



EXTRAORDINARY AVON FIRE AUTHORITY MINUTES

13 DECEMBER 2023

Present: Councillors L Brennan, R Hardie, P Hulme, B Massey, Y Mohamud, B Nutland, O Saini, S Smith, J Stansfield, R Tucker, D Wilcox and M Williams
Mark Shelford, Police and Crime Commissioner

The meeting began at 14.00hrs.

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs R Eddy, P Goggin, P May, R Payne, M Riddle, D Thomas, A Varney and K Walker and James Mason, Independent Person

30. EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

Members were advised by the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (CFO) that in the event of an emergency, to exit the room and meet in the rear yard.

31. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None advised.

32. PUBLIC ACCESS

None received.

33. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

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

1. The Chair outlined that the meeting was taking place at Severn Park Training Centre. The meeting would also be recorded and uploaded to the Avon Fire Authority (AFA) YouTube channel.
2. Members and Officers introduced themselves.
3. 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.
4. The Excellence in Fire & Emergency Awards 2023 took place on 1 December and the Head of Finance, Claire Bentley was nominated under the Unsung Hero category. Although Claire didn't win on this occasion, the Service was proud that she was shortlisted. Members sent their congratulations to Claire.

34. HMICFRS ROUND 3 INSPECTION REPORT

The CFO introduced the report to Members with a statement:

Members, the paper presented to you today includes the HMICFRS round 3 inspection report published on the 22 November following their inspection visit in the summer of this year.

The recommendations within the report are for Members to note the content of this paper and the HMICFRS report and note the work currently in progress to address the formal recommendations from the HMICFRS.

There is no doubt that the report makes for some uncomfortable reading and that I am deeply saddened by the findings of the inspectorate despite the efforts of many staff across the Service. Members will know that significant work was already underway to respond to the recommendations of round 2 inspection reports but it is clear that whilst work and plans have been ongoing the pace has not met the expectations of the HMICFRS.

Immediately following the inspection, the HMICFRS issued two accelerated causes of concern on the 16 August and since that date I have prioritised work activity and resources to accelerate delivery against the action plans submitted to the HMICFRS.

Members are invited to scrutinise the action plans in Appendix 3 which show that a significant amount of activity has taken place to address these concerns and in fact in relation to the mobilising system all actions have now been completed. Whilst there is still some additional work to follow all effort has been focused on technological fixes to solve the problems identified by working with our suppliers and staff.

Work continues to be prioritised to focus on the capture of risk information however Members will note that the time scales for completion are slightly longer given the amount of activity and Service wide activity that is required, including the procurement of IT hardware (MDT's), training and their installation. It is important to note that the focus has been on an acceleration of work that was already ongoing in relation to the risk information and more resources have been allocated to support this acceleration.

During week commencing the 4 December a HMICFRS inspection team revisited the service to scrutinise our progress against the two accelerated causes of concern and I will receive their feedback this Friday and expect to receive written confirmation of their feedback during the month of January. Given the work and effort put into the Accelerated cause of concern regarding the mobilisation system I am hopeful that the HMICFRS will look positively on discharging this cause of concern as being addressed.

Following the publication of the report, two further causes of concern were identified in protection and for culture and 31 areas of improvement and action plans are currently being finalised to respond to these findings. The Culture cause of concern is particularly disappointing and frustrating as much work has been undertaken since Round 2 inspections such as Zero Tolerance position,

policy changes, independent reporting and confidential reporting lines. This also includes delivering almost all of the recommendations within the sector wide spotlight report on culture published by the HMICFRS in March of this year.

During my leadership I have been clear on my commitment to cultural improvement where staff are able to be the best version of themselves, I have also been clear in that culture cannot be solved overnight and it requires a persistent and consistent commitment to establish and maintain a healthy workplace. Since the release of my zero-tolerance position, I have utilised external Legal HR investigators resulting in discipline sanctions including dismissals from the service on the basis of behaviour.

Sadly, with the publication of 4 causes of concern, I was notified by the HMICFRS that the service will move into the engaged phase of enhanced monitoring and support. We will be one of four services who are currently in the engaged phases and wrap around support to ensure progress is maintained. This will be provided by the fire performance and oversight group (FPOG) made up of representatives from the Home Office, Local Government Association, NFCC and HMICFRS and chaired by the Chief HMI Andy Cooke.

The Chair and myself have been invited to the first FPOG meeting on the 7 February and invited to present our improvement plans.

Since the publication of the report, I have taken decisive action by establishing an improved governance structure referenced on page 9 of your papers taking overall leadership and ownership of improvements alongside SLB members. I have established and realigned resources for a dedicated team to support the delivery and oversight of actions including the management of actions through a structured continuous improvement framework aligned to best practice.

I have realigned all improvement themes as well as the HMICFRS actions through one governance structure and established an improvement board to consist of external stakeholders, such as peer support from NFCC, external Chief Executive scrutiny from one of our local authorities and voluntary sector support from established partners.

I have met with the NFCC chair and utilised the services of the NFCC implementation and improvement team to undertake a gap analysis of NFCC tools and guidance to support improvement plans. I have also engaged with other Services already in the engaged phase of monitoring to capture learning and share best practice.

I have engaged with all areas of the Service to keep them informed and provide direction on my priorities in the coming months.

Members, we must not underestimate the amount of work that is needed and that for sustainable change to occur and prevent the Service from reacting to various recommendations and inspections, this will be a journey to demonstrate incremental improvements on the backdrop of budget restrictions and resource pressures. Investment will be needed to achieve the goal of sustainable improvements. I invite Members for questions.

A Member confirmed that the report was 'difficult reading' but added that he believed that Members 'were behind' the CFO and the Service Leadership Board (SLB). Regular updates were requested so that Members could provide oversight and scrutiny. The Member asked for a summary of commitments be provided with dated outcomes rather than actions, so that they are able to hold the CFO and SLB to account. The CFO confirmed that he would report into the AFA and the Policy and Resources Committee with regular updates and ambitious delivery dates. The key focus for the next 12 months would be to move out of the 'engaged phase' and to give HMICFRS and Members confidence that the Service was moving in the right direction. However, the CFO had not yet been informed of the benchmarking required from FPOG and at what stage this would begin. There was only 18 months between inspections, and the CFO felt that he needed to be realistic with Members, as there was much work to do. It was important for Members to hold to account the incremental improvements and milestones made by the Service. Focus on statutory duties was one of the CFO's main priorities as well as concluding the engaged phase. IT remained a key focus of investment within the Service along with ongoing commitment towards cultural improvements.

The Member agreed and requested SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-based) results in terms of outcomes, which would result in the delivery of a better report outcome next time around. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Service Delivery clarified that the inspection had taken place in early summer and a large amount of work had been completed since then.

A Member asked about the Chief's strategy and time plans over the next 12 months to achieve the targets. The CFO responded that his key targets were the causes of concern, and to move out of engaged monitoring as well as the challenge of how the Service would measure improvements in Culture within a Fire & Rescue Service (FRS). Responses and interventions we had put in place may take some time to come to fruition. The Service could set our own milestones internally which would be tested at the next HMICFRS inspection. He would be having regular 'touchpoints' with HMICFRS leading up to the next inspection.

A Member had noticed that HMICFRS had commented on the Service's response to incidents, however there was a proposal to reduce the number of firefighters. How would an improved response be achieved? The CFO advised that this referred to the mobilising system where individual consols had frozen. It was confirmed that the Service had never failed to mobilise an appliance during this time. It was clarified that the structural changes proposed would operate with the same number of appliances and stations.

A Member raised a question about the best use of resources, in particular the comments raised by HMICFRS in terms of overtime. Had any feedback been received about the cost savings and crewing changes approved by the AFA. The CFO confirmed that no feedback had been received from HMICFRS, but he would not expect them to. Their considerations were around how we use the resources that we currently have. The Member clarified that the HMICFRS would not have an opinion on whether the correct number of people are crewing

vehicles. The CFO clarified that they would provide an opinion on whether we are managing risk in relation to our Integrated Risk Management Plan, in terms of productivity. They would not provide a view on how we manage placement of resources against the risk profile of the organisation.

The Police & Crime Commissioner advised that he was fully supportive of the plans which would improve the situation. He asked whether there would be benefit in sharing Police technical resources to escalate the process. He agreed that the Service needed to promote the correct values and cultures, but that this would not be a quick change. A route map was mentioned and that it would be helpful for internal and external audiences to show the achievements made. He mentioned that the Gloucestershire police force was one of the fastest organisations to come out of engaged phase, and it may be worth talking to them on how this was achieved. Communications were very important, and suggested the CFO spoke to the Police Communications team. The CFO advised that he had met recently with the Chief Constable to identify opportunities, in particular around their development activity. With regards to the effectiveness of the management of risk, there appears to be double counting in the report which referenced the same area of improvement several times. The CFO was working with our media team to develop a Communications plan both internally and externally. Regular visits were taking place to each workplace by the CFO and SLB colleagues. The CFO had also met with all middle managers and provided a Service wide briefing soon after the report was released. The CFO was continuing engagement with staff as the report had impacted them despite the hard work carried out across the Service.

A Member stated that they fully supported the CFO and SLB. The report was extremely disappointing, and the content was not the Service that he recognised. He pointed out that there were incredible people working for the Service, who served the public whether operational or office based. Since the Baker report we had made massive jumps, so the report was disappointing. It was confirmed that Members would scrutinise the CFO to make sure improvements were made. Although there was not a short-term fix, Members wanted to see progression through a concise plan, which would be challenged by Members as it progressed.

In respect of the rating for Culture, the CFO would meet with the inspectorate in January to understand the evidence available to them to make this conclusion, as much work had been put in across the organisation. The CFO wanted to know how this outcome had occurred, to move from a good to inadequate rating with a Cause of Concern, and whether any of the incidents were inaccurate. He added that this was not a true reflection of the Service, but we needed to respond positively.

A Member shared the disappointment and suggested that small groups from all levels of staff met once a month, so input was received from all levels. The CFO responded that the Service did hold working groups but there was the potential to expand and engage further.

A Member enquired about the capability of incident command accreditation where some training was out of date. The CFO had spoken to HMICFRS who

had evidenced two personnel who had both declared their intention to retire. The HMICFRS visit was in between the declaration to retire and the retirement date. A risk-based approach was taken around the resource benefits and the operational activities of the individuals. This was three to four weeks prior to retirement and a judgement was made as to whether the Service could manage the risk appropriately. The HMICFRS view was that this approach was not laid down in our policy despite the risk-based approach taken. The CFO confirmed that all Incident Commanders had two yearly assessments.

A Member added that having been away from the AFA after four years, they could see improvements made and that the AFA was more open and a more positive place to be in. They felt that previously this report would have been 'buried' but after having confirmation that the issues would be dealt with, the CFO had their full support.

A Member mentioned that there had been a lot of underinvestment in IT, how could this be fixed. The Director of Corporate Services advised that austerity had led to underinvestment in our IT. A technology roadmap had resulted in £1.5m investment to improve our infrastructure, and work had commenced on the next technology roadmap and affordability. Unfortunately, IT had to compete with other areas, but we would collaborate with other FRS especially Hampshire and IOW. The CFO reminded that the funding shortfall of £3m over the next 3 years would be a big challenge.

The Chair added that she would like to thank the CFO and Officers, and all those involved, who were working on this. There was a lot of work still to do, but she was confident that Members could assist and make Avon the best place to work.

- It was RESOLVED that the Fire Authority:**
- a) Noted the content of this paper and HMICFRS' Round 3 inspection report provided at Appendix 1; and**
 - b) Noted the work currently in progress to develop the Round 3 inspection action plan to address the formal recommendations from HMICFRS in compliance with the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England.**

35. 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.

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Chair

The meeting closed at 14.50 hrs.