it was difficult to compare figures as the BLH opened during the pandemic. A report would be going to the Chief Fire Officer shortly and the data could then be shared.

RESOLVED –

That the outturn performance against the outcome measures specified in the Corporate Plan 2020-25 be noted.

OA29

OPERATIONAL ASSURANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Group Commander presented the report and gave a brief outline of the purpose of the Operational Assurance Improvement Plan (OAIP) and how the report was monitored and updated. The Service recently held a number of high-rise exercises and recommendations arising from these exercises were currently being actioned.

A Member asked in the light of the Kerslake Report, how was the Service working with multi-agencies and preparing for incidents. The Group Commander confirmed that the Service was running multi agency exercises at the Fire Service College on a regular basis and through the Joint Emergency Services, had been training with SCAS and Thames Valley Police.

RESOLVED –

That the progress made against each improvement detailed within the updated OAIP is noted.

OA30

GRENFELL INFRASTRUCTURE UPDATE (OCTOBER 2021)

The Group Commander introduced the update and informed Members that the report was in response to the formal recommendations made by the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 Report published on 30 October 2019.

The report highlighted the Service's collaborative approach both internally and externally and demonstrated that all departments were contributing to the work in order to meet the recommendations as part of the improvement plan. The central support funding being made available to the fire service was outlined in the report.

The Authority had been working with local authorities and other fire and rescue services to carry out regular exercises so assuring its exercise programme. A large-scale high-rise exercise was planned for January 2022 and would show a joint approach to major high rise incidents.

A Member put on record that they would be taking part in the exercise in January 2022 and expressed thanks for the way all parties had worked together.

A question was raised regarding whether people should evacuate or stay in place in the event of a fire in a high rise flat. The Group Commander confirmed that this question had been reviewed as part of the ongoing review of all high-rise buildings. The Service had reviewed cladding on buildings and evacuation strategies and had considered events within an operational context. At present, the Service was looking at simultaneous evacuation, and depending on the situation, would inform residents that they were expecting to evacuate the building completely. Buildings were being reassessed on a regular basis as the removal of cladding begins and situations change. Simultaneous evacuation was a complex process and the exercise in January 2022 would help the Service gain a better understanding of it. The advice to high rise tenants would be on going and reviewed on a regular bases as more knowledge was gained.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

OA31

PREVENTION EVALUATION – PHASE ONE REPORT 2021

The Community Safety and Safeguarding Manager introduced the report and explained to Members that following completion of the first inspection round of fire and rescue services, HMICFRS's 2019 report identified 11 areas for improvement, including two for prevention. Firstly the Service should evaluate its prevention work so it understands the benefits better, and secondly the Service should understand the reasons for its reducing number of prevention visits and consider how it could better target those who were most at risk of fire.

In July 2020, an evaluation of prevention activity was commenced which utilised the Viable Systems Methodology. Information was collected from all tiers of Service personnel, through engagement with relevant partners including both Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Councils. The pandemic undoubtedly caused an impact on progressing the evaluation throughout 2020/21 with work being paused to enable capacity to be diverted to assist with the Service's Covid-19 commitments in both the response and recovery phase.

During the second round of inspection of the Service in Summer 2021, HMICFRS identified that limited progress had been made against the prevention area for improvement. This formed the basis for the three recommendations being issued by letter in August 2021. As the Service had entered the business-as-usual period following the pandemic response, work on the Prevention Evaluation was reinvigorated, the

Prevention Evaluation finalised, and its findings made ready to progress. The Station Commander, West Ashland, explained to Members the methodology behind the evaluation of the Service's current prevention activity.

The Prevention Improvement Plan developed encompasses the prevention evaluation recommendations, HMICFRS recommendations and the Prevention Standard (July 27) requirements, including National Operational Guidance. These three strategic drivers lead to the 60 recommendations within the Prevention Improvement Plan.

Work was now in progress to develop these recommendations, and the actions identified, to address them into a project plan which would progress through necessary governance. Some of the timescales for which will be determined by external workstreams from the Central Program Office of the NFCC. For example, the imminent release of the National Prevention Strategy, a standard approach to evaluating activity and a workforce competence profile.

Learning had already been undertaken by prevention management addressing areas within the evaluation and improvement plan, including funding agreed by the Authority to establish several new prevention posts; service delivery area profiles developed to provide information on community risk; and incident demands/trends and benchmarking to assist in the comparison between Service areas and national statistics. A targeted programme of knowledge acquisition for operational staff, Service Delivery area profiles to provide information on community risk and incident demands/trends and benchmarking to assist in the comparison between Service areas and national statistics and planning meetings linked to the first phase of the evaluation were now integral to driving the prevention agenda forward and address priority prevention objectives bespoke to Service area requirements.

RESOLVED –

1. That the evaluation report be noted.
2. That the recommendations to secure long-term improvements to the Prevention function in Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) be endorsed.

OA32

HER MAJESTY'S INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY AND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES (HMICFRS) – BUCKINGHAMSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (BFRS) IMPROVEMENT PLAN UPDATE

The Head of Covid-19 Preparedness and Response advised Members that the HMICFRS Improvement Plan would be presented regularly to this Committee. Many of the actions had now turned green as the Service moved into a business-as-usual phase following lockdown last year. There were still workstreams that remained amber, particularly in the efficiency areas. The financial position had not significantly

improved since the last Inspection. The prevention capacity was being addressed with ongoing recruitment.

Following the round two Inspection in August 2021, a letter was issued raising concerns about prevention activity not being sufficiently high priority for the Service, and not adequately identifying those most at risk of fire. This had resulted in three new recommendations, which covered defining levels of risk, revision of the prevention strategy and a review of systems and process for dealing with referrals from partner agencies. Members could be assured that the recommendations had been acknowledged and a reply was sent to MHI Matt Parr addressing the recommendations before the deadline.

The substance of the recommendations was not a surprise, as Members have just heard from the previous presentation, a lot of work had been carried out evaluating the prevention team, but implementation had been delayed due to the pandemic response.

The next update of the plan would be a complete refresh following the publication of the round two inspection report, which was due to be published in December 2021. Any outstanding actions from the current report would either be removed or carried over to the second report plan.

RESOLVED –

That the Committee note current progress against the HMICFRS BFRS Improvement Plan.

OA33

TREASURY MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE 2021/22 - QUARTER 2

The Principal Accountant presented the report and informed Members that the return on investments for 2021/22 was £5k up on budget. The forecast for the rest of the year was projected to be £32k, which would achieve the budget set for the year.

At present the Authority had £19M invested in various counterparties including banks, building societies, money market funds and current accounts. It was anticipated that by the end of the financial year, the Authority would have £14 million invested. The reason for the deduction through quarters three and four was due to maturing deals that happen monthly and would be used to meet short-term expense requirements.

The Authority was due to make a loan repayment in May 2022 of £620k, cash would be available for the repayment. The repayment did not impact on revenue budgets.

The budget for Treasury Management was set at £30k in February 2021 and there were no plans to increase it for 2022/23. This was due to the Bank of England keeping the interest base rate at 0.10%. Officers

would continue to monitor investments and the base rate to ensure best results.

A Member asked for more information on who Close Brothers were. The Principal Accountant advised they were an investment company who work with a large number of local authorities.

RESOLVED –

That the Treasury Management Performance 2021/22 – Quarter 2 report be noted.

OA34 FORWARD PLAN

The Chairman brought the Forward Plan for future Overview and Audit Committee meetings to the attention of Members.

RESOLVED –

That the Forward Plan be noted.

OA35 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted that the date of the next Overview and Audit Committee meeting would be held on Wednesday 16 March 2022 at 10.00am.

THE CHAIRMAN CLOSED THE MEETING AT 12:25 PM.