

Fire Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee: minutes

Date: Thursday 7 January 2021

Time: 2.00 pm – 3.10pm

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Present: Cambridgeshire County Councillors: I Gardener (Vice-Chairman), J Gowing, L Harford, S Kindersley, M McGuire (Chairman) and J Scutt

Peterborough City Councillor A Bond

Officers Present: Jon Anderson, Rachel Brittain, Dawn Cave, Daniel Harris, Shahin Ismail, Chris Parker, Deb Thompson, Matthew Warren, Matthew Weller

Welcoming Members, the Chairman paid tribute to Cllr Janet Goodwin, a valued Member of the Fire Authority for many years, who had sadly passed away in December. Councillors Kindersley and Scutt also paid tribute to Cllr Goodwin and passed on their condolences to her family.

98. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

99. Declarations of Interest

None.

100. Minutes – 1st October 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st October 2020 were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman when next in the office.

101. Action Log

The Action Log was noted.

102. Integrated Risk Management Plan Performance Measures

The Committee received a report setting out performance against the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) targets. The data presented covered the period up to 30th September 2020.

It was noted that performance in most areas had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly attendance times, where there had been improvements due to greater availability of On-Call firefighters and less traffic. Additionally, there had been a reduction in the numbers of both primary and secondary fires, fire casualties, the number of road traffic collisions attended and incidents requiring special services.

With regard to diversity, there had been small increases in both female and black, Asian and minority ethnic applicants and employees, but figures had remained broadly static. The most significant increase had been the increase in the number of female On-Call firefighters, from 12% to 16%.

There had been slight increase in non-domestic fires i.e. fires not in residential dwellings. The reason for this was unclear, but officers agreed to ask the Performance Team to undertake some analysis of these figures. **Action: ACFO.**

The number of Fire Safety Audits during the period had dropped dramatically due to businesses either being closed or having limited access due to the pandemic. However the Service was adapting to doing its work in a different way, giving fire safety advice virtually in most cases.

During discussion Members raised the following points:

- Noting that the reporting period was to the end of September 2020 and that the initial lockdown period effectively ended at the end of June 2020, asked if any changes were discernible in the second quarter compared to the first, when there was a full lockdown, e.g. RTCs? Officers confirmed that RTC figures dropped dramatically when the first lockdown started, and whilst they increased when first lockdown finished, figures remained well below the five year average. Officers also commented that it would be interesting to see the longer term impact e.g. as a result of more people working at home so not commuting;
- It was noted that the latest police accident data for the number of people killed and seriously injured on the county's roads was for the period ending December 2019 and was therefore not relevant to the period under consideration;
- With regard to the diversity of job applicants and employees, a Member noted that the proportion of the workforce in the 17-35 age bracket had increased in all areas except Professional Support. The Member asked what roles Professional Support covered and whether fewer younger people being recruited in this area could be a risk? Officers confirmed that Professional Support related to non-uniformed roles in areas such as human resources and finance. During the period in question, there had been significant recruitment for uniformed staff roles, which tend to be at earlier stages of individuals careers. There had not been the same level of recruitment for Professional Support roles during this period;

- A Member asked how the reduction in Fire Safety Audits impacted on residential care homes, which were a considerable risk area. It was confirmed that due to the pandemic and the vulnerable nature of residents, those audits could not be carried out. However the Service remained in regular contact with care homes and was giving regular advice on fire safety to those settings;

It was resolved unanimously to note the contents of the performance report in Appendix 1 to the report.

103. Independent Review into the Oversight of Local Audit and the Transparency of Local Authority Financial Reporting

Members considered a report on the Independent Review carried out nationally by Sir Tony Redmond and the response to that review by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MCHLG) released in December 2020 and its impact on the Fire Authority.

The Independent Review focused on the external audit function in the public sector, specifically the sustainability of the accounting and audit sector, as there have been a number of challenges over the last couple of years, especially in respect of missing the contractual deadline for sign off. The intended outcome of the review was to deliver a new framework for effective local audit and an annual financial statement which enables all stakeholders to hold local authorities to account for their performance together with a robust and effective audit reporting regime.

The following points were noted:

- The difficulties attracting larger firms in market, possibly due to the level of fees offered;
- The issues in terms of oversight: PSAA (Public Sector Audit Appointments) was the body that appoints auditors on authorities' behalf, but it was less clear who should manage and govern those auditors once they were in place;
- The issues around transparency i.e. whether the average member of the public could understand financial accounting statements, and whether attempts should be made to simplify them to make them clearer.

Commenting on the report:

- A Member observed that many of the issues in recent years, in terms of closure of accounts, resulted from recruitment difficulties experienced by auditors. Officers agreed that there was a shortage of appropriately qualified and experienced auditors, and this issue needed to be addressed. They also highlighted that the publication date for final, audited accounts was the same for local authorities as the NHS, which

meant that auditors dealing with the public sector were under a lot of pressure in a short period of time;

- A Member was concerned that the new regulatory body that was proposed might replicate the size and complexity of the Audit Commission and may just present another level of bureaucracy and additional costs. She felt that this would be unfair, especially if the root of the problem was the accounting companies' inability to recruit;
- A Member commented that the market was reducing because local government settlements had become so squeezed, and this was a broader political issue nationally. Whilst the impact of the review may not be felt initially, he feared that longer term it would have a significant impact, especially for those local authorities with complex financial arrangements;
- In terms of timescales, it was noted that it was very unlikely any of the outcomes and actions of the review would be implemented prior to the end of the 2021/22 accounts.

It was resolved unanimously to note the content of the report and in particular the elements that will directly affect the Authority (paragraph 7 of the report).

104. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority – Annual Audit Letter

The Committee received the Annual External Audit Letter for 2019/20.

Members were reminded that they had considered an update on the outcome of the appointed auditors' annual audit and audit completion report at the Fire Authority meeting in October 2020. At that stage, the main outstanding area to be resolved had related to the Pension Fund, as that work was unresolved at that time.

It was noted that the deadline for completion of the 2019/20 Accounts had been deferred until 30th November 2020 by government, due to the pandemic. Whilst the Accounts had been ready at that date, due to administrative issues, they were not actually signed until 1st December 2020, as there had been a number of adjustments to be agreed by managers.

It was noted that there was a proposed amendment to fees for the 2019/20 Audit, and this would be negotiated with the Deputy Chief Executive. This increase would comprise two elements reflecting increased workload, some of which was for this audit only i.e. a one-off, and part which would be included in an annual uplift. This would also need to be agreed by the PSAA. The final proposed amendment to fees would be reported to Committee Members.

Action: DCEO.

During the course of discussion, Members:

- Thanked the Auditors and officers for all the work undertaken;
- Observed that in terms of transparency, whilst materiality was judged to be above 2% of gross expenditure, this did mean that many items below this threshold were deemed “not material”, but were huge in layman’s terms;
- Noted that “CIES” denoted “Consolidated Income and Expenditure Statement”.

It was resolved unanimously to:

Note the Annual Audit Letter.

105. Managing Risks in a Changing Environment – Analysis of Fire Risk Registers

Members considered a report from the Fire Authority’s External Auditors, BDO, regarding risk management by fire and rescue services (FRSs). The report identified some persistent challenges, together with some new and emerging risk areas, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic, IT and the external environment.

The Risk Registers of 16 FRSs were included in this exercise, with 264 individual risks examined in total within those Risk Registers. Each risk was then categorised by key theme to understand those areas of greatest concern. As well as the risks highlighted, services needed to be alert to opportunities for development and service enhancement. Those officers managing the Risk Register needed to be aware of this report and determine whether the Service’s Risk Register needed to be updated in any way.

Arising from the report:

- A Member queried whether there would be any adverse impact resulting from the delay of implementation of the ESN (Emergency Services Network). Responding, Daniel Harris advised that he attended a number of police and fire service Audit Committees and this was a common concern. It was clear that the main issue was the availability and robustness of the existing system (Airwave). There were certain pieces of equipment that support the existing system that were becoming more difficult to source and this would become more of an issue the longer the delay went on. It was also noted that the costs of the ESN system had practically doubled over the last 3-4 years, so there was also a financial risk;
- A Member raised an issue about employee engagement and mental health. Given that the Service was regarded as an exemplar, he felt it was important to lead on this area and explore issues that were not standard practice at the moment. The problems in recruiting to the new mental

health and wellbeing post were a concern but he was also concerned about the longer term impact of the pandemic, both in terms of PTSD for existing employees, but also the suite of issues that might arise from the pandemic in the long term, e.g. issues with home working, and the problems faced by school children and school leavers who would be the Service's future employees. Responding, officers commented that there was value in the Service evaluating what has been done to date with regard to the pandemic, especially in terms of mental health and wellbeing. They agreed that it was vital to prepare for the future, in terms of future employees, and be cognisant of the longer term impacts of the pandemic. Some other Members supported these comments, and suggested that issues such as torpor in emergency settings could have really serious consequences;

- A Member raised the issue of succession planning: whilst acknowledging that the Service currently benefitted from outstanding leadership, this could be at risk if appropriate succession planning measures were not put in place;
- A Member queried the reference to “de-collaboration – where intended efficiency outcomes or public safety objectives are not realised” under the section on “areas of potential efficiency gains”. Daniel Harris advised that this related to some criticism by HMICFRS on some collaborations, especially with the police. It was confirmed that there had been no criticism of any Cambridgeshire collaborations with either the police or neighbouring fire services;
- A Member asked the extent of local collaboration with partners at the County Council, Environment Agency and police for flooding events, as it was vital that the fire service was joined up with partners for these events. Officers outlined the regular group meetings with partners that take place during events such as the recent flooding, and confirmed that there would be debriefing to review what had happened and what lessons could be learned to ensure that the Service was better prepared for future incidents;
- A Member observed that there had been issues during the current pandemic, especially in health settings, with PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) not fitting some individuals, especially smaller women, and she asked if that issue had been reviewed. Officers outlined the proactive measures that had been taken by the Service with regard to PPE and there had been no reports of PPE not fitting correctly. PPE provided to operational staff was supplied to fit the size and shape of each individual.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the report .

106. Key Financial Controls

The Committee received a report that focused on the key controls in Ledger Access, Policies and Reporting, Accounts Payable, Cash and Treasury Management, and Asset Management.

In terms of progress year to date, the auditor anticipated issuing an unqualified opinion at year end.

A correction was noted to the second sentence of the last paragraph of page 6 of the report, which should read “the one outstanding medium priority action related to having not documented who *has* authority to improve investments had been delegated”.

It was resolved unanimously to note the report.

107. Internal Audit Progress Report January 2021

The Committee considered the Internal Audit Progress plan for 2020/21.

Since the agenda had been published, the Deputy Chief Executive had been in touch with the auditors to defer the People Strategy Review, as that team was not fully resourced, due to the impact of both the pandemic and HMICFRS activity.

It was resolved unanimously to note the Internal Audit Progress Report.

108. Member-led Review of Best Practice Consultation with Representative Bodies – Terms of Reference.

The Committee received the Terms of Reference for the Member-led review regarding best practice consultation with representative bodies.

Presenting the report, Members noted that the Terms of Reference for this review had previously been considered by Committee, but for many reasons, the review had not started.

Members confirmed that they were happy with the Terms of Reference and for Cllr McGuire to lead the Review, with Councillor Gowing assisting. One Member suggested that it was important in terms of public perspective to identify the Committee Chairman as leading this review. It was anticipated that this work should be completed in time for the Committee meeting in April.

It was resolved to approve the Terms of Reference.

109. Member-led Review of Approach to Recruitment

The Committee received an oral update regarding the Member-led review of approach to recruitment. Again, it was noted that this review had been deferred, partly due to the events 2020 but also because Members had wanted to analyse the BAME data on previous firefighter recruitment campaigns, which was only now available.

Members acknowledged that there were some very different issues to consider as a result of the changes over the last year but agreed that as the Service was now at the beginning of another firefighter recruitment campaign, it was appropriate to work towards concluding the review in time for presentation to the Committee in April.

It was resolved to note the update.

110. Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

Considering the updated work programme, Members noted that virtual meetings would continue for the foreseeable future.

It was resolved to note the work programme.

Chairman