



# Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY HELD ON TUESDAY 24 OCTOBER 2023 AT 11 AM.

**Present:** Councillors Adoh, Carr, Carroll, Chapple OBE, Darlington (part), Exon, Fuller, Hall, Hussain (part) Lambert, Rouse (Chairman), Stuchbury, Walsh (part)

**Officers:** M Osborne (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), G Britten (Director of Legal and Governance), M Hemming (Director of Finance and Assets), A Carter (Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO), P Mould (Head of Response and Resilience) K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer), R Wilsher (HMICFRS Inspector) and J Hayden (HMICFRS Chief of Staff)

Online: K Richardson (HMICFRS Service Liaison Lead)

**Apologies:** Councillors Bagge, Christensen, McLean (joined online) and Waite

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

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

## **FA32 DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **FA33 MEMBERSHIP OF THE AUTHORITY**

To note that Milton Keynes City Council appointed on 18 October 2023 the following Members to serve on the Authority:

Milton Keynes City Council (5)

From: Councillors Darlington, Exon, Fuller, Khan and McLean

To: Councillors Carr, Darlington, Exon, Fuller and McLean

## **FA34 COMMITTEE MATTERS**

- (i) Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and Local Government (Committees and Political Groups) Regulations 1990.

Conservative Group: 10 seats (58.82%)

Labour Group: 3 seats (17.65%)

Liberal Democrat Group: 4 seats (23.53%)

(ii) Committee Appointments

That seats to the following Committees be allocated as follows:

Executive Committee (8 Members):

(i) Conservative – 5

(ii) Labour – 1

(iii) Liberal Democrat – 2

Overview and Audit Committee (9 Members):

(i) Conservative – 5

(ii) Labour – 2

(iii) Liberal Democrat – 2

1. That the following Members be appointed to the Executive Committee:

Councillors Darlington, Christensen, Lambert, Adoh, Hall, McLean, Rouse and Walsh in accordance with the Group Leaders' wishes.

2. That the following Members be appointed to the Overview and Audit Committee:

Councillors Bagge, Carroll, Chapple OBE, Hussain, Waite, Stuchbury, Carr and Exon in accordance with the Group Leaders' wishes.

(Councillors Darlington and Hussain joined the meeting)

**FA35 HIS MAJESTY'S INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY AND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES (HMICFRS) INSPECTION REPORT 2023**

The Chairman welcomed His Majesty's Inspector (HMI) Roy Wilsher and Chief of Staff Jo Hayden from HMICFRS and advised Members that as it was an important session, he would allow Members a longer time to ask questions than usual.

HM Inspector advised Members that the Service had made some improvements but had not done enough since the last inspection to improve. Four of the 22 areas for improvement and three of the eight recommendations from the cause of

concern in the 2021 report had been addressed. Prevention and Protection both needed clear direction and prioritising targets in the highest risk. Although mobilising the nearest fire appliance in the Thames Valley was a good thing, BFRS was over reliant on neighbouring fire services attending incidents. There was a need for better direction setting and prioritisation from senior leaders, but also a concern for the workload levels within the Service.

The report had 26 areas for improvement and three causes of concern. The Inspectorate expect an action plan within 28 days of publication of the report to show how the causes of concern would be addressed.

Starting from the base document, the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), does not cover all risks within Buckinghamshire and does not allocate resources in the way they would expect prevention, protection and response in a proportionate manner. There had not until recently been sufficient community engagement in the CRMP process, although the Service does gather local risk information well.

The first cause of concern was prevention. There had been some improvement, a revised strategy and some direction to the work, but the Service was not identifying and prioritising people most at risk. Work had been concentrated on the over 80's and high rise residential. Although these were both risk factors, there were others. Health deprivation, alcohol and drug abuse etc. Prevention work needed to be evaluated. The staff who work on prevention had the right skills and make appropriate referrals, e.g. forms to social services and they also work well with partners. Staff were also good at safeguarding matters.

Cause of concern for protection. There was a need to review the strategy and the risk based inspection programme, to ensure the highest risk premises were identified and audited. There were more staff in protection, which was a good thing. They were well trained and carried out good quality audits within buildings and the building consultations were also good. The IT systems needed upgrading, and more direction and prioritisation was required for the staff.

Cause of concern on fairness and promoting diversity. The Service had not made enough progress since the last inspection to improve equality, diversity and inclusion. Although the Service had done some work, it had not done enough. The Service had completed one of the recommendations for reviewing its equality impact assessment process, but the other recommendations still required action to be taken or completed, i.e. raise awareness, feedback systems for staff, collecting data and recruiting a diverse workforce. The Service was good at tackling bullying and harassment and discrimination, but workloads would often mean that deadlines for those cases were not met.

In terms of response, there was no cause for concern, but the Service was very lean and struggled to resource fire appliance availability. 30% fire appliance attendance to incidents was from other Services. Risk information needed to be updated and available on the Incident ground and on the mobile data terminals.

There were good plans for fire station locations, officers knew how to command incidents, and Thames Valley Fire Control worked well. BFRS was well prepared to attend major and multi-agency incidents, although more needed to be done to complete all the Grenfell recommendations. The Service had comprehensive financial plans, but falls short on allocating resources to prevention, protection and response. The general IT systems were poor and required more investment.

Prevention and Protection information systems had failed, and mobile data terminals could not be removed from fire engine cabs to enable incident command. There was limited capacity and capability within the Service to bring about this change. The Service had struggled to recruit IT and Project Management specialists, which had an impact on the ability to change. Senior managers needed to be more visible and consistently demonstrate the right behaviours.

96% of staff who responded to the HMI survey do know the Service's values, which was a good thing, and staff were proud to work for the Service. However, complaints go through the chain of command, and this could affect confidence from staff in reporting, and the time scales that

issues were resolved. At the time of inspection, there was not an independent reporting line for complaints, but this was now in place. Inspectors witnessed middle managers who were not supportive of each other, and were told there was a lack of confidence in some of the senior leaders.

The Service had a good wellbeing provision, but it was not always accessed or implemented correctly. The Inspectorate was told of high workloads and pressures, which linked to the capacity issues. Workforce planning needed improving, although there had been some progress, there needed to be a fully open and fair promotion process. The Service was good at background checks for employment, and staff were proud to work for the Service.

(Councillor Walsh joined the meeting)

A Member asked about retained firefighters and the ability to staff on call stations.

HMI Wilsher advised Members that regarding retained, on call firefighters, this was a countrywide problem trying to get enough people to crew on call appliances. This was something that would come out in the Chief Inspector's State of Fire report, later in the year. Something needed to be done as this society had changed, and although it was not just BFRS, there were one or two stations in Buckinghamshire where it was an acute problem.

A Member asked with regard to the finances that were mentioned in the report, additional resource had been provided to improve head count, and estate improvements. A detailed financial review had been undertaken which had also improved the financial situation of the medium term forecast and that was very positive, but when looking at HMICFRS's concerns with over the border usage, because of the geographical nature of the county, and former parts that used to be part of Buckinghamshire, makes it quite challenging to resource without building a new station, or having a wholetime crew elsewhere with very significant cost. Where should the Service be in terms of over the border usage?

HMI Wilsher advised Members that because of crewing systems and the availability of some fire stations, the Service was a little over reliant on over the border usage. Mobilising the nearest fire engine was a good thing. Mobilising the

nearest fire engine across border was a good thing and that was where Thames Valley Fire Control worked well. The balance had got a bit out of line. Locations of fire stations were fine, and the HMICFRS were not expecting the Service to spend money on building another whole time station. It just needed a thorough review with neighbouring Services.

A Member stated that ever since the 1947 Act, fire services helped each other over the border, the report said there was a 30% reliance on over the border, but equally BFRS would be going into other authorities on an initial call, of two or three pumps, and one could well be from BFRS. So was the 30% net, or does it take into account BFRS going into the other authorities, does it bring the percentage down?

HMI Wilsher advised that the calculation had not been done exactly so he could not give a percentage but speaking to the Chief Fire Officers of Oxfordshire and Hertfordshire, BFRS did not go into their areas as much as they come into Buckinghamshire.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer advised Members that Buckinghamshire was a net receiver from some authorities because it was landlocked, and was bordered by a number of authorities, and it was also seasonal. With Oxfordshire the Service was a net provider in the wintertime, but net receiver in the summertime. Northamptonshire was similar. The Service was a net receiver from Royal Berkshire and from Hertfordshire as well. As previously mentioned, the area around Slough which use to be part of Buckinghamshire, even if the Service had a wholetime pump available 24/7 in that area, Slough would still beat BFRS into the area. There were some anomalies due to the shape of the county.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer could provide these figures to Members.

A Member asked if there was an area within the county that was weaker and relied more on over the border activity or was it all the way round the county.

HMI Wilsher advised Members that the Interim Chief Fire Officer could provide more information on that, but his perception was that Slough and Rickmansworth would provide most of the over the border reliance.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer advised Members that with the 30%, it could be interpreted that 30% of incidents had the initial response from someone over the border but that was

not the case. The 30% included if there was a six pump fire and there were five appliances from BFRS and one from over the border. The Service had been working with those Services across border around charging arrangements.

A Member asked if the 30% included false alarms.

HMI Wilsher advised that it included all incidents, including false alarms, and the percentage of false alarms were particularly high in Buckinghamshire.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer advised that the number of false alarms in Buckinghamshire was below the national average.

A Member asked about protection and the new responsibilities for the Service following Grenfell, particularly in high rises, which tended to be located, not exclusively, in Milton Keynes. What does HMICFRS think the Service could do to improve it. Also, of the two reports that were released on the same day, this Authority was just over £30 per head and the other Service was over £50 per head, what extra pressure does this gap cause the Authority. Lastly, one of the main conclusions was that the Service did not make enough progress from the last report, how can Authority Members support the senior management team and could HMI Wilsher elaborate on the point about senior leaders.

HMI Wilsher advised Members that the staff in Protection were well qualified, and when they undertook audits of premises, they did it well. The issue had been the actual risk based inspection programme, deciding which buildings to go to first and that could be high rise. HMI Wilsher had been advised by the Interim Chief Fire Officer that officers were already talking to the National Fire Chiefs Council getting some help and reviewing the risk based inspection programme.

With regard to finance, BFRS was a very lean service, which does cause capacity issues, but the financial plans were very good, it was just the Service did not have much money.

In terms of supporting the senior leaders moving forward, scrutiny of the areas for improvement and the recommendations from the causes of concern. Officers would come up with an action plan, that Members should be scrutinising. In terms of senior leaders, there was a lack of visibility and senior leaders could be Group Managers up.

Visibility, and how they take feedback and how they support and interact with each other was important.

A Member stated that the Service attended all automatic fire alarms, was the recommendation that it does not, and if that was the case, there would be an operational change which would change the cost profile. Please could HMI Wilsher elaborate more on what was meant by productivity in the report.

The people risk mentioned over 80s and above, this was a chosen area the Service was addressing, but in the report it said the Service now need to concentrate on the 65 plus age group and it was marked down for not including this group.

The high level of equality, diversity and inclusion work within the Service, does not seem to be recognised within the report, it mentioned characteristics, but you cannot make employees divulge their protective characteristics unless it was mandatory, going against what legislation said, that seemed to be the gap in the report.

HMI Wilsher advised that with regard to automatic fire alarms, that was a decision for the Authority and the Service. What was meant by productivity was the Service getting the best out of the workforce when they come to work. It was focused on Stations and if they were doing as much as they could be doing with their time. Were they doing safe and well visits, were they training as much as they should. Attending incidents could be measured, but what they were doing on Station was not easy to measure.

Over 80s, of course was a risk factor, but was concentrating on over 80s and high rise residential, meaning the Service was missing other risk factors. The staff know what they were doing with safe and well checks, it was just widening the risk base to make sure the Service was getting to the most vulnerable in those areas.

In terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, there was good plans, leadership and strategic intent, but it was not getting through how it should in some areas of the Service and that was what was concerning. You could not force anyone to give their characteristics, and there was not any government that was going to legislate that, in fact the change in legislation was to ensure you could not.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer gave Members assurance around the operational matters, there were good plans in



place already, and the Service had been working with HMICFRS since the hot debrief at the end of June and the National Fire Chiefs Council, to make sure that all the plans that were being brought forward, were best practice and had been peer reviewed across the board. The Service was working closely with all its partners and colleagues. 15 November was the 28 day deadline to respond, and the Service would have strong, robust, operational plans in place for those areas.

A Member asked regarding the concerns raised about availability, and highlighted four individual Stations that had acute problems, and suggested a review of operations, was HMICFRS asking officers to go away and look at the fire station base and rationalise it, potentially to close some stations and relocation resources elsewhere.

HMI Wilsher advised that this comes under the integrated risk management plan and something that was already being looked at. Many of the locations were good locations and Stations were where they needed to be, but if there was only 5% availability at a Station, it does raise the question as to whether that Station was required or not, but that was for the professional advisers and the Fire Authority to make those decisions.

The Chairman advised that when looking at some of the root causes in the report there were three main areas. The financial plan situation of the Service, the Public Safety Plan 2020-2025 and leadership. With regard to the financial plan, the Authority cannot change what went on 10 to 15 years ago, but in terms of where the Authority now sits, and this was recognised in the report, the reserves position and the operational resources position had both been strengthened and set a platform for transformation. The challenge now was that any investment for transformation had the impact that was needed.

The Chairman advised that there were two observations made in the report. One was that the Service had not properly looked at the allocation of resources between prevention, response and protection, and he would like to know what was meant by that. Identified in the report was that protection had been well resourced, but the resource had not been well directed, what were the key lessons the Service should take from that.

On the Public Safety Plan, the 2020-2025 Public Safety Plan could not be unpicked, but the Service recognised that it needed to change and that was why the community risk management planning process had been brought forward and there was good progress being made on it. Was there anything else that the Service should have done differently and was there anything between now and the publication of the Community Risk Management Plan that the Service should be encouraged to do, that would take away some of those concerns.

The Chairman advised that the Service had become more reliant on over the border over the last 12 months. Some of that was about whole time resources, but hopefully the Service was starting to see a change. The root cause was availability and again it would be helpful to know any best practice. As you say retained firefighters were a national problem, was there best practice from other inspections elsewhere of a similar rural area, that would help this Service with the availability challenge.

The Chairman also asked HMI Wilsher to explain the leadership points, the report referred to a fully open recruitment process, please could the issues around that be explained.

The Chairman advised that the Service was visited at the beginning of the year regarding the two causes of concern, and from the feedback, it felt that good progress was being made. It did not feel that the feedback was going to lead us to the content of this report. Moving forward, how could the Service ensure it was getting the right feedback from HMICFRS that suggested it was not making enough progress.

The Chairman asked that looking at other reports published, where does this report put the Service against its peer group. How concerned should Members be.

HMI Wilsher advised that with regard to finance, if it was not in the base budget from years ago, building back up was very difficult. The plans the Service had for finance were good, the reserves were building and over the coming years as more was invested, whether it was through precept, or any other way, the Service would start to reap the benefits. One of the issues the Service does suffer with was location. The job market and the pressures on how much the Service could pay, as a local public sector, made it difficult to recruit. It was an acute problem in the South East.

Resource allocation sits within the CRMP and it was very important where resources were allocated. Fortunately, now, there were standards for CRMP's from the Standards Board, advising Services that they should be looking at the national risk register, the community risk register, floodplains, demographics, there was a whole list of things. Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS) was a good one to look at, because it was more rural and did risk management well. Also, with regard to rural availability, again look at KFRS, they had done some different things, but most services were struggling with on call retained availability. There had been talk of a national project for a while now as something needed to be done and it was something that HMICFRS would push the government on.

HMI Wilsher advised that with the open promotion progress had been made, but the perception was that it was not as open as it should be and through communication and how things were done to ensure that people understood and perceived it to be open.

HMI Wilsher advised that regarding feedback on the causes of concern, he guaranteed while he was the Service's HMI, he would advise exactly where the Service was, and how it was improving or not improving and he would make suggestions to help the improvement.

HMI Wilsher advised that with regard to peer competition HMICFRS tried not to do league tables. It was not a good report, improvement was needed, and the Service could improve. The commitment was there, proudness of the Service was there. With the help of the Authority scrutinising the senior management team, the Service would improve.

The Chairman reiterated what he said at the start of the meeting, he was exercising a degree more latitude over the normal Standing Orders. He reminded Members that they were in a public meeting and to take a degree of care over some of the points that were being made. Also, he encouraged Members to ensure they were not repeating questions that had already been covered.

A Member asked if the 30% was linked to any specialised service or any specialised unit and wondered if this had contributed to the issue. Also, in terms of climate management, how was the Service going to predict and manage that in terms of financial support. Was there any best practice that would assist the Service, in particular in terms of

heat waves, flooding, particularly for Milton Keynes. Also, if the Service doesn't address these points within the report, what would the outcome be.

HMI Wilsher advised that the 30% was very much day to day incidents. The specialist resource and national resilience resource were all built on the national resilience advisory framework. With regard to the report, things would start to improve, and HMICFRS would assist with that. The National Fire Chiefs Council, Local Government Association and the Home Office would all help with the improvement as well. Ultimately, although it would never happen, the Home Secretary could put in a team of people to run the Service, but that would be the real bottom line. The HMI's job was to make sure that doesn't happen. There would be a revisit inspection, and the Service Liaison Lead would keep in constant contact, and HMI Wilsher would speak to the Chief Fire Officer regularly.

A Member asked about the section on promoting the right values and improvement and governance and scrutiny. Would it be worth looking at what governance and scrutiny other Authorities do in order to ensure the processes were robust enough. The Member was concerned about comments around occupational health and mental health and additional welfare for staff, and asked where HMI would recommend the Authority improve its governance and scrutiny to help improve welfare.

HMI Wilsher advised Members there were very good welfare provisions within the Service, but it was people accessing the system, understanding the system, and having the time to go and do the things they needed to do. There were a lot of workload pressures, people were working 'hot', working all the time, so it was about people taking that little bit of time to access some of that provision.

In terms of scrutiny, HMICFRS do not have any remit for inspecting Fire Authorities, but how they do scrutiny is very important. Good governance was very important. HMI Wilsher suggested discussion with the LGA because they do a lot of peer assessment and know how these things work. Through the Fire Services Management Committee of the LGA was probably the best way.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the Authority note the BFRS HMICFRS 2023 inspection report (Appendix 1).
- 2) That the Interim CFO be delegated to prepare and publish an Action Plan on behalf of the Authority in consultation with the Chairman and the Vice Chairman.
- 3) That the Overview and Audit Committee be delegated the monitoring of progress of delivery against the Action Plan.

The Chairman thanked HMI Roy Wilsher, Chief of Staff Jo Hayden and Service Liaison Lead Kathryn Richardson (online) for attending the meeting.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

To note that the next meeting of the Fire Authority will be held on Wednesday 6 December 2023 at 11 am.

THE CHAIRMAN CLOSED THE MEETING AT 12.02PM