

Fire Overview and Scrutiny Committee Minutes

Date: 4 October 2023

Time: 2.00p.m. – 3.55p.m.

Venue: New Shire Hall, Alconbury Weald, Huntingdon

Present: Councillors Gardener, Hathorn, Kindersley (Chair), Rae, Taylor and Warren

64. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Councillor McGuire and there were no declarations of interest.

65. Minutes – 20 April 2023 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. In noting the action log, the Chair reported that Constabulary data covering in excess of three years on road traffic collisions on the A14 around Ellington/Keyston was e-mailed to Members on 28 September 2023; this information was particularly welcomed by one Member.

66. Integrated Risk Management Plan Performance Measures

The Committee considered a report reviewing the Service's progress against its Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) between 1 April and 30 June 2023. Attention was drawn to Appendix 1 detailing attendance times for urban and rural areas and all incidents, total fires, primary and secondary fires, fire deaths and casualties, road traffic collisions (RTCs) attended, people killed or seriously injured in RTCs, special service incidents attended, applicant and workforce diversity, the number of non-domestic fires, and the number of business engagements identified through the risk based audit programme. Members also received an update on crews of three and noted a detailed overview in Appendix 2.

In response to a query regarding secondary fires in East Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, it was noted that these areas had not been highlighted in the report as there had been no significant change.

The Chair invited Mr Mark Harriss, Brigade Secretary, Region 9, Eastern, Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to address the committee. He expressed concern that the report only highlighted the benefits of deficient crewing rather than concerns. He challenged the reference in Appendix 2 to a "positive news story" regarding on-call crews mobilising with four or more fire fighters when the rota system showed three, as this demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the availability of firefighters. He was of the view that deficient crews were an unnecessary use of taxpayer's money, created unnecessary risks for both emergency responders and the public, and diminished availability across

the county and disrupted IRMP locations. He further disputed the claim that “fully crewed appliances” were being sent as backup.

He reminded Members that he had raised concerns at their meeting in January which had then been addressed by letter. It had been reported originally that the average time taken by a second pump to arrive would be four minutes and nine seconds but this report stated five minutes and nineteen seconds which was in line with projections. Firefighters on their first day were knowingly being used in deficient crews. Although there was a big focus on recruiting more on-call firefighters, barriers put in place had made the role less attractive. Over 200 firefighters had signed letters either of objection, duress or resignation. He was of the view that crews of three was a conscious choice taken by the Service.

In conclusion, he drew attention to a statement shared by an incident commander with over 25 years wholetime service, who had attended an incident as a crew of three a few months ago and had since decided to leave the Service. He had waited for nine minutes for a second pump.

The Chair invited officers to respond to the issues raised by Mr Harriss, as follows:

- the Service’s aim had always been to recruit crews of four, five or six but it had struggled to recruit on-call firefighters.
- the crew of three had carried out defensive firefighting tactics at the incident referred to above in Wisbech. It was reported that such crews could carry out a number of actions to improve outcomes before a second pump arrived.
- a survey of communities had identified that they wanted three people to do something rather than to wait longer for a second pump. It would also enable fully trained crews to risk assess the situation without putting themselves in danger and prevent the public from taking action. In response, Mr Harriss challenged the leading questions in the survey.
- confirmed that the incident commander referred to above had retired from the Service.
- many incidents were false alarms which released vehicles to attend other incidents.
- the Service was committed and had identified significant funding to recruit on-call firefighters, it also welcomed any ideas from the FBU to assist with recruitment.
- people did not generally live and work in the same place and prevention campaigns meant there were less calls. A considerable amount of work had therefore taken place to incentivise on call-firefighters including meaningful work in the community such as working in partnership with the East of England Ambulance Service to attend heart attacks.

The Chair invited Mr Harriss to respond to issues raised by Members, as follows:

- actions taken by an on-call crew of three were very limited. There were therefore concerns that the public would act to rescue someone, which would then put a moral pressure on the three firefighters to respond.
- a crew of five could demand more resources to enable them to effect rescues inside buildings for example. There were so many restrictions as to what a crew of three could or could not do. In response, Members commented that waiting for a crew of more than three to attend would result in unacceptable delays.
- acknowledged that whether it was better for a crew of three to turn up before a fully staff crewed depended on the incident. It was noted that concerns related to such crews turning up first rather than as additional support.
- Control Room staff were highly trained to extract information from callers to determine the right resources to deploy to incidents.
- there needed to be more investment, against a backdrop of 12,000 and 260 firefighters cut nationally and locally since 2010, to improve on-call recruitment. The Chief Fire Officer reported that he did not recognise the figure of 260. Since 2010 the Service had reduced the number of Wholetime staff by 25 but had not deliberately lost any on-call staff. Any reduction in on-call staffing was due to difficulties with recruitment and retention, not funding.
- noted that in the last ten years there had only been two occasions when on-call crews had been mobilised to rescue people inside a building. However, it was important to be prepared for the worst case scenario.
- the on-call crew at the Wisbech incident had carried out defensive firefighting tactics for four minutes but it had taken 13 minutes for a second pump to arrive. In response, the Chair commented that the on-call crew of three had taken six minutes to arrive and then five minutes to conduct defensive firefighting tactics with the second pump arriving in 12 minutes, which meant that they had spent only one minute doing nothing. It was acknowledged that issues relating to over the border appliances being used in urban areas was being addressed. Mr Harriss reminded Members that he had not personally attended the incident and the times reported had been provided by the incident commander at the scene. The Chair commented that management would need to consider two different interpretations of the same incident.

Members noted the following responses to their questions from officers:

- the intervention of a crew of three at Wisbech would have resulted in better outcomes.
- acknowledged the need to add to on-call training the importance of all firefighters booking on to avoid on-call crews mobilising with four or more fire fighters when the rota system showed three. **Action Required.**

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the contents of the performance report in Appendix 1 to the report which covered the first quarter of the year, 1 April to 30 June 2023.

67. Programme Management Monitoring Report

The Committee received an update on progress against projects for 2023/24. Attention was drawn to the Replacement Integrated Command and Control System & Mobilising Solution and the disappointing decision taken by Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to introduce its own standalone fire control centre from December 2024. Members were advised of the progress, and timetable to go live from February 2024. Other projects highlighted included the Review of Operations where a report on operational resource would be presented to the next Fire Authority meeting, the Finance System Software Replacement Project, which was under budget and due go live in November 2023, and Microsoft 365 Implementation and Cultural Change.

Members noted the following responses to their questions from officers:

- the importance of providing continuity of service.
- confirmed that the decision taken by SFRS would not prevent the new system going live from February 2024. Officers were working hard to support SFRS, which had committed resourcing to ensure this date was met.
- the 4x4's were currently based at Burwell and Cottenham.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the Programme Status Report, as of September 2023, attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

68. Cyber Security Update Report

The Committee considered an update on the current position with regards cyber security. Cyber incidents had increased as a result of events in Ukraine. The Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) had always taken cyber security seriously, being only one of two fire and rescue services to have achieved and maintained its ISO 27001 accreditation. This standard required regular external audits to ensure compliance. The Service was therefore in a good position working constantly to address issues. This included a number of enhancements and the implementation of additional cyber security tools since an independent audit in 2021. The Service had also participated in an assessment by IBM against the Cyber Assessment Framework, which had identified some areas for improvement that were currently being progressed.

The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that cyber security had been a high priority for the service and had always been resourced appropriately. He thanked the Head of ICT and OHU and his Team for their hard work to place CFRS in such a good position. On behalf of the committee, the Chair added his thanks.

Members noted the following responses to their questions from officers:

- government support was available to public organisations depending on the scale of the attack; lower level attacks were expected to be dealt with internally. The continuous level of investment in multi levels of security had helped to prevent attacks penetrating beyond the outer levels.
- the importance of staff training and a number of good tools to prevent breaches.
- all Wi-Fi enabled infrastructure was tested annually.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the contents of this report.

69. Annual Review – Compliance with the Local Government Transparency Code

The Committee received the annual update on an assurance of compliance with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015. The annual review had found that the Service was currently fully compliant with the requirements of the Code except for the publication of the Trade Union Facility Time data from financial year 2022/23. Assurances had been given that the necessary work would be completed by the end of October 2023.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the current position in terms of compliance and in particular the assurances given at Paragraph 7.2. of the report.

70. Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Annual Governance Statement

The Committee considered the draft Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for 2022/23. Attention was drawn to the areas where the Authority would continue to take action to deal with governance issues. These included the Combined Fire Control, assets including the disposal of the former Huntingdon Fire Station site, culture, financial climate and sector developments. It was noted that a full review of the Asset and Fleet Management System was in progress.

Members noted the following responses to their questions from officers:

- the decision of SFRS to introduce its own standalone fire control centre would result in a loss of income of around £1m. The financial impact of this decision was currently being considered and in particular how the budget gap would be addressed. Early discussions had taken place with other possible partners.
- the CFRS would not be informed of its funding by government until mid-December at the earliest. Letters had been sent to local MPs and the relevant government department asking for an increase in grant in line with inflation. The Financial Business Continuity Plan would reflect arrangements to downsize if necessary.

- 80% of the budget covered pay which was outside the control of the CFRS. An announcement on pay would be made next June which added to the level of uncertainty.
- the Fair Funding Review had been delayed and was unlikely to take place during the current parliament. There was also unlikely to be any review of the business rates system until post general election.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- scrutinise the AGS, attached at Appendix 1 to the report.
- recommend to the Authority that the AGS is approved for external publication.

71. Report on use of Lithium-ion Batteries and Response by Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service

The Committee received an update on the rise of lithium-ion batteries and specifically their use in micro mobility items being involved in fire and the response by the CFRS. There was growing concern over the rise in incidents involving fire of lithium-ion batteries in electrical items such as mobile phones, laptops, e-scooters, e-bikes and e-cigarettes, which had resulted in fatalities. External factors such as the cost of living had led to an increase in e-bike usage. The primary risk associated with these batteries in micro mobility products was thermal runaway. Battery safety and stability depended on the maintaining internal temperatures within specific limits. Poor quality and substandard components, flawed design, physical abuse and improper charging or discharging could all cause a battery to become unstable and lead to catastrophic failure. Even if a fire was extinguished, it could easily start again. Attention was drawn to the incident data and analysis, and the activities being undertaken by the CFRS and National Fire Chiefs Council to mitigate against these risks.

During discussion, Members:

- acknowledged the importance of educational safety with regard to not charging micro mobility items at night. There was also a need to highlight the replacement of batteries with the manufacturer's battery rather than one purchased cheaply on the Internet.
- queried the impact of the planning process on the safety of micro mobility items. The Area Commander highlighted the importance of advising early in the planning process. It was noted that more work was being carried out nationally and locally in this area. The concern was that safety would take up more space thereby impacting on financial gain for developers.
- requested information on the training available to firefighters to handle lithium-ion based fires. Organisational training was being provided on the risk and tactics for firefighting such fires, which include first aid and pre-hospital medical training.
- requested information or data to supply to parish councils who could then disseminate it to residents to try and prevent such fires. The Area Commander

reported that a social media campaign on safe charging had recently been launched. A newsletter has also been sent to all parish councils.

- queried whether education not just via online had sufficient resources. The Area Commander acknowledged that the situation was fast moving. On 11 September 2023, The Office for Product Safety and Standards had published information for consumers to raise awareness around the safe purchasing, use and charging of e-bikes and e-scooters. The Service had also written to the Coroner following the fatal fire in Cambridge asking him to write to the government to request legislation in relation to the sale of battery chargers.
- queried whether the Service was liaising with the NHS to ensure warning leaflets regarding battery safety were provided with mobility scooters. Members were informed that the Service was reaching out to partners including Trading Standards.
- expressed concern that flats could contain a number of e-scooters and queried whether the engagement with the Landlord Forum was just Cambridge. It was noted that the joint team from prevention and protection had started in Cambridge but would be looking to approach other districts.
- noted that there was no separate breakdown of fires caused by faulty e-scooters or e-bike batteries.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the contents of the report.

72. Internal Audit Annual Report 2022-23

The Chair reported that the Governance Audit Opinion had changed post the April committee from reasonable to substantial assurance.

The Internal Audit Annual Report 2022-23 provided an annual internal audit opinion, based upon and limited to the work performed, on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's risk management, control and governance processes. The opinion was that the organisation had an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance and internal control. However, further enhancements had been identified to the framework of risk management, governance and internal control to ensure that it remained adequate and effective. It was noted that the opinion would contribute to the organisation's annual governance reporting. Members were informed that this had been the same opinion for the last few years.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the annual internal audit report 2022/23.

73. Emergency Services Benchmarking Report 2022-23

The Emergency Services Benchmarking Report 2022-23 provided a benchmark, which allowed for self-assessment against other emergency services. There was a thematic overview of high priority management actions covering the following: people, health and safety; finance; IT; estates, storage and disposal; fleet management, and commissioning and service collaboration. Comparisons showed that the CFRS was performing well against other services.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the Emergency Services Benchmarking Report 2022-23.

74. Internal Audit Progress Report

The report provided a summary update on progress against each plan and summarised the results of work to date. Attention was drawn to the reports finalised since the last meeting highlighted in bold. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer acknowledged the importance of this report, which reflected concerns the Service had regarding the utilisation and best use of its estate. A review of Estates Strategy including its headquarters would therefore be carried out.

It was queried whether a review would consider the location of fire stations. The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that it would consider how the service could use its stations more effectively rather than relocation. The Chief Fire Officer added that the review would be looking at people and resources rather than fire stations to make sure they were in the right places. Another Member queried the cost per call out of £2,329.59 for St Neots Station. It was noted that this reflected the overall cost of the station in relation to the people sited there and number of calls but did not allow for risk. The review was about using the station more effectively in the future.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the Internal Audit Progress Report.

75. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

The Committee resolved unanimously to note its work programme.

Chair