

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 2 September 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT

Cllr Bernard Fisher	Cllr Wendy Thomas
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair)	Cllr Brian Tipper
Cllr Mark Mackenzie- Charrington	Cllr Pam Tracey MBE
Cllr Vernon Smith	

Substitutes:

Apologies:

In Attendance: Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer (GFRS)
Cllr Dave Norman, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries (GCC)
Clive Webber, Head of Business Planning and Performance (GFRS)
Sophie Benfield, Democratic Services Adviser (GCC)

55. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

56. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 27 May and 21 June 2022 were approved.

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

58. HMICFRS INSPECTION FEEDBACK

Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer (CFO), presented the report on feedback from the HMICFRS inspection, which took place in September and October 2021.

Members understood that the inspection was focused on three questions: how effective was the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from the risk of fire and other risks; how efficient was the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from the risk of fire and other risks; and how well did the fire and rescue service look after its people?

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

Members were reminded that Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) had been notified in January 2022 of two Causes of Concern identified during the inspection. These related to GFRS having not done enough since the last inspection to embed its values and associated behaviours, and promote a positive workplace culture; and GFRS having not done enough since the last inspection to improve understanding of the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and to remove barriers to establishing EDI in the service.

Members were informed that since receiving the notification, GFRS had worked collaboratively with Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) to develop an Improvement Plan, which was signed off by HMICFRS on 11 March 2022.

Members noted that GCC had committed a further £2million of funding to GFRS, which would be used to increase capacity by funding 28 new permanent posts.

Mark Preece informed the Committee that GFRS had been placed into an enhanced monitoring process in May 2022, which would provide additional scrutiny and support, and that on 27 July 2022, HMICFRS published its final report on GFRS.

Members understood that in terms of effectiveness, GFRS had been graded requires improvement. In terms of efficiency, GFRS had been graded requires improvement. In terms of people, GFRS had been graded inadequate.

The CFO expressed disappointment that the grading for GFRS had deteriorated since the last inspection. He explained that in response to the feedback from HMICFRS, GFRS had worked collaboratively to produce a detailed improvement plan to address the issues which had been raised, and which would be presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 21 September 2022 for approval.

Members were also informed that the Community Safety Improvement Board had been re-established, which would be chaired by the GCC Deputy Chief Executive, to monitor progress against the Improvement Plan. Additionally, GFRS had engaged with an external provider which specialised in public sector cultural intelligence and change, as well as with the Principal Officer Team at West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, which had been through a similar improvement journey.

Members noted that HMICFRS would be revisiting GFRS in autumn 2022 to review progress against the Improvement Plan for the two Causes of Concern.

The Committee discussed the feedback on the HMICFRS inspection and asked questions of the CFO for clarification, considering each of the three areas of effectiveness, efficiency and people in turn.

Focusing initially on effectiveness, one member sought clarification on what was meant by the enhanced monitoring process. They also asked the Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries for their thoughts as to whether the HMICFRS report fairly reflected the inspection.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

In response, the Cabinet Member explained that it was difficult to challenge HMICFRS and therefore they had to accept what had been written and move forward with it. He added that should GFRS receive an inspection report going forward that he and the CFO felt was not balanced, he would have to consider challenging HMICFRS. However, currently, GFRS needed to accept the inspection result and make positive steps to address the issues raised so that when the Service was re-inspected in 2023, progress could be clearly identified.

The CFO explained for context that since the inspection in 2019, GFRS has been dealing with 120 audit recommendations which had affected the capacity of officers. The Service had also had to work through a challenging pandemic, which had resulted in the Service being unable to address some of the previous recommendations from HMICFRS.

In response to a query, it was understood that the Improvement Board would take place every 6 weeks and the meetings would be hybrid.

One member expressed the view that the service provided to local communities by GFRS, in the practical sense, was exemplary. They queried whether the criticism by HMICFRS was of the management of GFRS rather than of the service provided.

In response, the CFO explained that broadly the issues lay with implementing systems and processes, and with the culture and behaviour of individuals within the Service.

One member expressed the view that GFRS had not responded quickly and effectively enough to the previous inspection report. They added that the feedback relating to the culture of the Service was worrying, and queried the timescale for addressing the issues.

The CFO agreed that having the right culture within the Service was paramount. He also recognised the importance of monitoring progress against the Improvement Plan.

One member asked about staff recruitment to address the issues. In response, the CFO explained that all areas of GFRS business would be increasing in capacity and that back office functions would be strengthened. Additionally, an EDI Manager post had been established to provide challenge and perspective.

Several members commented that the Committee should have received official notification that the inspection report had been published.

One member asked about the concern raised in the report about home safety checks. The CFO responded that he felt the report was conflicted in terms of the performance relating to home safety visits, as the report recognised that GFRS was identifying the most vulnerable when carrying out their safe and well checks.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

One member asked whether the Service had engaged with staff on culture. It was explained, in response, that GFRS had engaged with focus groups and representative bodies on the issue.

The CFO, following a question about implementing the recommendations from the Grenfell inquiry, explained that GFRS has completed the required actions, including inspecting buildings and providing training to staff.

The Committee turned its focus to discuss the HMICFRS feedback relating to efficiency.

In response to a query, it was understood that the Improvement Plan encompassed actions to address feedback from both the 2019 and 2021 inspections.

One member queried why this scrutiny committee was not consulted with during the inspection, and whether HMICFRS would engage with members during their re-visit.

Clarification was sought regarding the comment in the report that GFRS's service budget and staffing plans were not clearly aligned to its policies and priorities.

The CFO explained that the fire cover review would enable the Service to develop its strategies and to ensure it was providing the right resources in the right places.

In response to a query relating to GFRS's ICT plan, the CFO explained that whilst the strategy was not up to date, they had robust procedures to provide cyber security.

One member commented that consideration needed to be given to ensure that next year's GFRS budget was sufficient to address its priorities.

Another member queried whether GFRS had the capacity to cover new housing developments within the County.

The CFO informed the Committee that an external company was being commissioned to carry out the fire cover review, which would look at the current risk and projections.

Finally, the Committee considered the HMICFRS feedback relating to people.

One member asked for clarification regarding the comment in the report about a lack of senior leader visibility.

The Lead Cabinet Member explained that he had visited every fire station since becoming cabinet member in 2018, and that he was currently a third of the way through another full round of visits, during which he had the opportunity to speak to staff about the issues they were facing.

One member queried whether staff would be willing to open up to a politician.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

In response, the Cabinet Member countered that staff recognised his past experience working within the Service, and that therefore they were open with him. Staff were also aware that he would pass on any concerns where appropriate to the CFO and senior leadership team.

The CFO added that a focus group had been established for staff to provide honest feedback, and that senior leaders tried to appear approachable. However, it would take time to build that level of trust with staff.

Clarification was sought regarding the criticism on diversity within the inspection report, given that GFRS had recruited female firefighters above the average proportion for England.

The CFO recognised the progress made by GFRS to recruit female firefighters, adding that he felt the report had not given enough recognition to the attempts to recruit from ethnic minority backgrounds. However, he also acknowledged that more needed to be done to recruit and develop staff within this area.

The Committee requested to receive a briefing note or a copy of the minutes (whichever was the most appropriate) for every two meetings of the Improvement Board.

The Committee also requested to invite the Chair of the Improvement Board to attend a meeting of the Committee to present on progress against the Improvement Plan.

It was suggested that an item be included in the Committee work plan for members to receive feedback on the HMICFRS re-visit which would be taking place in autumn 2022. The Chair of the Committee also queried whether they could be included as part of the informal feedback session on the HMICFRS re-visit.

A copy of the Improvement Plan would be circulated with the Committee following its approval by Cabinet.

59. RESILIENCE TO WILDFIRES IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Mark Preece presented the report which detailed GFRS preparations to deal with the potential increase in heatwaves and wildfires in Gloucestershire in the future.

Members noted the definition of a wildfire, and that wildfires tended to coincide with extended periods of dry, warm weather. The risk could be exacerbated by rainfall ahead of a dry period which increased vegetation growth and therefore fire spread.

It was understood that within Gloucestershire, the most significant area at risk of wildfire was the Forest of Dean, which contained one of the few surviving ancient woodlands in England.

Members were informed that a comprehensive tactical plan had been developed to respond to wildfires in this area, with resources including four fire stations, a number of appliances and 4x4s. Additionally, high volume pumping equipment could be mobilised from across the service; GFRS could access Gloucestershire Constabulary's drone; and a number of officers had attended a wildfire awareness course in November 2021.

Members noted that prevention activity included promoting messages about the risks of wildfires amongst local communities.

One member queried whether aircraft could be mobilised to help tackle a wildfire if required. In response, the CFO explained that GFRS was part of national assistance arrangements with its neighbours to provide support in the case of an incident, however he was unaware of an incident on the UK mainland having ever required the use of an aircraft. He explained that high volume pumping was effective over several miles and allowed for water to be continually pumped, unlike aircraft which would need to refuel and reload.

One member queried where the water to put wildfires out came from and about resources where ponds had dried up. The CFO responded that water could be taken from fire hydrants connected to the mains water supply. With regards to ponds, where asked, the Service had in the past used jets to oxygenate ponds.

One member asked whether temporary trenches could be dug around the forest. In response it was explained that agencies, such as the Forestry Commission, were responsible for managing these areas and would take measures to prevent wildfires.

Another member asked for clarification on the penalties for those deliberately or accidentally starting wildfires. It was suggested, in response, that a briefing note be provided by the legal team on legislation relating to sanctions for causing wildfires.

60. GFRS PERFORMANCE DATA AND UPDATES

Members were presented with the Quarter 1 2022/23 performance data.

One member observed that 65% of targets were worse than target and hoped that the data would improve for the next Quarter.

In response, the CFO advised that the targets they had been set were incredibly ambitious and that the Service, when compared nationally, was already performing better than average. He suggested that the Head of Prevention be asked to attend a future meeting of the Committee to talk about safe and well visits and provide assurance.

61. WORK PLAN 2022/23

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

Members were reminded to attend the Fire Scrutiny Training Session on 5 October 2022. Members were also invited to speak to the LGA as part of its peer review of fire communications on 26 September.

The Committee noted that the Chair of the Improvement Board would be asked to attend a future meeting of the Committee, as would the Head of Prevention.

62. FUTURE MEETINGS

The dates of future meetings were noted.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 12.00 pm