



AVON FIRE AUTHORITY MINUTES

4 OCTOBER 2023

Present: Councillors L Brennan, R Eddy, R Hardie, B Massey, P May, Y Mohamud, B Nutland, R Payne, M Riddle, S Smith, J Stansfield, D Thomas, R Tucker, A Varney, K Walker and D Wilcox.

The meeting began at 14.00hrs.

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs P Goggin, P Hulme, O Saini and M Williams, James Mason, Independent Person and Mark Shelford, Police and Crime Commissioner.

19. EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

Members were advised by the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) that in the event of an emergency, to exit the main building and congregate in the car park below Reception.

20. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

In respect of Item 8, recommendation B, Cllr Nutland declared an interest as a resident and Councillor of Yate.

21. PUBLIC ACCESS

None received.

22. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

The Chair welcomed Members, guests and visitors to the meeting and drew attention to the following:

1. The Chair confirmed that the meeting was taking place at Headquarters, Portishead. The meeting was being recorded for the public to view.
2. Members and Officers introduced themselves.
3. The Clerk advised that there was a Police exercise taking place today at Headquarters and there may be some noise disturbance.
4. The Clerk reminded Members that they had been invited to complete an Equality and Dignity in the Workplace E-Learning and a link was sent by email

on 17 August. This was a voluntary training, but if Members did complete it, to please inform Emma and provide any feedback on the contents.

5. The CFO updated Members on the recent ITV coverage and read the following statement:

On 11 September, ITV hosted a segment on their regular news programme, which investigated claims of bullying and harassment in Avon Fire & Rescue Service. The programme included testimonies from former Assistant Chief Fire Officer Rob Davis, and anonymously a former member of staff and a current member of staff, who also shared their concerns about a culture of bullying and harassment within the Service. A comment was provided by the Chief Fire Officer, as was requested by ITV.

The response was clear that there is no place for discrimination, bullying or harassment within the Service, and that most staff are excellent ambassadors for the Service and treat each other and the public with kindness, dignity and respect. To support this position, over the past few months the Service have introduced a Zero Tolerance Statement, launched a new Dignity and Respect toolkit, and communicated a whole host of support services. All of which has been regularly communicated to staff via the intranet and/or The Shout, on posters displayed at stations and workplaces across the Service, via the Chief Fire Officer's video blogs and through Microsoft Teams utilising the SharePoint publication facilities.

More recently, the Service have established a new, independent, external, and confidential reporting line 'Speak Up', to provide staff a safe space for them to raise concerns if they consider something is not right within the workplace and don't feel they can raise this through other available channels. The system, which is hosted by an external body Crimestoppers to ensure anonymity, has to date received three reports. Of the three reports received, two have included sufficient information, for the Service to take action and instigate an investigation. One report does not have sufficient information for us to take forward. Those investigations being taken forward have seen the suspension of one individual in each case and they will each also be independently investigated by external investigators.

6. The Chair explained the voting system for the meeting, i.e., votes against a motion would be recorded first, followed by abstentions, then votes in favour.
7. The CFO advised Members that a team of 10 firefighters from the Service recently cycled over 400km, in just 3 days, from Bath fire station to Paris, and in doing so had to date raised over £5,500 for Cancer Research UK. The achievement received a round of applause from Members.
8. The CFO advised that on the weekend of the 15 September, some of our rope rescue, water rescue and extrication teams took part in the UKRO Festival of Rescue competition, in Lincoln. Our teams displayed their outstanding skills, and were successful in their efforts winning awards in the following categories:
 - First place in the Heavy Rescue Challenge: Avon worked alongside Tyne and Wear demonstrating exceptional skills and teamwork.
 - Kirsty Nelms was awarded second place for best water rescue medic, showcasing her commitment to life-saving techniques.
 - Lee Rogers was awarded second place in the incident commander category, highlighting our expertise in vehicle extrication.

Well done to everyone who took part in the competition and congratulations to those who picked up awards. The Chair asked for the CFO to pass on Members' congratulations.

23. MINUTES OF THE ORDINARY MEETING OF AVON FIRE AUTHORITY HELD ON 21 JUNE 2023

The minutes were moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Varney.

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the ordinary meeting of the Avon Fire Authority held on 21 June 2023 be signed by the Chair as an accurate record of the meeting.

24. MINUTES OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS

7.1 Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the Local Pension Board held on 15 February 2023.

7.2 Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the People & Culture Committee held on 3 March 2023.

7.3 Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the Audit, Governance and Ethics Committee held on 22 March 2023.

7.4 Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the Performance, Review and Scrutiny Meeting held on 20 April 2023

13.1 Confidential minutes of the Ordinary People and Culture Committee Meeting held on 3 March 2023.

13.2 Confidential minutes of the Ordinary Audit, Governance and Ethics Committee held on 22 March 2023

The Committee minutes noted above, already approved by the Committees, were noted by the Fire Authority.

25. BUDGET SHORTFALL OPTIONS

The CFO introduced a paper to Members which outlined a number of options and recommendations to consider. In February 2023, the Head of Finance and interim Treasurer presented the Medium-Term Financial Plan. It was identified that there would be a balanced budget for 2022/23 but that there would be a deficit from 2024/25 onwards. Funding pressures had become known following the confirmation of the Grey Book pay award and uncertain future funding settlements for 2024/25 onwards.

The Head of Efficiency Savings then presented the report to Members and advised that in May 2023, the CFO had commissioned a project to identify savings to maintain a balanced budget, which was a statutory duty. The objective of the

project was to maintain a service delivery model without losing firefighters or closing stations.

The Efficiency project had identified a potential £2m annual and recurrent savings within the Service by 2026/27. This had been identified through natural retirements but would not be realised until future years.

For the 2023/24 financial year the Service had been able to present a balanced budget due to the £5 Council Tax precept settlement. For future years there would be uncertainty around the funding settlements and therefore a conservative assumption of a 1.99% increase per annum was modelled. The uniformed Grey Book pay award of 7% for 2022/23 and 5% for 2023/24 had contributed to the shortfalls outlined in paragraphs 3.1 of the report.

Members' attention was drawn to paragraph 3.6, which outlined that the Service had explored other models across the country. Seven other Services had introduced the same efficiencies, which had not resulted in detrimental effect on response standards.

Member's attention was drawn to Paragraph 4.4, Table 1 and they were advised that the wholetime workforce would be reduced by 40 posts realising an annual savings of £2m by 2026/27. It was crucial that the Service matched resource to risk, ensuring service delivery to our communities.

It was confirmed that the next steps, if the AFA approved the proposals, was to continue engagement with the representative bodies which had already started. In addition, to engage with the wider workforce.

A statement was read by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Representative

Chair, members of the fire authority,

I'm Amanda Mills, elected FBU representative for the firefighters across Avon.

I am here today to make a collective representation against the cuts to frontline firefighter posts being proposed. The reduction of 40 firefighters amounts to just over 10% of whole-time front-line staff. Should your constituents that we serve across Bristol, Bath and Northeast Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire accept these dangerous cuts?

Currently in AFRS, standard crewing on pump ladders is set at 5 personnel, this enables us to resolve the majority of 1 pump incidents safely and effectively in our commitment to the public we serve. It is a sombre fact, that even with optimum crewing levels set at 5, daily, we struggle to achieve this, and must ride with crews of 4 all too often. The effects of this are far reaching in a house fire the 5th person is a crucial safety measure who monitors our air supply and sends vital messages back to our incident commanders. Or at the scene of a road traffic collision where all 5 of the crew play a vital role in our procedures, procedures put in place to ensure the effective release of the casualty, paramount when an ambulance is not yet on scene.

Not to mention the psychological demand on incident commanders who are eager for resources to carry out lifesaving intervention, to resolve or to prevent escalation of an incident.

In our CRMP developed, approved, and promoted by AFRS, environmental considerations were documented highlighting the increase of wildfires and flooding. Combined with the year-on-year population increases across all 4 counties of Avon, can we really be expected to do more with less.

It is noted that advances in technology have assisted the FRS within my generation but ultimately, when a member of the public dials 999 and requests a fire engine, there is an expectation that we will arrive with sufficient crew to be able to resolve the incident. Firefighters join to help people in their hour of need, not to be bystanders waiting for additional resources to arrive so they can carry out their duty in a safe manner.

Just last month, Scottish firefighters were forced to stand and watch a historic hotel burn to the ground due to a lack of available resources brought about by deadly cuts within the SFRS.

The FBU safe systems of work and critical attendance standards call for 9 firefighters at the scene of a house fire. If this crewing model is agreed a third additional appliance will have to be mobilised leaving towns and villages with no timely fire cover. Should a fire occur in these now uncovered towns and villages, resources will have to attend from considerably further afield. When waiting times for a fire engine increase so do the ferocity and size of a fire, giving less chance of survival should anyone need rescuing and putting firefighters in a position of greater risk.

These cuts, if endorsed, will endanger both the residents and visitors throughout Avon, and place preventable, unreasonable demands on our members. A modern fire and rescue service which claims to match resource to risk needs appropriate funding, we will not stay silent while Avon Fire and Rescue 'make do' with inadequate funding. These proposals represent casualisation, not modernisation.

The FBU is committed to fighting for better funding for the UK fire service now is the time for urgent investment. The FBU will campaign against any threat to public and firefighter safety every step of the way, we ask you to stand with us.

A Member asked for clarification on how the proposed changes at Yate fire station would save four posts. The Head of Efficiency Savings advised that Yate had both day crewing contingency and on call. During the day, there were two watches of seven, riding five on each appliance. The proposal was to move to crewing of four, and blend the two watches into one, who could self-roster and plan three months ahead.

It was advised that the blended vehicle option would save eight posts, two per watch across four watches. The Head of Efficiency Savings advised that this was a dynamic model concept where there was a standard crew of seven on station who would be flexible depending on the type of call received. For a non-life critical

call, the blended vehicle could be mobilised with two or three crew with four available on the appliance if required. Therefore, a total of nine crew would become seven.

A Member referred to paragraph 4.4 which projected 40 retirements over the next three years. If these did not take place, would the money be found elsewhere. Secondly, the Member raised the loss of experience in not filling these posts. The CFO advised we would have to balance the recruitment of new firefighters, who take two years to fully train. It was advised that on average, the Service had two retirements per month. If this prediction was not met, there was some element of flexibility within the budget in terms of a working reserve for a short period of time. With regards to the loss of skills, this was the same balance for any experienced colleague who left the Service.

A Member advised that their understanding was that other Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) had experimented and implemented these changes and asked whether we had further information about their assessment and experiences. The Head of Efficiency Savings advised that many FRSs had evaluated their crew model and at least seven had implemented the proposed crew model.

A Member asked about the view of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The CFO advised that they do not form a view in relation to staffing models but would focus on how the Service utilised their resources along with the efficient and effective use of public funds.

A Member asked whether the Service Leadership Board (SLB) had any observations about the FBU's concerns around safety. The CFO confirmed that he would not compromise Firefighter safety.

A Member questioned that if the implementation of the report did not go ahead with the proposed changes, would the Service be required to close fire stations and reduce the number of appliances? A question was also asked about which stations would be likely to be affected and the impact to our communities. The CFO advised that this would be determined by our Community Risk Management Plan and available data. This would give us an indication where reduction could take place, and this would be measured against any impact on our attendance standards. However, this paper did not propose the closure of any fire stations or reduce the number of appliances.

A Member referred to paragraph 6.4 and early collaboration with Representative Bodies and asked how these discussions were going and was there any possible compromise? The statement today from the FBU had described dangerous cuts. The Head of Saving Efficiency advised that the Service had engaged at the earliest opportunity, had an open relationship, and there was acknowledgement of the situation the Service was in, but we needed to have a balanced budget.

A Member referred to the proposal of small response vehicles. In their ward there were narrow streets with access issues for larger appliances. This appeared to be a good step forward in terms of risk assessment and access issues. The Head

of Efficiency Savings confirmed that the vehicles would have full firefighting capabilities but have a smaller capability and carry less water.

A Member asked about the number of crew on the blended vehicle, and would the vehicle be electric? The Head of Efficiency Savings confirmed that the Service was working towards achieving net zero and the vehicle would either be electric or dual fuelled. There would be a dynamic crew of seven with four/five on the main appliance and two/three on the blended vehicle. The CFO advised that this approach would be introduced within a three-year period.

A Member commented that when we talked about efficiencies this meant cuts and the Service could only make so many before impact. Along with the work that SLB had completed, they hoped that the Authority could send a message to Government, as they could only delay funding for so long. By law the AFA had to have a balanced budget and the message to Government should be that the AFA needed more than a one-year settlement and required proper funding.

A Member commented that they were pleased that the positive message received was that the Service was not cutting stations or appliances. The safety and effectiveness of the Service moving forward was important and they were delighted that a follow up report would be received at the Policy & Resources Committee (PRC) in December. The CFO added that the Service was committed to working with the trade unions to make sure our Firefighters were safe, matching resources to risk.

A Member advised that the key to these changes would be assurance that the changes did not affect the Service provided and if they went ahead the AFA would need to monitor. The CFO advised that our performance standards were that the first appliance must arrive within 8 minutes, and that would be a Key Performance Indicator. The regular performance report would continue to be presented to the Audit, Governance and Oversight Committee (AGOC).

A Member asked that if the forecasted funding was increased, could the AFA delay or reverse these savings or put these savings into capital. The CFO advised that it was always prudent to review our financial situation when known, and to work with the AFA and trade unions. Any changes would be an AFA decision, and a report would be taken to the PRC in December which would include an indication of our budget at that time.

A Member agreed that the AFA were asked to make a very difficult decision. It was asked whether this would affect retained stations. It was confirmed that this decision would only affect wholtime stations, who would also receive the smaller blended vehicles. The Head of Efficiency Saving advised that this proposal would match resources to risk.

A Member thanked the FBU for attending the meeting. They had concerns about how the work of five Firefighters would be completed by four and how would oxygen levels be monitored. The Head of Efficiency Savings advised that trials would be carried out later this month with the FBU, in line with other FRSs. It was

advised that there were other options that could be deployed to ensure safety at all times.

A Member advised that when they had visited fire stations there often was a reduced crew on shift. If the AFA was to reduce staffing levels, was there a risk that the Service could end up without sufficient crew on station and appliances off the run. The Head of Efficiency Savings advised that the Service had a crewing factor of 1.37. If five crew are required on duty ($5 \times 1.37 = 6.9$). Therefore, seven crew would be required to maintain cover on station.

A Member commented that Members had to make a tough decision, and these were challenging times, were there any alternative options? The Head of Efficiency Savings advised that in his research for the project, he had contacted the majority of FRSs and reviewed their implemented models. An example considered was the turntable ladder, where 2 crew were permanently allocated but this was discounted as a high risk.

A Member stated that they took great pride in what AFA and Firefighters had achieved in safeguarding our residents. However, the AFA did have a statutory duty to maintain a balanced budget. It was added that reluctantly it seemed that these recommendations were the least 'worse option', in that no fire stations would be closed, and no appliances taken off the road. Liaison needed to continue with the FBU and Representative bodies.

The CFO closed by adding that in May 2023, he commissioned the team to find cost savings to achieve a balanced budget. The recommendations would achieve savings from 2024/25 onwards and the years ahead. The CFO added that he was dedicated to Firefighter safety and the wellbeing of residents. The efficiency savings would not reduce the number of appliances or close fire stations and Firefighter safety would not be compromised. Discussions would also continue with Representative Bodies.

The Chair thanked the FBU for attending the meeting.

The recommendations were moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Smith.

It was RESOLVED that the Fire Authority:

- a) Approved the continued development and implementation of a crewing model that reflects 4 personnel on every pumping appliance at wholetime stations. Crewing to be maintained on 5 at Hicks Gate where we have Key Point Indicators (KPIs) for National Resilience, subject to any unforeseen risks to service delivery to the public or firefighters and subject to changes in the funding position, with progress on development and implementation to be reported to the Policy and Resources Committee meeting in December.**
- b) Approved the ongoing research and development of a flexible crewing model for Yate wholetime personnel whilst ensuring 4 personnel on the wholetime appliance to maintain on a day crewed model.**

- c) **Approved the reinvestment and introduction of an Alarm Response Vehicle (blended fleet) to create capacity for wholetime crews to be more productive in protection and prevention activities.**
- d) **Approved the research and potential implementation of a smaller response vehicle for lower category, non-life critical incidents. This was a blended fleet option for a multi pump station to be defined by risk analysis and data.**
- e) **Returned to the Policy and Resources Committee (PRC) a report outlining progress on the implementation of these recommendations to their meeting in December.**

26. ADOPTION OF LGA CLLR MODEL CODE OF CONDUCT

Members received a report from the Clerk who updated that the AFA had commissioned an Independent Governance Review and considered the final report at an extraordinary meeting on 25 April 2023. The Fire Authority accepted all 12 recommendations, which included Recommendation 8 that the current Members' Code of Conduct should be updated to fully reflect the Local Government Association (LGA) Model Councillor Code of Conduct and associated Guidance. The Clerk made enquiries with the local Unitary Authorities (UA), who all apart from Bristol had adopted the LGA Code.

The LGA encouraged training on the Model Councillor Code of Conduct. As Members had already adopted Recommendation 8 of the Independent Governance Review, it was anticipated that the Code would be recommended for adoption to the Fire Authority. Therefore, training had been provisionally booked in conjunction with B&NES (to share costs) on three dates: Monday 30 October (in person), Friday 10 November (in person). and Wednesday 15 November (on-line), to accommodate all Members. Members were asked to indicate which session they would be attending; they were not expected to attend all sessions.

The Clerk drew Members attention to paragraph 5.1, which explained that the LGA had issued a new code of conduct which had been updated twice, the latest being on 17 May. The code is a template for UAs to adopt, with additional sections added if required.

Following approval at the AGOC Committee on 20 September 2023, the AFA Code had been amended to include Clause 8b – which asked Members to consider any advice given to them by the Statutory Officers (the Statutory Finance Officer and the Clerk/Monitoring Officer).

The Clerk explained that the Fire Authority's existing code included arrangements for dealing with complaints, however, the new Code required separate 'Arrangements' and a new separate document had been created. A Sub-committee would be formed to consider any code of conduct matters which arose.

It was RESOLVED that Avon Fire Authority:

- a) Adopted as Avon Fire Authority's new 'Members' Code of Conduct' the LGA Model Councillor Code of Conduct, with a minor addition, at Appendix 1.**
- b) Adopted as Avon Fire Authority's new 'Arrangements for dealing with complaints' at Appendix 2 with two annexes, a complaint form and Procedure for hearing of the AGOC sub-committee.**
- c) Noted the Code of Conduct training already arranged in conjunction with Bath & North East Somerset (B&NES) on three dates: Monday 30 October (in person), Friday 10 November (in person) and Wednesday 15 November (on-line), to accommodate all Members.**

27. EXTENSION OF INDEPENDENT PERSON APPOINTMENT

The Clerk presented the report to the AFA and advised that the Fire Authority's Independent Person (IP), Mr James Mason, was appointed following interview for a term of 3 years from 1 January 2021. That appointment was due to come to an end on 31 December 2023.

During that time James had attended IP training and Fire Authority meetings. Fortunately, his input had not been required as there had not been any Member Code of Conduct complaints during his tenure. James has confirmed that he was willing to continue his appointment as IP to the Fire Authority for another term.

Under the Localism Act 2011 every Authority is required to appoint at least one IP to be consulted on Member Code of Conduct cases. The Localism Act is silent about terms of office and the Local Government Association were therefore consulted about 'best practice'. The LGA have confirmed that there is no official 'best practice' for length of tenure, which varied among local authorities, however, they confirmed that the proposal to extend our IP's term by one further term appeared reasonable.

A Member asked whether there was any possibility for sharing an IP with another FRS. The Clerk advised that the Localism act applied to every UA and the wording was that the AFA had at least one IP, so that would not be possible. However, the Clerk could choose not to appoint another IP and share that resource if needed. The Clerk advised that the IP had completed the LGA training but would be sent on further training once his position was reconfirmed.

The recommendations were moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Payne.

It was RESOLVED that the Avon Fire Authority:

- a) Extended the term of the current Independent Person by 3 years, until 31 December 2026.**

28. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was RESOLVED that Avon Fire Authority noted the date of the next meeting on 16 February 2024 at 10.30hrs.

The meeting closed at 15.30 hrs.

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Chair

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