



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY HELD ON WEDNESDAY 15 FEBRUARY 2023 AT 11 AM.

Present: Councillors Adoh (part), Darlington (part), Exon, Hall, Hopkins (Vice Chairman), Lambert (part), Mahendran, McLean, Rouse (Chairman), Stuchbury, Waite and Walsh

Officers: J Thelwell (Chief Fire Officer), M Osborne (Deputy Chief Fire Officer), G Britten (Director of Legal and Governance), M Hemming (Director of Finance and Assets), A Hussain (Deputy Director of Finance and Assets), A Carter (Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO), P Mould (Area Commander), M Hussey (Principal Accountant), A Collett (Organisational Development Manager), F Mansfield (HR Advisory and Development Manager) C Bell (Head of Protection, Assurance and Development) and K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies: Councillors Bagge, Carroll, Chapple OBE, Christensen and Hussain

The Chairman advised the Authority that the meeting was being recorded and would be uploaded on to the Authority's YouTube channel after the meeting.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWmIXPWAscxpL3vIiv7bh1Q>

FA44 NEW MEMBER OF AUTHORITY AND APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEE

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Shanika Mahendran to the Authority.

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Shanika Mahendran be appointed onto the Overview and Audit Committee.

That Councillor Emily Darlington be appointed onto the Executive Committee.

FA45 MINUTES

Councillor McLean to be added to the Minutes as attending the meeting.

RESOLVED –

That with the above amendment, the Minutes of the meeting of the Fire Authority held on 7 December 2022, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

FA46 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Chairman advised that:

FA33 – High Wycombe Fire Station, the Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT to report back on the improvements to the station: due to be completed by the end of March 2023.

FA 35 - White Ribbon Accreditation process the Chief Fire Officer to ensure it was raised at the next meeting of the Thames Valley Collaboration Steering Group: this had been done at the December meeting.

FA37 – Procurement Strategy 2022-2026 the Procurement Manager to give the Overview and Audit Committee updates on social value progress: this would come to a future meeting of the Committee.

FA40 – (a) The Health and Safety Advisor to run a report on underlying causes and split between actions taken by an individual or anything that the organisation would need to highlight to reduce injuries for future reports and (b) The Chairman requested that future analysis incorporated data on protected characteristics: the Lead Member for Health and Safety and Corporate Risk had been updated on the above and was happy with the actions that had been taken.

FA41 – Building Risk Review and Protection Update, the Chairman requested a briefing for Members on the Building Safety Act (Group Commander Community and Business Policy): the relevant officer has agreed to do this but was unavailable today as a witness in court proceedings.

FA47 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

None.

(Councillor Lambert joined the meeting)

FA48 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised Members that with regard to the ongoing pay negotiations, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) had taken a ballot that met the thresholds for potential strike action. There had been a number of discussions in

January leading to a revised National Employers proposal. The Chairman and Chief Fire Officer took part in those discussions and a 7% uplift was made to grey book employees for 2022/23 and a 5% uplift for 2023/24. Since the offer was made, the FBU had confirmed they would undertake a consultative ballot with their members and no strike action would be taken while it was underway. The FBU Executive had indicated that it would be advising its members to accept the settlement and hopefully, industrial action would be avoided. This would allow the Authority to move forward and focus on transformation of the Service.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Fire Officer and Senior Management Team for the huge amount of work that had been undertaken to ensure the Authority and the Service was in a position where it could deal with the challenges of any industrial action should it happen.

Since the last Authority Meeting, the Chairman's activities had included attending the Christmas Carol Service. This was well attended by guests from both the Service and the wider Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes community. Thank you to all those involved in organising such a successful event.

The Chairman joined Rob Butler MP on his visit to the Urban Search and Rescue team at Aylesbury Fire Station, in support of our desire to retain this vital capability.

The Chairman asked if the Chief Fire Officer could ask the respective councils to write reflecting the Authority's views on the impact of losing the fire link grant and USAR funding.

Wholetime Firefighters – The latest cohort (8) for Wholetime Firefighters commenced employment on 3 January 2023 and are currently halfway through their Firefighter Development Programme at the Fire Service College. We have sixteen new and one existing apprentice firefighters commencing on 1 March 2023 and two candidates on hold from this intake for the October 2023 course. Recruitment for the next cohort of apprentice firefighters will commence on 20 February, as we have secured eighteen places at the Fire Service College for October 2023. We are also looking at other opportunities with the Fire Service College and other fire and rescue services that may allow us to add to the above intakes throughout 2023.

Chief Fire
Officer

Transferee Firefighters – Throughout February/March 2023, we will have the following transferee recruitment campaigns open –

- On Call to Wholetime transferee (internal only)
- On Call & Wholetime Firefighter transferees (internal and external)

Following these, we will look to promote another On Call to Wholetime Crew Commander and Watch Commander transferee intake for internal and external candidates for commencement in September 2023.

(Councillor Adoh joined the meeting)

FA49 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COMMITTEES

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE – 8 FEBRUARY 2023

(B) MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP) 2023/24 TO 2027/28

The Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT introduced the report and informed Members that a lot of work had gone into this budget. It was a budget that set out the Chairman’s strategic vision for transformation of the Service moving forward and safeguarding the plans for 300 wholetime firefighters. The financial position was better than it was, but there was still a huge amount of risk around utilities and pay.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the revised appendices presented the revenue and capital Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for the financial years 2023/24 to 2027/28. It had been a challenging year with inflation reaching double figures and having a significant impact on the expenditure budgets.

There had been a significant change in the Council tax precept flexibility for Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs). The referendum threshold had increased from 2% to 3% throughout the MTFP. Furthermore, the government proposed additional precept flexibility for FRAs to increase their precept by up to £5 for 2023/24 only, without the need to hold a referendum. This additional flexibility was welcomed and reflected in the MTFP.

The council tax collection fund base had been improving since the start of the pandemic where it had been adversely impacted, and the tax base had reduced. Last year the Authority saw the council tax base increase by

2.19% and there had been another year of continued growth averaging at over 2%.

The Revenue Support grant had increased in line with Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the Authority had been informed that the Service's grant had reduced from the previous year by circa £150k but the Authority would still receive in the region of £200k.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets informed Members that there had been some negatives. The Firelink grant would reduce by 20% and no more grant would be received from 2024/25 onwards. The Service was verbally notified in January 2023 that the grant funding for the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) capability hosted at Aylesbury would end on 31 March 2024. This would reduce the amount of fire specific grant funding from 2024/25 onward by a further £817k per annum, meaning the Service would no longer receive any fire specific grant funding from 2026/27 onwards.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that since the report was presented to the Executive Committee on 8 February 2023, there had been two significant events that had required the appendices to be updated further. On 8 February 2023, the National Employers agreed to make a revised pay offer of 7% increase on all basic pay rates and Continual Professional Development payments (with effect from 1 July 2022) and a 5% increase (with effect from 1 July 2023). Although the offer was still subject to agreement, pay inflation assumptions for those two years had been updated to reflect this latest offer. Future year planning assumptions for pay awards have been revised upwards to 4% per year.

The Service had been able to agree and award a 12-month fixed price contract for both gas and electricity, which due to movements in wholesale prices during the period in which the budget has been developed, would cost significantly less than initial projections. Therefore, the utilities budget throughout the MTFP had been reduced by £500k per annum. It should be noted that the overall increase in utilities prices would still cost the Service circa £500k more per year than during 2021-22.

A Member raised a question about the reduction of the Firelink grant and potential loss of USAR, which equated to almost a £1m cut in funding which was a significant amount coming out of the budget. Also, the impact on the Service, especially losing USAR which not only benefited

the residents of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, but also residents across the country. Was the Authority making enough fuss to the government.

The Chairman advised Members that the Authority had not yet received formal notification that the USAR grant was being removed. The Chairman and Chief Fire Officer had been focussed on influencing government. There had been a lot of support from the local MPs. Rob Butler MP had visited USAR and seen the team in operation, as mentioned in the Chairman's Announcements. There had also been correspondence between Rob Butler MP and the Fire Minister, and both the Chairman and Chief Fire Officer had conversations with the Fire Minister and the National Fire Chiefs Council regarding USAR. It was important that this Service retained USAR and this was what was being conveyed to the Home Office.

The Chief Fire Officer gave his thanks to the USAR team who continued to provide a fantastic service with this hanging over them. Every time they were mobilised, locally or nationally, the feedback was excellent.

A Member asked if a risk assessment had been undertaken if the Service was to lose the USAR capability.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that so far, there had been no correspondence from the Home Office to indicate that the Authority would be losing the USAR team, there had only been an informal meeting with the National Fire Chiefs Council who had identified that this Service was one of the teams at risk. The Chief Fire Officer had not yet seen the risk assessment from the Home Office or how the decision was being made, or what was being taken into account. In terms of the risk position, this would need to be encompassed into the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP). This Service needed a heavy rescue facility, and other fire and rescue services within the Thames Valley, based their response models on this Service's USAR team being available in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The next two nearest teams were West Midlands and Essex.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that as the Chief Finance Officer, he was required to report on the assumptions made and the adequacy of financial reserves. His assessment that the reserves were adequate and sustainable was based on Members approving the recommendation to increase the council tax by £5. Should that not be the case, his professional opinion was that the reserves were not sustainable.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report and Statement of the Chief Finance Officer (see section 8 of Annex A) be noted.
2. That a Council Tax precept of £77.16 for a band D equivalent property (equal to an increase of 10p per week) and the revenue budget as set out in Appendix 1 be approved.
3. That the capital programme as set out in Appendix 2 be approved.

Details of the recorded vote for resolutions 1-3 above are set out below:

	For	Against	Abstained
Adoh	✓		
Darlington	✓		
Exon	✓		
Hall	✓		
Hopkins	✓		
Lambert	✓		
Mahendran	✓		
McLean	✓		
Rouse	✓		
Stuchbury	✓		
Waite	✓		
Walsh	✓		

(A) THE PRUDENTIAL CODE, PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS AND MINIMUM REVENUE POSITION

The Principal Accountant advised Members this was a technical paper and was presented annually to the Authority. The Prudential Code was established to ensure the capital investment plans were affordable, prudent and sustainable, and that treasury management decisions were taken in accordance with good professional practice.

The Prudential Indicators presented here demonstrate that the current plans for capital investment meet these criteria and present an acceptable level of risk to the Authority. Minimum Revenue Provision was a statutory charge to the General Fund, which ensured the Authority had sufficient cash balances to repay borrowing upon maturity, reducing the refinancing risk. Since 2015/16, there had been sufficient funds set aside to cover the repayment of the long-term borrowing, this could be seen in the background paper.

Historically, early repayment of these loans had not been an option due to the prohibitive penalties on early repayment. However, due to the rise in interest rates since December 2021, it may be more feasible to repay some of the long-term borrowing early. Officers were authorised to make early repayments within the prudential limits where, having consulted with the treasury advisors, there was an opportunity to do this on beneficial terms. Officers would discuss any early repayments with the Lead Member before any final decisions were made. There were currently no plans for additional borrowing according to the MTFP.

The Chairman asked if officers pay off debts early, that it was reported (after the event) at the next Executive Committee meeting.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Prudential Indicators for 2023/24 be approved.
2. That the Minimum Revenue Provision policy statement be approved.

(C) MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES

The Chairman advised Members that there was a discussion at the Executive Committee last week in relation to this paper and at that time it was against the backdrop of an unresolved pay settlement discussion. The view of the Executive Committee was that it was not appropriate for Members Allowances to be changed while a pay settlement discussion was underway. As a result, the Executive Committee made the following recommendation to the Fire Authority 'That a Scheme of Members' Allowances for 2023/24 be adopted index linked to the 2022/23 'Grey Book' pay award'. For clarity, that would

Director of
Finance and
Assets

mean the pay award would need to be fully settled before it was applied, and it would be linked to the grey book.

RESOLVED -

That a Scheme of Members' Allowances for 2023/24 be adopted index linked to the 2022/23 'Grey Book' pay award.

(Councillor Darlington left the meeting)

FA50 PAY POLICY PRINCIPLES AND STATEMENT 2023/24

The HR Advisory and Development Manager advised Members that the pay policy was required to be updated each financial year and was presented to the Authority today for approval as the 2023/24 pay policy for the Authority, effective 1 April 2023. This pay policy was based on the current 2022/23 pay policy and had been updated with minor amendments made where appropriate, as detailed with red and unlined or struck through.

Looking at specific sections of the pay policy and the pay multiples and ratio of highest to lowest pay, it continued to fall for the eleventh year, seeing this eleventh year ratio improving by 34% since first reporting in 2012. However, it was important to note this reduction was due to the fact that no pay increase had been put through for the highest salary, however, the lowest had seen an increase.

The cover paper made a note to the government continuing their discussion on exit payments and the consultation undertaken during 2022. This consultation was to seek views on proposed guidance and processes prescribing additional reporting requirements and increased scrutiny and assurance on exit decisions. To reduce the use of large exit payments in the public sector, to improve consistency and accountability in decision making.

It was the Government's intention to ensure that a comprehensive and effective set of controls were in place across the public sector, and it was anticipated an exit payment cap or similar would be reintroduced in some form, and officers await details of any Regulation changes and implementation dates.

The Chairman asked about the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) which was currently showing a neutral impact for that level of assurance. He also welcomed the reducing gap from high to medium salary. On the EIA it referred to the

gender pay gap report and he asked when this report would be coming to the Authority.

The HR Advisory and Development Manager advised Members that the Gender Pay Gap report would be going to the Executive Committee on 22 March 2023. The Gender Pay Gap report would be presented to Members to be approved to be published on the government's website. The EIA showed a neutral impact because there were no specific impacts identified within any of those areas, as it was a more general report, rather than specifically looking at individual areas.

The Chairman asked if the Authority could receive ethnicity pay gap information as well as gender pay gap in future reports.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Pay Policy Principles and Statement as set out in Appendix one, as the statutory Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24, is approved for publication.
2. That the Authority notes the Pay Multiple ratio continues to fall for the eleventh year running, with the eleventh-year period seeing the ratio improved by 34 per cent since 2012.

FA51 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023/24

The Principal Accountant advised Members that this was the Treasury Management Strategy for 2023/24, which included statements in relation to the Treasury Management Policy, Treasury Management Strategy and Annual Investment Strategy. There were no significant changes to the strategy and Officers would continue to invest surplus funds in secure short-term deposits, maturing on a frequent basis, whilst ensuring the Authority could maintain adequate liquidity and meet short-term expenditure requirements. The current borrowing position, as of 31 December 2022, included loans of £6.177m, with an average interest rate of 4.64% and interest payable of £283k per annum. In May 2022, the Authority repaid a maturing long-term loan (£620k). The next maturing loan was due March 2024 (£1m). These repayments do not directly impact the revenue budget and funds had been set aside to ensure the Authority could repay the loan when due.

Head of
Human
Resources

Historically, early repayment of loans had not been an option due to the prohibitive penalties on early repayment. However, due to the rise in interest rates since December 2021, it may be more feasible to repay some of the long-term borrowing early. Officers were authorised to make early repayments within the prudential limits where, having consulted with the treasury advisors, there was an opportunity to do this on beneficial terms. Officers would discuss any early repayments with the Lead Member before any final decisions were made.

The current investment position as of 31 December 2022, included investments and bank account balances of £17.598m averaging 1.56% interest between April and December 2022. The investment portfolio included £2m investment in sustainable deposits. Officers would continue to explore sustainable investments when these investment deals mature. The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee had increased the interest base rate on ten consecutive occasions since December 2021, currently at 4%. This had resulted in an increase in the level of returns from investments for the Authority. Therefore, the investment returns budget for 2023/24 would increase to £350k. This figure had been reflected into the MTFP. The treasury advisors were forecasting for the interest base rate to peak at 4.5%. During 2023/24, Officers would continue to monitor the Treasury Management Performance, and this would be reported to the Overview and Audit Committee.

A Member asked about the number of reds ratings in the UK counterparties and so few for the non UK ones. How do we evidence and track those changes.

The Principal Accountant advised that Officers receive weekly notifications from their treasury advisors of all of the counterparties and any movements that had happened in their ratings. In terms of current investments, the Authority had no investments outside of the UK and there was a threshold of plus six months.

A Member asked that with all the good work being done, were all staff members kept up to date with information.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members, that staff were updated with regular Vlogs, the Authority meetings were recorded and available for all staff to watch on YouTube,

Station visits, leadership group meetings, the Service does try to get all information out to staff.

The Chairman asked about the target benchmark for interest rates of 2%, the previous year hit 2.6%. Given that the benchmark rate looks slightly under ambitious, how do Officers ensure the target was sufficiently ambitious for the Authority.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that as accountants, they would take a slightly prudent approach, and rather under estimate than over estimate. There would also be a slight lag, as the investments were over a range of maturity dates and interest rates were already locked in. This might be a lower rate than the rate of interest increase, especially when the rate of interest was going up so quickly, but likewise, if interest rates start to drop, there would be a positive lag as the rates start dropping as the longer term deals were locked in. Officers work with the treasury advisors to try and get a prudent benchmark for that rate of return, but obviously try and exceed this throughout the year.

RESOLVED –

That the Authority approve the Treasury Management Policy Statement, Treasury Management Strategy Statement and the Annual Investment Strategy for 2023/24.

**FA52 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE
AUTHORITY APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Organisational Development Manager advised that this report presented an update to Members on the Authority's apprenticeship programme, its current funding arrangements, and future opportunities. This update provides an overview of the apprenticeship journey, the range of apprenticeship subject areas, and also brought up to date current numbers enrolled on programmes and future plans.

The report showed details of the levy payments and spending, and highlights that because the Authority had been so effective in fully utilising its levy, it had now entered into co-funding arrangements with the department of education, where they fund 95% of the apprenticeship cost and the Authority funds the other 5%.

The Organisational Development department were currently exploring other potential funding options. It was possible for levy paying employers to transfer a percentage of their unused levy funds to other employers. The team had reached out to local colleges within Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, who the Authority deliver its apprenticeship programmes through, as well as other fire and rescue services, to determine if this would be a viable option for the Authority. The enrolment numbers showed the Authority had consistently exceeded the public sector target of 2.3% of its workforce in new starts each year.

The Organisational Development Manager advised Members that last week was National Apprenticeship Week, and the Communications Team had run case studies on all social media platforms of current apprentices in various roles across the organisation, and the positive experiences they were having. The Service also attended the NFCC National Apprenticeship Conference, and spoke to other services on how they recruit, train and deliver their apprenticeships.

The Organisational Development Manager advised Members that this update showcased the success of the Authority's apprenticeship programme, the level of investment in new and existing staff across the Service and how it could enable succession planning, resilience, and future proofing by recruiting and training apprentices into a number of roles across the organisation. The energy, enthusiasm, and diversity that apprentices bring to the roles benefits the organisation, whilst enabling the Authority to show them what it can offer as an employer and a career within the fire and rescue service.

The Chairman stated that the performance of the Service with new starters against the government target was the best he had seen, and the Service should be incredibly proud, not only the number of apprenticeships, but the mix of apprenticeships that were being delivered.

The Chairman congratulated the way in which the Service conducted itself through National Apprenticeship Week, the social media was superb, with some excellent case studies showing both diversity in terms of gender and an excellent neurodiversity case study as well.

The Chairman felt apprenticeships were a really great way of driving diversity in the workplace, both in terms of age,

and other characteristics and it would be helpful if in future reports, some of these statistics could be included.

The Chairman was also supportive of a concerted effort from the Authority in approaching large national employers, particularly those based in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, to ask for support with levy transfer, because there was a significant underspend with some of those larger employers.

RESOLVED –

That the information contained within this update is noted.

FA53 THE CHARTER FOR FAMILIES BEREAVED THROUGH PUBLIC TRAGEDY

The Director of Legal and Governance advised Members that it was with great pleasure that he presented this report to the Authority, recommending that it sign up to the Charter for Families Bereaved Through Public Tragedy. The proposals for adoption, which had been planned to take to the Authority in 2020 before the disruption of the Covid pandemic and changes of membership on the Authority, were reinvigorated by the attendance of the Right Reverend James Jones at a conference of the National Fire Chiefs Council at the end of November in 2022. Coincidentally, after this item had been added to today's agenda, the National Police Chiefs Council announced on 31 January its formal response to the Right Reverend James Jones report which was published in 2017 and was referenced in the executive summary. This also led to the matter of bringing into legal effect some aspects of the Right Reverend James Jones's report being raised again in Parliament with cross-party back bench support. The impact on the Authority would be minimal and would be underpinned in the employee's Code of Conduct and the Complaints procedure. For Members information, the local FBU representative had seen a copy of the draft report, and fully endorsed its proposals, and would be happy for a joint statement to be issued via the Authority's website.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that it was with mixed emotions that this report was brought here today, as from a personal perspective, a member of his family was killed at Hillsborough and his whole family went through the issues of Hillsborough and the trauma of that over decades.

Organisational
Development
Manager

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that when they went through the hearings and the final court hearings and found out how his family member had died. It was not until 30 years later that the family, for the first time, realised that there was actually somebody with him when he died. A police officer who tried his best to save his life. The family never got a chance to thank that police officer for his actions and that police officer never knew the person he tried to help.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that this paper encouraged authorities, to be open, honest, and transparent and think about the families of those who were bereaved in tragedies that effect the public. From a personal perspective he hoped the Authority accept and endorse this approach moving forward.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Fire Officer for sharing this, as he knew it would not have been easy for him, but he appreciated him doing so.

The Chairman also asked that the Authority not just signed the Charter, but Officers made sure it was embedded in the way the Authority operated and how it thought about things.

The Chairman would also like it to be sufficiently reflected, where needed, through the Authority's policies and procedures, and also to remind everyone about the expectations that signing the Charter placed upon the Authority, so it does not get signed and forgotten.

RESOLVED –

That 'The Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy' be adopted and be attested by the signatures of the Chairman and the Chief Fire Officer.

FA54 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To note that the next meeting of the Fire Authority will be the Annual Meeting, and will be held on Wednesday 14 June 2023 at 11am, at The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council.

THE CHAIRMAN CLOSED THE MEETING AT 12.27 PM.