



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY HELD ON FRIDAY 28 APRIL 2023 AT 11 AM.

Present: Councillors Bagge, Carroll, Darlington, Exon, Hopkins (Vice Chairman), Hussain, 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 Carter (Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO), P Mould (Area Commander), C Bell (Head of Protection, Assurance and Development), A Stunell (Head of Human Resources) and K Nellist (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies: Councillors Adoh, Christensen, Chapple, Hall and Lambert
(Councillor Adoh joined remotely)

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/UCWmIXPWAscxpL3vliv7bh1Q>

FA55 MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Fire Authority held on 15 February 2023, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

FA56 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Chairman advised that:

FA48 – Chairman's Announcements, the Chief Fire Officer to ask the respective councils to write reflecting the Authority's views on the impact of losing the fire link grant and USAR funding: letters to respective councils were yet to be sent, however, there had been developments in respect of USAR funding since the last meeting of the Authority about which

the Chairman wished to update Members in his announcements.

FA52 – BMKFA Apprenticeship Programme Update, 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: the Chairman had been provided with details of the top 10 large national employers, particularly those based in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

FA57 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

None.

FA58 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised Members that:

With the support of local Members of Parliament, and through various discussions with civil servants and the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, regarding funding, and a letter from the Authority on 30 March 2023 setting out a compelling case for continued funding for Urban Search and Rescue (USAR), the Minister responded to confirm that he was looking into it and would update further in due course. The Authority was delighted to receive on 13 April 2023, confirmation from the Home Office that funding for all Urban Search and Rescue teams, would continue until at least April 2025. In the next public sector funding round, the Minister intended to seek the investment required to continue funding longer term. This was excellent news for the Authority and Nationally.

Members would also be aware that an adjournment debate was held in the House of Commons on 19 April 2023, where the Service was recognised for its contribution to the local community. Also mentioned by the Minister, was the excellent decision taken a number of years ago to undertake disclosure and barring (DBS) checks on firefighters and specifically, enhanced DBS checks on firefighters, which was recognised by the Minister and described as best practice that other fire and rescue services should follow. A very welcome acknowledgement. The link to the report in Hansard of the Adjournment debate, including the response from the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire would be sent to Members:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-04-19/debates/A4CC7E2D-E2AB-4B6C-9F70-F8B78D155E63/BuckinghamshireFireAndRescueService>

Democratic
Services
Officer

From Monday 24 April 2023 firefighters began wearing new breathing apparatus (BA) sets. The roll out of the Interspiro BA sets formed part of the ongoing commitment to ensure crews had the best equipment, to enable them to provide the best response to the communities. The BA collaborative contract was worth a total of £1,768,468 across the three services. The collaborative procurement process delivered a total joint cost avoidance saving of £532,178, with an individual saving to the Authority of £187,239 for the first year. It was a large amount of money, but when it came to the Authority's most valuable assets, it's people, it was a worthy investment. This Service was the second of the three services to go live with the new sets, and this milestone marked a significant achievement in the three-year project which would ultimately see the same equipment used by firefighters in each of the three Thames Valley Services.

An Officer of the Service, Ania Czerminska, would be representing the Service at the Coronation of King Charles III.

FA59 VALUES AND CULTURE IN THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES

The Chairman advised Members that all fire services across England and Wales received a report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) on a review they had undertaken into values and culture in fire and rescue services. The report was difficult reading for everyone involved in fire and rescue services, but also essential reading. The report set out nine themes and 35 recommendations. This report was of such significance that it was important that the Authority met in a timely way that enabled officers to reflect on the report and integrate the findings and recommendations into their work, but also to enable Members to undertake scrutiny. It was the role of the Authority, as elected Members, to scrutinize and hold the Service to account, and culture and values were right at the heart of the confidence that the community had in the Service.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that officers accepted the recommendations in full and from a Chief Fire Officer's perspective, he would work over the coming months and years to change the culture of this Service. The fire and

rescue service as a sector, must make a difference for the future. This Service was not complacent, and officers would go through the recommendations, some of which had been started and some had been completed.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that this report presented an update following the release of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Values and Culture report.

Following the release of the London Fire Brigade report and subsequent articles in the press, HMICFRS were asked to produce a spotlight report on the values and culture in English fire and rescue services. HMICFRS would use the findings from the second full round of inspections, and would comment on the following, values and culture, bullying, harassment and discrimination; and also highlight examples of promising and innovative practices established in respect of values and culture.

The report was released on 30 March 2023 and set out HMICFRS findings, supported by 35 recommendations, to be delivered by all fire and rescue services alongside, the government and national fire bodies. The Authority welcomed both the report, and supported all the recommendations, as it takes the culture of its staff extremely seriously, to ensure all staff and the public it served were treated with the dignity and respect they deserved. Of the 35 recommendations, 19 were owned by the Chief Fire Officer. The update in Appendix 1 showed progress against these recommendations. Two were complete, 13 were in progress – on track, and four were not started. Of the four not started, a number were reliant on other recommendations being completed first.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that there were a couple of areas to highlight. The values which had been in place since 2011 and aligned with the National Fire Chief Councils (NFCC) Code of Ethics, and the Whistleblowing Policy that was in place and a line run by an external company. Work was ongoing to promote this line with the 'Speak Up' campaign.

As mentioned in the Chairman's Announcements, in 2019, the vetting process was increased and moved to the annual enhanced DBS process for all front line staff. This was not just operational staff, but anyone who came into contact with the public.

A thorough review of the Equality Impacts Assessments process took place in 2022, which led to an update of the template and supporting guidance, and this was a clear focus for reports going through the governance process.

Biennial staff surveys had been undertaken since 2017, with response rates of over 65%, allowing staff to raise their feedback on a broad range of topics anonymously. The Authority recently approved funding for this survey to move to annually from 2023/24.

Following feedback regarding the various streams of people, work plans and actions, including the previously presented exploring our culture paper, these recommendations would now feed into the larger people plan to ensure progress could be monitored.

A Member felt that the HMICFRS report was not as far ahead as the Authority in its discussions. It was still very much focussed on processes and procedures and the Authority was looking more at how to create an environment and culture change, and asked the Chief Fire Officer for any reflections on what had changed and what more could be done to create an environment where people felt they could come forward, as previously they were leaving the service before speaking up.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that people were now coming forward and there were currently three cases on going. Over the last few years, the staff satisfaction and culture surveys, were trying to engage staff as much as possible, and that had led to people speaking up. The Service had also implemented mental health champions, which gave people an opportunity to speak to others in a different way. There may be people who still want to come forward, and this was monitored on a regular basis. If there was criminal misconduct on record, this would be reported to the police. In other services, there had been criminal acts that had not been reported to the police.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members he met regularly with the HR Advisory and Development Manager who leads employee relations, and they review every case. One of the criticisms that came out of the report was that some services had not dealt with issues.

The Chairman advised Members that it was important the Authority provided scrutiny and oversight of the work of the Chief Fire Officer and his team across these issues and the HMICFRS report. Some of the work being undertaken in this

Service was ahead of what was captured in the HMICFRS report, but it was important not to be complacent, as there were things in the report the Service was not doing and needed to be addressed. Members should be confident that the actions officers were putting in place were sufficient to give assurance that progress was being made addressing values and culture and this should be tracked through the normal mechanisms. The report would be reviewed regularly by the Executive Committee and with the risk being escalated to the Corporate Risk Register, it would be reviewed by the Overview and Audit Committee and full Authority.

The Chairman felt that the Home Affairs Select Committee would also want to review and discuss progress on values and culture with the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, and indeed, if Members had watched the Adjournment Debate, the Minister was very clear that he expected to see a response from fire and rescue services to this.

Members could be assured, that over the last few weeks, the Chairman and the Chief Fire Officer had met with Members of Parliament across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes to cover a range of local issues in their constituencies and the Service as a whole. One of the most significant topics of discussion had been culture and values, based on their desire to understand what was being done to address it, but also to share what was being undertaken within this Service.

A Member asked about recommendation 28 and felt that equality and diversity data should be integrated and tracked through the performance management process.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that HMICFRS treated the equality and diversity section as a slightly different area, and there had been a lot of challenge when they went out and inspected on how services had been capturing the data, as some were not capturing any data, so it could not be reported on.

A Member asked about the process in relation to whistleblowing and ensuring the Authority was compliant with the relevant legislation, protecting employees etc.

The Director of Legal and Governance advised that the Authority had a compliant whistleblowing policy in place. There was a common misconception of what whistleblowing was and what a whistleblowing procedure was. Corporately, it was a sequential approach, and the whistleblowing policy reflected best practice in terms of raising it internally first,

but if people could not do so, going externally. Part of the Service's 'Speak Up' campaign had been to clarify that sequential approach.

A Member asked if the only option was for people to contact the whistleblowing line by phone.

The Chairman felt the method that people could raise concerns was really well made, and although the policy had been adopted, it could always be improved. Officers would investigate other contact methods.

A Member asked if everything with a deadline date of 1 June 2023, would be achieved and was the Service engaging with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) on some of the work as they were an important partner.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that in terms of the recommendations due by 1 June, good progress was being made. At the next Authority meeting in June, anything not completed would be escalated if not completed or shown as off track.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed that he had met with the local FBU representative and gone through every recommendation in the report.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that from a national perspective following a recent conference on culture, one of the outcomes was the Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council and other officers would engage with the FBU on a national level to talk about how these issues could be moved forward. It was a very big issue for the FBU and other unions, as they find themselves in a difficult position, it may be some of their members committing these acts against other members. There had been very positive engagement for local representative bodies in terms of how to deal with this together.

The Chairman advised there were two actions that had a 1 June 2023 due date and were not yet started, recommendations 4 and 21, and asked if these would be met.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that with regard to recommendation 4 - *'that chief fire officers should assure themselves that updates on how concerns are being handled are shared with those who have raised them. The updates should be given in an accessible way that encourages trust and confidence in the service response. Consideration should be given to creating a professional standards function to*

Head of Human
Resources

handle conduct concerns in service (or from an external service) to have oversight of cases, to make sure they are conducted in a fair and transparent way and to act as a point of contact for all staff involved' - he had commission legal advice from a specific HR legal advice provider. Part of the advice related to issues in terms of disciplinary hearings within the Service. The advice also included procedural issues, ACAS guidance, and feedback following disciplinary hearings.

The Chief Fire Officer also advised Members that with regard to creating a professional standards function, he had been approached by other fire and rescue services which bordered Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes regarding collaboration opportunities to provide this service.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that the Service did have a 360-degree feedback process available. There was work to do in how the senior management team asked for that feedback, and rather than talking about 'Assistant Chief Fire Officer and above', to make it broader for the whole senior management team.

The Chairman advised Members that HMICFRS had been working with the National Fire Chiefs Council to put in place a best practice portal and this Service had been feeding into that piece of work. When the best practice portal goes live, whistleblowing was one of the things that the Service would look at. One thing raised by HMICFRS, was that fire and rescue service had a unique strength in Watch cultures, which was not only important to the service, but was also where a lot of these issues became intensified.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that this Service did not have fixed Watches because it operated bank shifts, which was different to other services. Most watches would have other firefighters who were not on than watch coming in every shift. The workforce also moved around on a regular basis so there was not that fixed watch culture. There had also been a large injection of apprentices, which had made a huge difference. The expectations of people coming into the Service now was completely different.

The Chairman asked if Watch Commanders, were coached on how to reflect on the culture of their watches and what they should be looking for. Also, what leadership and development support were given to Watch Commanders.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that a Leadership and Management Development Programme had just been held. Whilst this programme had begun with the senior management team, it had now gone all the way down to Watch Commanders. The sessions involved different Watch Commanders and support staff being trained together in small groups, based around the NFCC Leadership Framework.

A Member asked if apprentices were taught about culture when they joined the Service.

The Head of Human Resources advised Members that as part of the application process, there was a behaviours part of the interview and there was also a behaviours workshop as part of the assessment, it was also part of the induction process.

The Chairman asked about recommendation 34 – *‘With immediate effect, chief fire officers should review their implementation of the core Code of Ethics and make sure it is being applied across their services’* - , it was marked as complete and stated *‘Our values have been in place since 2011 and are embedded in our Service...’* What assurance do officers have they were embedded, and how had this been challenged in the report.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that the values were introduced before the Code of Ethics. The National Fire Chiefs Council introduced the Code of Ethics, as some services did not have any values at all. When the Code of Ethics were introduced, officers carried out a review of the values, and the values were also part of the end of year reviews and appraisals.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the Leadership and Management Development programme was built on the Service’s values and all the promotion and development processes were values based.

The Chairman asked regarding the data in performance reports, and could officers give assurance about how those performance indicators give confidence that the leadership and management culture was in place.

(A minute’s silence was observed to mark International Workers Memorial Day)

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO advised Members that officers continued to review performance quarterly, including presenting the report to Members. This

year more team specific information would be provided, so teams could hold themselves to account. The Performance Monitoring Board was now looking at these in much more detail.

The Chairman stated there was a huge amount of work being done on recruitment and the volume of applicants going through the process, and the number of applicants taken through was significantly increasing. Could officers give Members assurance regarding the process of recruitment and the diversity of applicants and how the diversity of those applicants was being monitored through the process.

The Head of Human Resources advised Members that in terms of applicants, officers do look at all the protected characteristics, and the dropout rates at each stage of the process. Also, how to improve this, through have-a-go days for specific protected characteristics for example. In terms of engagement, the Service was currently working with the South Asian community, attending events and visiting Mosques. Officers had also attended career open days and armed forces days.

The Chairman advised that when the report came out, a letter was sent to all MPs across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes which he felt got to the heart of how it gave the community confidence that their fire and rescue service was where it needed to be. As well as internal scrutiny, he felt that regular communication externally on the actions being taken, and the tone with which those actions were taken, that there was no complacency or defensiveness, would give people the sense that the Service had responded with sufficient pace and action to the report.

The Chief Fire Officer and the Chairman to reflect on how this would be done and brought back to a future Authority meeting.

The Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO asked Members if the appendix could become part of the Exploring our Culture report, rather than bringing back separate reports. A report would be brought to the next Authority meeting.

The Chairman and Chief Fire Officer would write to HMICFRS to explain the discussion that had been had, the recommendations that had been agreed, and how it was being integrated into the Authority's wider plans.

Chief Fire Officer

Head of Technology,
Transformation and
PMO

Chief Fire Officer

The Chairman thanked officers for their hard work on the report.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Fire Authority should accept the recommendations allocated to the Chief Fire Officer in full
2. That the Service will fully engage and support the delivery of the remaining recommendations
3. That the Fire Authority support a risk being escalated to the Corporate risk register – Poor Culture

FA60 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 12.15 PM.