



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Minutes of the Meeting of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE of the BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY held on WEDNESDAY 12 JULY 2023 at 10.00 AM.

Present: Councillors Christensen, Hall, Hopkins, Lambert, Rouse 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), A Stunell (Head of Human Resources), P Mould (Area Commander Industrial Action), M Crothers (Programme Manager), C Bell (Head of Protection, Assurance and Development), S Tuffley (Head of Prevention, Response and Resilience and K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies: Councillors Darlington (joined online) and McLean (joined online)

The Vice-Chairman advised the Committee 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/UCWmIXPWAscxpL3vliv7bh1Q>

EX01 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

(Councillor Hopkins in the Chair)

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Rouse be elected Chairman of the Executive Committee for 2023/24.

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Rouse be elected Chairman of the Executive Committee for 2023/24.

(Councillor Rouse in the Chair)

EX02 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Hopkins be elected Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee for 2023/24.

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Hopkins be elected Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee for 2023/24.

EX03 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on Wednesday 15 March 2023, be approved, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

EX04 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Chairman advised of the following matters arising:

EX43 Gender Pay Gap Report – The ethnicity pay gap would be reported annually in future.

EX44 Performance Management – Q3 2022/23 – the environment and emissions targets would be added for 2023/24. The Environment and Climate Action Plan was being presented at this meeting by the Director of Finance and Assets.

The Performance figures would be updated and reviewed and any updates requested by Members would be considered for inclusion in future reports.

EX45 Exploring Our Culture – The status line in Appendix 1 had been changed to blue for complete, green on track, amber if slightly off track and red not progressing.

The Head of Human Resources was looking at the Code of Conduct and People Strategy process to see if they could be made into an e-learning package.

EX05 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

EX06 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT APRIL 2022 – MARCH 2023 (PROVISIONAL OUTTURN)

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the report set out the Authority's revenue and capital spending position as at 31 March 2023, together with the projected outturn position for the financial year. The provisional outturn figure for the year was a net underspend of £607k.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets highlighted to Members that even though there was an underspend, there were three main factors which had influenced this. Firstly, it must be noted that the underspend included a year end technical adjustment and reversal of a provision of £524k. This was predominantly funds held in provisions relating to holiday pay and potential compensation due to individuals impacted by the 2015 pension remedy which were

found to be age discriminatory. The government had directed that they would be covering the compensation costs.

Secondly, the Authority received additional one-off funding in the region of £650k in January 2023 relating to 2021/22 reconciliation of the business rates grants. Thirdly the Authority had overachieved in its treasury investment returns by £300k due to the significant increase seen in interest rates since 2022. These three factors were not known at the time the budget was set in February 2022. If none of these events had occurred, an outturn report with an overspend in the region of £900k would have been presented.

2022/23 had been a challenging year with a number of financial pressures being faced by the Authority. There were unknown costs around utilities, inflationary pressures and higher than budgeted pay awards. All these pressures had been reflected in the outturn and future known pay awards had been reflected in the medium term financial plan.

A Member asked when undertaking the budget process for next year, would the Authority be a position where it could push the precept for a flat £5 rather than be capped at 1.99%.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the current precept of 2.99% had been factored in, however, there were discussions within the fire sector of the potential to increase it to a £5 flat rate.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that two years ago, the additional £5 precept flexibility was secured for the lower quartile fire and rescue services, in recognition of the significant pressures they faced. Last year, the principle was extended to all fire and rescue services, based on national work around inflation, and inflationary pressures. There was very good data from all services around the pressures they were facing, which gave the evidence base for additional flexibility to be awarded.

A Member asked about the property portfolio and the pursuit to recover some of the increased costs incurred during the build of the Blue Light Hub from the professional design team.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that it would not be appropriate for him to disclose information about the legal position but would be happy to update Members after the meeting.

The Chairman asked for an explanation of the Marketing and Communications equipment and licencing in-year growth bid.

Director of
Finance & Assets

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised that at present £8,399 had been spent, and the licences still needed to be obtained. The £55k requested was no longer needed, so there was a variance of £6,601k.

The Chairman asked for an update on where the Service was in regard to wholetime establishment.

The Head of Human Resources advised Members that wholetime number were 292, on call 63 and support staff 124. 18 apprentices were due to start in September and there was an additional pool of 11.

The Chairman asked what was happening to the top floor of the West Ashland building which was not complete. What provision had been made for completion of it.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised that at present, there was no provision set aside for the top floor, as the initial idea was that someone external would come in and assist with the contribution of paying towards it.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that when West Ashland was built, it was pre-Covid, and it was felt it would be best to let it out to an external company, as Milton Keynes office space was in high demand. After the pandemic, people changed the way they worked. The latest advice received from Lambert Smith Hampton, was that it would be hard to let as commercial office space. It would now be looked at strategically, rather than a commercial let.

The Chairman asked that a proposal be brought to Members on the top floor of West Ashland.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that the space could be used for whatever the Authority wanted it to be, as it was just a shell with very little fit out. It would most easily be converted to office space but could serve other purposes as well. There were plans to bring a report to Members in Quarter 3, but this could be brought forward.

The Chairman asked for an update on the business as usual work property spend that was being undertaken on stations. As there was an underspend for the year, could it be spent on business as usual property improvements.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised that this could be provided to Members detailing the work that had been done.

RESOLVED:

Director of
Finance & Assets

Deputy Director of
Finance & Assets

1. That the provisional outturn forecast for the Authority as at 31 March 2023 be noted.
2. That the slippage of £1.100m on the capital programme be approved to be carried forward into 2023/24.
3. That the underspend of £0.607m be transferred into Revenue Contribution to Capital Reserve (RCCO).
4. That delegated authority be given to the Chief Finance Officer to authorise any late changes to the movements in reserves and capital slippage amounts resulting from accounting adjustments needing to be made during the year-end closedown process.
5. That should any changes to the amounts referred to above be required, then the Chief Finance Officer will report these to Members at the next available meeting.

EX07 EMERGENCY SERVICES MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMME

The Programme Manager advised that the last report presented to Members regarding the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP) was back in July 2022. Since then, a key delivery partner Motorola had left the programme, which had resulted in a re-lotting process. This had meant a pause in the delivery and deployment activities, whilst the work to relocate and revise the national business case again took place. This report outlined how the South Central region was going to manage this period, to enable it to remain engaged and updated.

The region would maintain a strategic owner for ESMCP, and this remained Deputy Chief Fire Officer Jo Bowcock of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service; and a single point of contact, Thames Valley ESMCP Project Manager, Paul Channing. It was unlikely there would be any further update papers submitted during this period, until notification was received that delivery work had restarted nationally. This was not expected until mid-2025 at the earliest.

A Member asked if this Service was impacted negatively, were people put in danger, was the Service's ability to deal with day-to-day operations adversely effected.

The Programme Manager advised that the impact was minimal within the Thames Valley region. Airwave was originally proposed to be switching off at the end of 2019, but when it looked as if ESMCP would be extending, they undertook to upgrade all their base stations across the national network and were currently looking at a programme to upgrade devices. In terms of safety to firefighters and the public within the Thames Valley region, when the Service moved to the fire control project and the combined control, it moved a step forward in comparison to other regions, in

that arrangements were made to use Airwave for transferring data messages. Many services do not do this and would be impacted by the delays.

A Member asked what the cost was in money and time of the delays to the Service.

The Programme Manager advised that until earlier this year, funding had been provided, but at the end of March, that funding was withdrawn, which was why the decision was made to step back from the programme.

RESOLVED –

That the Emergency Service Mobile Communications Programme update be noted.

EX08 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that this action plan was originally approved by the Authority in December 2021, and this was the first update of progress since then. The original plan was split into two sections, adaptation and mitigation. Adaptation was about optimising the Service's response to extreme weather events and two updates had been provided in response to Summer pressures, most recently at the Authority meeting last month. This paper acknowledged those updates, but the primary focus of this report was on mitigation.

Mitigation was the action to reduce the Authority's own environmental impact. All previous actions were green or complete. There were two new actions; the first was around Unit 7. Vacating this building would have environmental benefits. The second action was to undertake a fully revised Property Strategy linked to the new Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).

The Director of Finance and Assets highlighted that the Authority had now measured its carbon emissions baseline at 978 tonnes, which would allow future improvements to be quantified. Also, by signing up to a zero carbon electricity contract, the Authority had reduced projected emissions by an estimated 283 tonnes in the current year.

A Member was pleased to see the benefits of the zero carbon electricity contract, and asked if officers would be able to provide an update on the movement in energy prices since the contract was awarded. Also, how would it be decided to award contracts in future should a zero carbon contract not be the lowest cost option.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that the current contract was only for one year due to the extreme volatility in

prices last year. The good news was that prices had started to reduce since February. Officers would continue monitoring this to agree a one, two or possibly three year contract. In terms of zero carbon emissions, officers look for the best financial value, but also had an environmental responsibility and would take the decision along with the Lead Member for Finance and Assets, Information Security and IT.

A Member was pleased to note that the Authority was looking at solar panels for the fire station in Marlow. However, there was a story in the local press recently regarding alleged wildlife destruction at the station. Could this be explained and what was being done by way of a response.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that there was a proposed road scheme which would use some of the station's land to expand the roadway to improve roundabout access. Whilst the scheme was on going, the land was not maintained, as there would be diggers driven over it etc., so it had become overgrown. The road scheme eventually did not proceed, so as part of the contract, the land was reinstated to the condition it was before. There was a group in Marlow, called Wild Marlow who observed this had happened and wrote to the local press about the destruction of this habitat, which was valuable to local wildlife. Plans were now in place to rectify this, and reinstate some of the land for wildlife, which would be very low cost and reduce the amount of maintenance. Wild Marlow would provide volunteers.

The Chairman was impressed with the work on the zero carbon electricity contract and felt it would be good for the Authority to promote this and the environmental and climate action plan update. A draft communication to be given to the Chairman and Vice Chairman to approve before publication.

Director of
Finance & Assets

The Chairman asked if the business case for Unit 7, setting out the options for exiting the building, could be presented to the Executive Committee in September.

Director of
Finance & Assets

RESOLVED –

That the Committee note the report.

EX09 FINANCIAL STRATEGY UPDATE (NO 2)

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the original strategy was approved in November 2020, and this was the second update on progress. The financial position had improved significantly since the last update, primarily due to additional flexibility on council tax. Also, the Authority continued to push

hard on efficiency, and the HMICFRS data showed the cost per firefighter per person in Buckinghamshire was just over £20, compared to the national average of just over £25. The Authority's own KPI data showed that total net expenditure was also significantly below the national average. The Service was very efficient in terms of what it delivered for the money it had.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that with regard to the debt position, steps had been taken to improve this even further. One of the loans had been repaid early and the change in interest rates over the past year, had meant that rather than paying a premium to repay it early, the Authority actually got a discount. Other loans were being kept under review.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the updated action plan, showed the majority of actions were green or complete. A lot of 2022/23 actions were to be carried forward to this year, as there was flexibility in the plan. The Reserves Strategy had been updated and it was proposed to rename some reserves to more accurately describe their purpose, plus reallocating some reserves no longer required for the original purpose. Taking some of the reserves no longer required, there would be approximately £3m available to invest in transforming the service in line with the upcoming CRMP.

The Chairman advised Members that with regard to precept flexibility, the Authority sought the benefit of precept flexibility, and would continue to push for flexibility, but that was different to exercising that flexibility when it comes to a decision, as pressures on council taxpayers had been significant over the past twelve months. It was important that as well as seeking flexibility, the Authority continued to drive on efficiencies. The next phase on seeking efficiencies would be much harder, and the Chairman felt it would be worth considering whether to seek external support to challenge the budget process.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that in terms of precept flexibility, the Authority should only be asking for what it needed. Last year if the Authority had not taken it, the service would have been in a bad financial position. There was a budget setting challenge process to go through, and expenditure would be challenged to ensure the Authority was spending what it needed to spend and investing where it needed to invest, and the budget would be set accordingly. In terms of efficiencies and getting external support, or potential challenge, this would be investigated. In terms of governance, the self-assessment was more around the Service than skills.

The Chairman asked about the governance section where it referred to the financial expertise of the governing body and asked when the CIPFA self-assessment was undertaken and felt it would be helpful if Members did a self-assessment.

A Member asked when the Masterclasses would be available to Members and why was there a significant delay in receiving the final audit opinion from the external auditor. Also, the only red status was the HMICFRS 'efficiency and effectiveness' still rated as 'requires improvement' in the most recent report, what actions were in place to address it.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that with regard to HMICFRS, this was based on the last report. As Members would be aware, HMICFRS had completed their latest inspection of the Service, but the report had not yet been received. Until the latest report was received, it was too early to sign it off. The issue around the audit had primarily been around valuations, and the way it was presented in the balance sheet but would have no impact on the accounts themselves.

The Director of Finance and Assets would circulate the Masterclasses to Members, as well as looking at potential self-assessments.

Director of
Finance & Assets

RESOLVED –

1. That the Committee note the report.
2. That the following changes to usable reserves (detailed on pages 21 to 25 of Appendix 1) be made retrospectively with effect from 31 March 2023 be approved:
 - a) That the Apprentice Reserve be renamed Workforce Planning Reserve.
 - b) That the Future Funding Reserve be renamed Transformation Reserve.
 - c) That the Continuing Projects Reserve be closed and the balance of £80k transferred to the Transformation Reserve.
 - d) That the COVID-19 Reserve be closed and the balance of £594k transferred to the Transformation Reserve.

EX10 UPDATE FLEET AND PROPERTY STRATEGIES TO 2025

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that these were both interim updates to align with the current Public Safety Plan. Both were to be revised for 2025 onwards to align with the Community Risk Management Plan. The original Fleet Strategy was approved in November 2017 and the substantive updates were

noted in the Executive Summary. There was an updated action plan, and all previous actions had been completed or were business as usual. There was one new action, and that was to pilot the use of smaller response vehicles following the Summer pressures recommendations.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that the Property Strategy was originally approved in May 2018, and the substantive updates were noted in the Executive Summary.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members there were a couple of typographical issues with the published version. These would be rectified for the final version. The Action Plan had 12 actions, which were either complete, ongoing, still to do or had been removed. The most significant update was to reflect the last five year condition survey which was completed last year and was the road map for all property work over the next few years. It was pleasing to note the continued improvement in work required each survey. In 2013, the value of work outstanding was £4.4m, 2017 £2.4m and 2022 had reduced to £1.6m, showing the value of continued improvement.

A Member asked about the disposal of red fleet, three appliances had recently been sold at auction in Doncaster, did officers investigate other methods of disposal of appliances.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised that various methods had been tried in the past, the appliances were assumed to have no value in the budget, so anything achieved was a bonus.

The Chairman asked if officers could speak to Councillor Hall regarding his knowledge and expertise in this area.

The Chairman asked about the £25k set aside for specific EDI improvements, and asked if this budget was sufficient.

The Deputy Director of Finance and Assets advised that the £25k set aside was more around basic modifications at stations, for example, if someone wanted to create a quiet room and wanted some furniture. There was a separate piece of work the Property Manager was undertaking, looking at standardisation at each Station, what was needed, what was feasible, carrying out a GAP analysis of how it would be undertaken.

The Director of Finance and Assets advised Members that when any work was carried out on stations now, the equality diversity and inclusion implications would be considered.

Director of
Finance & Assets

Director of
Finance & Assets

Following feedback from Members regarding the formatting of the draft Property Strategy, the Director of Finance and Assets amended his recommendation as follows:

That, subject to the amendments raised in respect of sections 17 and 19 of the Property Strategy, the updated fleet and property strategies to 2025 be approved.

RESOLVED –

That, subject to the amendments raised in respect of sections 17 and 19 of the Property Strategy, the updated fleet and property strategies to 2025 be approved.

EX11 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

RESOLVED –

It was moved and resolved that the public and press representatives be removed from the meeting by virtue of Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972, as the report contains information relating to any individual; and Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972, as the report contain information relating to the financial or business affairs of a person (including the Authority); and on these grounds it is considered the need to keep information exempt outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

(All officers left the meeting with the exception of the Democratic Services Officer).

EX12 SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM SUCCESSION PLAN

RESOLVED –

The Committee considered the report and appendices, details of which were noted in the confidential/exempt minutes.

EX13 EXEMPT MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Exempt Minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on Wednesday 15 March 2023, be approved, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

EX14 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted that the next Executive Committee meeting would be held on Wednesday 13 September 2023 at 10am.

THE CHAIRMAN CLOSED THE MEETING AT 11.40AM

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