

Public Access Statement to the Avon Fire Authority meeting of 20 March '24

by Jenni Gwynne

Regarding the failed floor in the then relatively new Bedminster extension, the Finance Officer has stated that £222k of the £425k (revenue as opposed to capital) provision, created in 2017/18 for floor repairs, had been utilised up to the end of March 2023.

Avon Fire have still failed to answer, as AFA members requested in response to a previous Public Access Statement, how £222k (about £2k per square metre) could have been spent on these “various interim repairs” to the failed Bedminster extension floor when planning documents reveal the floor remained unrepaired, when the Bedminster Capital works to demolish and rebuild the extension commenced?

The Finance Officer also stated that they would reverse the remaining £203k provision if necessary, but has failed to do this in the accounts. So the accounts state that Avon intend to spend this further £203k on a repair to a failed floor that has already been rebuilt as part of the Bedminster multi-million pound capital works?

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In recent years, over £900k at least of Capital Expenditure has already been approved (with a large proportion already spent) for Weston Fire Station rebuild/refurbishment pre-construction costs including detailed planning before a site had even been identified and £500k, apparently to buy land.

And several hundreds of thousands of pounds has similarly in recent years been approved (with a large proportion already spent) for Bath Fire Station pre-construction costs.

Please could the AFA and the public be informed of the total of this authorised expenditure that has been spent and how much is carried forward and therefore the total of both which are in addition to the £7.5 million Avon are seeking approval of for the refurbishment of Weston Fire Station and £14.5 million for the rebuild of Bath Fire Station.

And please could the Property Department explain how a refurbishment can cost over £7.5 million (with an expected life of 25 years) when previously a total rebuild was estimated at about £4 million cost?

Can Avon Fire confirm how much of this £7.5m and £14m is for further pre-construction and non-construction costs such as project management during the works, payable to McBains and those other than the main construction company please?

Could Avon Fire also inform the AFA and the public how much more they plan to spend (whether brought forward or currently being sought approval for) on pre-construction or other elements of the major refurbishments or rebuilds of Weston and Bath Stations before Business Plans are presented to the AFA for approval to go ahead with these projects?

Presumably and understandably there are no AFA members with the knowledge necessary to assess whether the costs of the major refurbishment and rebuilding of stations are reasonable, but there is recently published guidance available on the approximate cost per square metre of Fire Station rebuilds: £2.2k to £2.9k per square metre of indoor space. It would be good for Avon Fire to provide the cost per indoor square metre of their rebuild costs for Bath Station, the refurbishment of Weston Station, which presumably should be significantly cheaper, and the part rebuild, part refurbishment of Bedminster Station.

And yes I have mentioned the following before, but these questions are presented in the additional context, that a tribunal found that Avon Fire had not shown that they answered the question of what £765k was actually for, that was apparently spent on land at Temple Back when no land was purchased around the time Temple Back Station was rebuilt. And both AFRS & the AFA did tell the tribunal that they would answer questions that had not previously been answered, which applies to this matter, and presumably is in line with their stated values of Transparency etc, so I hope AFA members will request this to finally happen, or state why this must remain a secret.

Preconstruction costs appear to have rocketed with just one of several purchase orders for McBains issued in October 2021 authorising expenditure of £1.5 million (Bedminster £215k, Bath £651k, WSM £634k), in addition to £370k already spent against an earlier Purchase Order re these 3 stations, and other purchase orders for McBains issued so over £2 million in total. With over £900k of this sum already paid to McBains to December '23.

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And regarding the Chief Fire Officers pay award, the CFO is already receiving £159,562, which is more than the 2024 minimum figures provided by the NJC Gold Book for CFO's of regions with much higher populations than Avon, and higher even than the minimum recommended for the CFO for London.

Assuming that the majority of the AFA don't reject the findings of the independent inspections of HMICFRS and other reports, that Avon is one of the lowest ranked Fire Services in regard to Culture and Delivery, shouldn't the AFA use its option to not reward failure, and use the above mentioned, pretty generous looking, NJC minimum salary, rather than accepting senior management's argument for using the average of what many regard as over inflated pay received by CFO's around the country?