

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 14 January 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Virtual Meeting - Web ex meeting.

PRESENT

Cllr Bernard Fisher	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair)	Cllr Wendy Thomas
Cllr Nick Housden (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Pam Tracey MBE

Substitutes:

Apologies: Cllr Brian Tipper

In Attendance: Cllr Dave Norman MBE, Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries, GCC
Mark Preece, Interim Chief Fire Officer, GFRS
Jean Cole, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, GFRS
Clive Webber, Head of Business Planning and Performance, GFRS
Maria Boon, Finance and Compliance Manager, GFRS
Nick Evans, Deputy Gloucestershire Police and Crime Commissioner
Paul Blacker, Finance Director, GCC
Laura Powick, Democratic Service Adviser, GCC.

24. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Brian Tipper.

25. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

27. BLUE LIGHT COLLABORATION

Jean Cole, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, provided the Committee with a presentation on Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) and Gloucestershire Constabulary collaboration.

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It was explained that the duty for emergency services to collaborate in England was determined within the Police and Crime Act 2017. The Act was deliberately broad in its definition of collaboration to allow for maximum local innovation.

It was understood that parties entering into a proposed collaboration needed to be satisfied that it would have a positive impact on efficiency and effectiveness. Should it be found that the collaboration would have an adverse effect on the efficiency and effectiveness of an emergency service, then the legislation would not require that service to enter into a collaborative agreement.

Members were informed that the South West Emergency Services Collaboration Strategic Board had been disbanded, however the South West Emergency Services Collaboration Working Group had continued for the sharing of best practice and collaborative opportunities.

Since the election of the new Gloucestershire Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Chris Nelson, in May 2021, opportunities for greater collaboration between GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary had been explored. Areas for consideration included road safety, training and development, and shared access to premises.

It was explained that at a strategic level, a Memorandum of Understanding had been developed which set out the governance for the partnership; the objectives for the partnership; opportunities for finance; and details for the termination of arrangements.

An action plan had also been developed identifying five key areas for collaborative work, including leadership arrangements, the shared estate, and operational opportunities.

Members noted that the next steps were to sign off the strategic documents and to identify officers for the delivery of objectives.

One member asked for specific detail on the collaborative work undertaken at a tactical level between GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary, arguing that low level collaboration should be part of the norm.

Nick Evans, Deputy PCC for Gloucestershire, was asked to explain to the Committee the top three collaborative projects to be undertaken by GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary. He explained that collaboration went beyond dealing with specific incidents, and that the focus was on systemising and formalising this collaborative partnership.

He continued to explain that the top three priorities for collaboration were:

- The One Estate project – This sharing of premises would help to increase the footprint of the Constabulary in Gloucestershire; provide access points for police officers; and help to embed joint working and an awareness of how each service operates.

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- Road Safety – A Road Safety Forum had been established, along with a formal collaboration agreement between GFRS, the OPCC, Gloucestershire Constabulary, and Gloucestershire County Council (GCC), which set out the Forum's parameters.
- Community Safety – This included tackling persistent anti-social behaviour; considering how the services could contribute to developing a sense of community in areas where there were problems; and providing a visible presence to show that these communities were taken seriously.

One member commented that they could see a number of benefits for the police through this collaborative work, and little, if none for GFRS. They expressed concern that the lines were being blurred between them. They also stated that it was a police 'force' rather than police 'service'.

In response, Deputy PCC Evans proposed that it was a police 'service' and reassured members that lines were not being blurred, that each service had their own clear duties, but that they could collaborate in areas that they were all responsible for, such as in tackling anti social behaviour, and in working together to make communities safer.

Mark Preece, Interim Chief Fire Officer, also stressed that both GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary maintained their independence, however it was in the public interest for them to work together in key areas to maximise effectiveness.

In response to a query, it was understood that Newent and Dursley Community Fire Stations were being considered for use as shared premises. The CFO explained that that these stations were currently on-call stations, and using them as shared premises would be a more effective use of the public estate.

The CFO added that GFRS was benefitting from collaboration with the Constabulary by being able to access their excellent leadership and management training facilities at the Sabrina Centre in Berkeley. He also explained that collaboration was necessary between the two services to reduce road deaths in the County.

Cllr Dave Norman MBE, Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries, reminded the Committee of the difficult historic relationship between GFRS, GCC and the OPCC, and welcomed this positive collaborative approach under the new PCC. He also reassured members that he would not allow GFRS to enter into any partnership that would not be of benefit to the service.

One member suggested that the change in relationship between GCC, GFRS and the OPCC was as a result of party politics and expressed the view that there was no need for closer association between GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary.

One member commented that party politics should be set aside and that collaboration could be beneficial, so long as the governance of each service remained separate. Another member echoed that a collaborative approach could

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only be of benefit to local communities, whilst another member suggested that the public would be delighted that these services were working together.

A further member queried whether the separate responsibilities of each service were being blurred.

Another member commented that, whilst collaboration was essential, the use of shared premises created a perception issue and that the fundamental differences between the fire and police services should be ring-fenced.

The CFO explained that working alongside each other had benefits for both services in helping to identify and help those most vulnerable. He also reassured the Committee that the stations would retain their community assets, and that any costs incurred would be covered by the police, as determined through the Memorandum of Understanding.

One member informed the Committee of having visited the Emergency Services Community Station in Hayle, Cornwall, which co-located the fire, police and ambulance services. They noted that the principle for the tri-service station was good, however they felt the design was flawed and therefore requested that the designs for the shared use of Dursley and Newent Community Fire Stations be shared with the Committee for scrutiny.

The Deputy PCC provided reassurance that the operational and leadership separation between the police and fire services remained and would continue to do so, that both services retained their clear responsibilities and duties, and that the governance of both services were independent. He reiterated that collaboration was about working together to deliver improved services to the communities in Gloucestershire.

In terms of the use of shared premises, the Deputy PCC reassured members that the police would not be detaining people in community fire stations as they had a custody suite in Gloucestershire that they used already, and that having spoken to people in Newent, they welcomed the shared use of buildings that were already in the public estate. These shared premises would be used to enable police officers to complete reports and would increase police presence in communities by providing a base.

The Chair thanked the Deputy PCC for taking the time to talk to the Committee. It was requested that a copy of the Memorandum of Understanding be shared with Committee members, and for a progress report on collaboration activities, focusing on the shared estate, road safety and community safety, be brought back to the Committee in six months time.

28. GFRS BUDGET

Mark Preece introduced the proposals for the GFRS Budget 2022/23.

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It was understood that time had run short at the Budget Scrutiny session on 6 January 2022 for these proposals to be considered, and members had therefore been asked to submit any questions to this Committee to be raised during this item.

The CFO explained that the Service was anticipating an increase to its revenue budget of £1.144m for 2022/23. This funding would be to cover the costs as set out in the report.

Additionally, the one-year funding for investment training costs for learning and development was highlighted, as well as the one-year funding for an additional Young Person Support Officer post to help reduce the risk from fires being started deliberately by children.

It was understood that the increase to the budget was mainly directed towards training aspects in order to ensure that operational staff, in which just over half were in the development phase of their careers, were competent in their roles and working in a safe manner.

It was noted that in order to address the safety of the most vulnerable within the community, as recognised by the Community Risk Management Plan, funding would also be allocated in prevention roles delivering safe and well checks, road safety education and arson prevention activities.

Members were also advised that there were a number of capital bids by GFRS for 2022/23 totalling £2.819m, in order to replace and upgrade radios, replace PPE for specialist incidents, and replace operational vehicles.

Cllr Norman highlighted to the Committee how, since he had become Cabinet Member, he had continued to push for significant investment in fire, and that in the last three budgets he had successfully achieved significant increases to the GFRS budget. He committed to continue to push to ensure that the Service was well-resourced and able to deliver an effective service for residents.

One member welcomes the additional funding for the Service and stated their belief that the Service should be funded to cover all risks. They queried where the GFRS estimated income of £290k was coming from?

In response, Maria Boon, Finance and Compliance Manager, GFRS, explained that some of that income came from charges to South Western Ambulance Service for the work GFRS did for them, as well as from charges for the telecare service. A breakdown of this income would be provided to members.

A question was also asked as to why the funding for an additional Young Person Support Officer was only for one year? In response, it was explained that it was about proving the value of that role in making a tangible difference, reducing fire, and the number of children referred. The aim was to consider this over the period of 12 months. Feedback on the success of the role would be provided to the Committee after 6 months.

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Further information on the Fire PFI Reserve and Fire Joint Training Centre Reserve was requested and it was queried why these couldn't be dipped into? In response, Paul Blacker, Finance Director, GCC, provided an explanation of these funds and explained that the advice was not to take from these funds. Information on the cost of the PFI buildings in the Service would be provided following the meeting.

One member praised Cllr Norman for the work he had done to achieve additional funding for GFRS.

The Committee noted the proposed GFRS Budget for 2022/23.

29. GFRS STATEMENT OF ASSURANCE 2020/21

Mark Preece provided the Committee with an overview of the GFRS Statement of Assurance 2020-21.

Members were advised that this statement was produced to demonstrate to Gloucestershire communities how GFRS had progressed in the last 12 months towards delivering its mission of working together to provide the highest standard of community safety and emergency response services to the communities of Gloucestershire. The statement provided information covering governance, financial and operational matters, as well as detail about the GFRS workforce.

One member queried the situation regarding the number of on-call firefighters. In response, it was explained that there was a 25-30 percent turnover of on-call staff as many of them had jobs and other commitments outside of the Service which could change and contribute to this high turnover. Recruitment of on-call staff was continuous.

There was also a query regarding mutual aid agreements. In response, Clive Webber, Head of Business Planning and Performance, GFRS, informed members that these agreements were reviewed annually, that there could be differences between agreements depending on the capacity and resources of each service, and that Avon was used as the back up control room for GFRS. It was requested that a short briefing note be circulated to Committee members on these mutual aid agreements.

30. HMICFRS INSPECTION UPDATE FOR GFRS AND STATE OF FIRE REPORT 2021

Mark Preece provided the Committee with an update on the HMICFRS inspection of GFRS which had concluded in November 2021 after 8 weeks of inspection.

Members were informed that initial feedback was given to CFO Mark Preece, the Principal Officer team and Cllr Dave Norman in the form of a hot debrief on 1 December 2021, and it was anticipated that the full report would be published in June 2022.

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The CFO also introduced the State of Fire and Rescue Report 2021 to the Committee, which was produced by the Chief Inspector of HMICFRS and provided an overview of all fire services in England.

There was a question as to how likely it would be for GFRS to receive an inspection report from HMICFRS recognising that considerable progress had been made? In response, Cllr Norman explained that he was unable to comment on the report currently as it was under embargo to allow for the moderation of all inspection reports to ensure fairness and accuracy, however as soon as the report was released, this Committee would be the first to see it and would be given the opportunity to challenge the CFO and himself.

There was a further question as to when the White Paper on Fire Reform would likely be published? In response it was acknowledged that the date for its release had still not been determined.

31. WORK PLAN 2021/22

At its next meeting on 4 March 2022, the Committee would consider:

- An update on the CRMP
- GFRS collaboration with SWAST, including a written report from GFRS highlighting the impact of this work on the service, including the positives and negatives of this collaboration.

The following items were added to the work plan for future consideration by the Committee:

- Proposals for the shared use of Newent and Dursley Community Fire Stations
- Update on progress with GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary/PCC collaboration (written report to focus on the three themes identified: the Shared Estate, Road Safety, and Community Safety).
- Feedback on the success/ value of the Young Person Support Officer role (after 6 months in post).

32. FUTURE MEETINGS

The dates of future meetings were noted.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.50 am