

Fire Overview and Scrutiny Committee Minutes

Date: Thursday 19 January 2023

Time: 14:00 – 16:00

Venue: Fire Service Headquarters

Present: Councillors Bond, Gardener, Gowing, Kindersley (Chair), McGuire, Rae, Taylor and Warren

46. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

No apologies were received. There were no declarations of interest.

47. Minutes – 6 October 2022 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. The action log was noted.

48. Integrated Risk Management Plan Performance Measures

The committee received a report which reviewed the service's progress between 1 April and 30 September 2022 with regard to incidents and workforce diversity. There had been a decrease in road traffic collisions; an increase in minor injuries and co-responding with special services; and a spike in primary, secondary and non-domestic fires, which was not anticipated to be a trend. Applicant diversity had been affected by recruitment difficulties and a high staff turnover.

During discussion members:

- Clarified that while the percentage killed or seriously injured had increased 9% over the five year period, the overall population had increased 11%.
- Noted that the A1307, A1198 - Papworth St Agnes junction - and A1 Wittering had high rates of road traffic accidents. Signage work occurring to mitigate accidents. The service agreed to request information from police databases regarding road accidents occurring on the A14 from Ellington to the Keyston/Bythorn junction following a change to the road layout. **Action.**
- Learned that road traffic collision deaths were recorded if the death occurred within 28 days of the accident.
- Were reassured that the National Fire Chief's Council and local authority recognised the impact of climate change on spate conditions and were seeking to mitigate the resulting trends.

It was resolved unanimously to:

Note the contents of the performance report in Appendix 1 which covers the first two quarters of the year, 1 April to 30 September 2022 and make comment as they deem appropriate.

49. Update on the Expansion of Crews of Three Appliance Mobilisations to all Incident Types

The committee received a report which detailed the use of crews of three appliance mobilisations for all incidents, approved by the Programme Board 13 September 2022. This had enabled CFRS to increase availability of on-call fire stations, improved response times, and prevented further deployment when unnecessary. A training offer existed to mitigate concerns from firefighters, but had been attended by thirteen of 242 officers.

The officer provided updated figures for Section 7 of the report: there had been eight mobilisations – in which a stop message had been utilised for one; 630 hours additional appliance availability; a failure to agree letter from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) dated 4 January 2023; fifteen letters of compliance under duress, of which ten were from wholetime on call firefighters and three had completed the training session. In response to the letters, the service had written to the FBU acknowledging concerns and met separately with each person. They found the primary concern to be attending incidents for which urgent action was required, which needed over three firefighters to enact. In these instances, there would be a moral dilemma as firefighters would be expected to wait for an additional response unit. The officer countered that preparation work could be done in the interim period.

The Chair invited Mr Harriss, FBU representative for Cambridgeshire, to speak against the proposal. Mr Harriss expressed concerns that crews of three could be waiting sixteen minutes for additional response; and shared that, following implementation, response times had been five minutes quicker to 25% of incidents and one minute quicker to 56% incidents. Prior to commencement, 88% of firefighters in a Whatsapp group had signed a letter of concern, 66% of whom were wholetime staff. He also established that Councillor Murphy, Chair of the Fire Authority, had responded to an email from the Fire Brigades Union recognising their concerns.

In response to questions from members, Mr Harris:

- Clarified that, in a separate email sent to members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, he had used rural areas as an example of an instance in which mobilisation of crews of three would not necessarily provide a quicker response time.
- Notified members that this policy required multiple appliances to be mobilised in all circumstances, including those for which previously one was required. This used additional resource in a stretched service.
- Established that preparation work prior to building entry was approximately sixty seconds. This limited action that could be taken by the first response to alleviate the moral pressure to act. This moral pressure to act would be increased by the public

whose expectation for the fire service to act would be subverted. The Chair responded that any form of attendance may provide the public with reassurance.

In response to the public question, the officer stated that:

- The majority of call outs were not of a severe nature and could be handled by a crew of three. It would not be an organisational aim to crew appliances with only three firefighters but, when required, this would mitigate under-resourcing. Currently the service struggled with on-call firefighter retention due to the contrast between the role's significant time commitment relative to the number of call-outs.
- There had been a house fire prior to the mobilisation of crews of three appliances which had become more serious due to the nearest station having a smaller crew than necessary available for mobilisation.
- This measure had been implemented in other counties, and the officer was not aware of any redaction of the policy.
- Following commencement of the mobilisation of three, the response time within Cambridgeshire had not been sixteen minutes.
- Firefighters were trained in handling moral pressures and making risk assessments. This reduced firefighter loss of life. Research by the University of Cambridge demonstrated that moral pressure was stronger when officers were unable to take any action. However, actions could be taken by a team of three in a severe situation, such as: setting into the nearest water supply hydrant; running a jet or hose reel out to contain a fire; and window rescues using ladders.
- Representative bodies would receive a written response to their concerns.

It was requested that Mr Harris and Overview and Scrutiny Committee members receive a written response to the statement within five working days. **Action.**

In response to the report, members:

- Reiterated feedback from the consultation that it was residents' preference to see any response from the fire service, rather than wait additional time for their arrival. This included preparatory work.
- Drew comparisons between three-crewed appliances and NHS first response vehicles. When NHS first responders used ambulances, public expectations could also be subverted. For both, changing public perception could alleviate moral pressure.
- Learned that, on accepting the role, officers received ten weeks of initial training, an annual training update, and breathing apparatus training six months after commencement in the role. General training included the minimum number of firefighters required for use of the equipment. Therefore, while three-crew appliance training had been offered in response to officers' requests, it was not mandatory and low uptake was likely because most officers already felt sufficiently trained.

- Were reassured that three-manned appliances would only be crewed by experienced staff.
- Clarified that there were 252 on-call colleagues, 15 of which had penned under duress letters. These letters were received following the mobilisation of three-crewed appliances, whilst the larger volume of letters written by the Whatsapp group and presented by Mr Harriss had been written prior to commencement.
- Reflected that the need to mobilise crews of three had been initiated due to low recruitment and retention, caused largely by the low number of calls outs.
- Established that data from crews-of-three mobilisations would be included on the Performance Dashboard and RNB Performance Report, which would highlight any concerns. This could also be included as a regular report to the Fire Authority. It was requested this was also seen quarterly by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
Action.
- Expressed a desire to endorse the action taken. It was therefore proposed by Councillor McGuire, seconded by Councillor Gardener, and resolved unanimously to amend the recommendation to reflect this and circulate the minutes of this meeting to the Fire Authority. **Action.**

It was resolved unanimously to:

Note the contents of this report, specifically the work the service has undertaken with all stakeholders (colleagues, representative bodies and communities) that were affected by this new way of working and **endorse the expansion of crews of three appliances to all incident types.**

50. Update on CFRS Planning for Industrial Action

The committee received a verbal update on the CFRS Industrial Action Plan. Following the rejection of a 5% pay rise by FBU members, a ballot regarding whether to proceed with strike action was taking place, after which strikes could commence from 23 February 2023. A Resilience Agreement was in place, which included the availability of the following officers throughout strike action: a minimum of ten appliances, a silver commander, two group commanders and a fire control commander. It was not anticipated that specialist skillsets would be offered, but available resource would enable officers to manage a tall building fire. Support from other services was also being sought. The Business Continuity Plan had been agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee.

During discussion, members:

- Clarified it would be an individual's choice whether or not to continue with strike action should a terrorist event occur. However, in the event of such a major incident, of any type, it was anticipated that it would be responded to fully regardless of strike action.

- Noted that previous costing for military aid had been £64k to crew two appliances. This would provide defensive support, but not building fire management or aid for road traffic collisions. The fire service would also be required to provide additional resourcing for the training of military personnel. This was therefore deemed an unviable option.

It was resolved unanimously to:

Note the report.

51. Internal Audit Progress Report

The committee received the Internal Audit Progress Report which measured the authority as having controls with reasonable assurance. Following the audit, it was agreed that the journal would be independently verified in future. All actions were agreed with management; however, additional resource was required to enact them.

During discussion, members expressed concern regarding the long timescales for implementation, however, expectations had to be managed as all recommendations were being enacted by a single member of staff.

It was resolved to:

Note the Internal Audit Progress Report.

52. Draft Budget Report

The committee was provided with an overview of the annual budget subject to approval by the Fire Authority. It broke down the £37.136m gross budget for 2023/24. The service was currently functioning in a £1.2m deficit, but £211k short term savings had been made and the 2023/24 gross budget had been reduced by £1m. Spending had been affected by inflation (which was accounted for within the budget), fuel costs, pay awards and anticipated pay increases. Should pay awards increase, the budget would need to be reviewed. Currently the authority was still considered a low cost, high performing organisation.

During discussion, members:

- Learned that reserves would become dangerously low should additional pay awards be granted.
- Noted that the property development reserve and financial business continuity reserve would be utilised to resource the pay award, although the majority of the property development reserve had been used on supporting the St John's project. Borrowing would be more effective than capital revenue to fund pay awards further.
- Were pleased that by end-2023, the sale of the Huntingdon Fire Station would buoy low reserves, as would the additional £1.9m provided by Council tax precepts. However, 800k savings were still required.

- As a result of global warming, the government was considering providing fire services with additional funding should demand in summer 2024 exceed forecasts as it had for summer 2023.
- Acknowledged that the outline strategy had been reviewed by the Policy and Resources Committee who, along with the Fire Authority, would review it again following this meeting.

It was resolved to recommend to the Fire Authority:

1. That approval is given to a Fire Authority budget (as detailed in Appendix 1) to the requirement £33,678,280.
2. That approval is given to a recommended Fire Authority precept for Tax from District Authorities and Peterborough City Authority of £24,143,451.
3. That approval be given to an Authority Tax for each band of property, based on the number of band D equivalent properties notified to the Fire Authority by the District Authorities and Peterborough City Authority (302,095):

Band	2022/23	Authority Tax	2023/24	Band	2022/23	Authority Tax	2023/24
A	£ 49.98	+£3.30	£53.28	E	£ 91.63	+£6.05	£97.68
B	£ 58.31	+£3.85	£62.16	F	£ 108.29	+£7.15	£115.44
C	£ 66.64	+£4.40	£71.04	G	£ 124.95	+£8.25	£133.20
D	£ 74.97	+£4.95	£79.92	H	£ 149.94	+£9.90	£159.84

4. That approval is given to the Capital Programme detailed in Appendix 2.

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

The committee discussed what areas or issues might add value to the scrutiny function. It was agreed not to progress the existing member-led review of estates, property management and capital programme but focus on people themes. Terms of reference for a member-led review on employee retention would be drafted and circulated for comment. **Action.**

The committee agreed to a site visit at St John's on 10 February 2023. **Action.**

The committee resolved unanimously to note its work programme.

Chair
20 April 2023