

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 26 May 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT

Cllr Bernard Fisher
Cllr Tim Harman
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair)

Virtually in

Attendance: Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington

Substitutes: Cllr Wendy Thomas

Apologies: Cllr Brian Tipper and Cllr Pam Tracey MBE

Cabinet Member: Cllr Dave Norman

2. MINUTES

2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2023 were approved by the Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

3.1 No conflicts of interest were declared.

4. UPDATE ON PROGRESS WITH GFRS/CONSTABULARY/PCC/SWAST COLLABORATION

4.1 Mike Hammond, Head of Logistics and Resources at Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) presented this report. The Newent and Winchcombe stations were the focus of the report. The officer explained that progress there was proceeding very well. The intention was to take up occupancy of the stations by the end of May. There were a few technical issues, such as around door locks, but the officer expected those would be resolved soon. The officer also explained that work was ongoing to look at the possibility of moving GFRS teams from Waterwells HQ to GCC (Gloucestershire County Council) Quayside.

4.2 In response to a question about the reasoning behind the intended move away from Waterwells HQ, Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer, explained that the offices at Waterwells were not being sufficiently used since staff had adopted agile working. It was also explained that this move would help to maintain links with the Police through the teams remaining at Waterwells HQ, whilst helping to enhance ties with GCC.

4.3 In response to questions about costs and savings, the CFO explained that there were ongoing discussions with the Police about leasing or selling the unoccupied space at Waterwells. The CFO also explained that there would be a saving from moving to a smaller office, but he didn't have the exact figures to hand. The CFO agreed to bring that information to the Committee once he was able.

4.4 A member asked for clarification around timelines. The CFO explained that the intention was to move to GCC Quayside by September following a period of engagement with staff to explore how best to make the move. He explained that the decision to make the move had already been made by GCC's Chief Executive and the Leader of Gloucestershire County Council.

4.5 The officer was requested to bring a more detailed report on the proposition for the move to GCC Quayside to the July meeting.

ACTION – A detailed Waterwells HQ to GCC Quayside report to be brought to the FRSC July meeting.

4.6 The CFO gave further clarification that the option to move staff to GCC Quayside had already existed in staff contracts, and the period of engagement would be to seek staff views about how best to make the move, rather than whether to make the move.

5. REVIEW OF SEVERN PARK JOINT TRAINING CENTRE

5.1 Mark Preece, gave this report. The officer explained that the current training centre (Severn Park) was in Avonmouth and was run by Babcock international, financed through a private finance initiative (PFI), which was due to expire in 2028. The CFO explained that they were looking at options in advance of that contract ending, and re-evaluating if continuing the current arrangement was the best option for GFRS training. He had confirmed there would be no cost liability if they came out of the contract in 2028. The Severn Park training centre was out of the County and was a considerable effort to travel to for a significant number of staff. They were looking at multiple strategic training facilities to make training more accessible for staff.

5.2 A member asked whether the training facilities available at Severn Park, such as hot fire training, would be available elsewhere. The CFO explained that there were already some facilities within Gloucestershire that did have hot fire training capability. The plan was to evaluate what training capacity was available where and develop a mixed approach utilising several centres such that the right facilities would be within reasonable distance of as much of the staff as possible.

5.3 The CFO explained that the scoping of these different options would likely be complete in the next couple of months. He explained that capital investment would be required for any substantial work required to deliver sufficient training infrastructure and a decision on releasing that capital investment would be made at a Property Board meeting in July.

ACTION – Mark Preece to bring a report on proposed mixed training site plan to July or September meeting.

5.4 A member raised concern over the loss of inter-county collaboration in training if GFRS did move away from Severn Park. The CFO explained that the improved accessibility of training to all staff would mean better trained staff and that collaboration with neighbouring counties would still occur but at a range of centres.

6. KIT AND EQUIPMENT REPORT

6.1 Mike Hammond presented this report. He had brought some firefighting uniform for members to look at. He explained that there had been a 2-month delay in equipping staff with new light weight rescue jackets due to supply issues and industrial action abroad. Going forward, by 2028, GFRS were looking at working towards a total care package where all fire kit would be supplied, serviced, and maintained by an external organisation because holding the stock internally had caused difficulties for the service. The officer explained that there had been significant price increases across firefighting equipment and these costs could not be avoided as equipment had to be replaced regularly due to routine wear and tear. The officer was evaluating GFRS use of resources and was intending to produce a Logistics and Resources ten-year delivery plan by the end of the year. That report would give a much clearer sense of what finances were required. The officer highlighted that the quality of the equipment would always be their primary concern.

6.2 In response to a question about the tendering process for this equipment, the officer explained that GFRS used a mixture of tenders and frameworks depending on the cost of the equipment. The Kent framework was given as an example of a framework that they used.

6.3 In response to a question about bulk buying power to negotiate prices down, the officer explained that prices were kept lower through the frameworks they used as they were joined up across different fire and rescue services. He explained that sometimes there was only one supplier available because the equipment was so specialised, but prices were still regularly scrutinised and challenged.

6.4 A member asked whether the UK leaving the European Union's customs union had impacted costs and lead times. The officer explained there were a number of external difficulties that were affecting costs and lead times directly and indirectly and that was likely one of many causes.

6.5 A member raised concern over holding old equipment that wasn't up to date and asked whether the 5-year plan to implement the total care package could be sped up. The CFO explained that firefighter PPE (personal protective equipment) was of very good quality and that the move to a personal care package would maintain that quality whilst supplying for the range of sizes that GFRS required in a more cost-effective way. Mike Hammond added that regardless of what package GFRS was using, staff safety would not be compromised on.

6.6 A member asked whether GFRS had evaluated why a total care package was not chosen in 2017 when the decision to provide equipment in-house was made. The CFO explained that a report had been prepared at the time and that there had been significant changes since then, in particular in staff demographics and therefore required sizes.

6.7 In response to a question about equipment provided under a total care package, the CFO explained that changes in equipment requirements from extreme weather conditions occurring more frequently in Gloucestershire, such as wildfires, would be investigated over the coming months and years.

7. UPDATE ON COMMUNITY RISK MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

7.1 Mark Preece presented this report. He gave an overview of the different objectives of the four-year community risk management plan. The key objectives verbally highlighted by the CFO were people and social responsibility, prevention, protection, response, and digital and data technology. The CFO explained what was being done to drive favourable outcomes for each.

7.2 In response to a question about the new staff appraisal system, the CFO explained that it was difficult to ensure yearly appraisals for on-call staff who were only in for work for 3 hours a week. He also explained that on-call staff didn't have access to SAP to be able to confirm that they have had an appraisal. They were working to fix both those issues. The CFO also intended that appraisals moved away from being purely top-down and hoped they would be seen as an opportunity to feed back up to managers.

7.3 A member raised concern over fire safety in tall buildings, in particular Gloucester Royal Hospital. The CFO explained that there was an ongoing exercise that day to test fire safety at the hospital specifically and that there were regular evaluations of at-risk buildings.

7.4 In response to a question about staff turnover and retention with regard to the HMICFRS (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services) inspection. The CFO explained that it appeared that promotions and retirement were significant driving forces for staff turnover. He also explained that there had been periods of time where nationally fire services were not recruiting. This meant that a significant portion of staff were over the age of forty. On the other end, a significant number of staff had less than 2 years' experience in their current role so significant resources were being spent on training and development.

7.5 A member raised concern about the bureaucracy behind the report and the resources that were lost to preparing these reports. The CFO explained that yes it was using up resources but how GFRS was managed was very important and would contribute to a better and more efficient service in the future.

7.6 Cllr Dave Norman, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries, added that there was significant transformation ongoing in GFRS. There were big changes around Severn Park and Waterwells HQ and these changes were being made to fit with what would best serve GFRS today. These adaptation and improvements would help to bring GFRS back to the high standard it once was.

8. IMPROVEMENT BOARD PROGRESS UPDATE

8.1 Mark Preece highlighted that 51% of actions were complete, 24% were on track, 11% were behind schedule and 15% were overdue. He also highlighted that the Workplace Charter had been introduced since the last meeting.

9. HER MAJESTY'S INSPECTORATE SPOTLIGHT REPORT

9.1 Mark Preece presented the Spotlight report that had recently been released by HMICFRS. Thirty-five recommendations had been produced as part of the report. It was explained that since GFRS had already been very open with HMICFRS about disciplinary issues before the report. Since the report, a GAP analysis had been performed to see what had already been taken up as part of the improvement plan and which recommendations needed to be added to the improvement plan.

Eleven of the Spotlight report recommendations had already been implemented in Gloucestershire. Ten recommendations were under GFRS's control with four already in the HMICFRS action plan. The remaining six needed to be included in forward plans. Six recommendations would be worked on in collaboration with GCC, and 8 recommendations required no action from GFRS as changes were out of their control.

9.2 In response to a question about the recommendations that were out of GFRS's control, the CFO gave examples of some that were concerned with DBS (disclosure and barring service) checks which would require legislative change to fix. He also explained that the Police and Fire Minister had commented that the government's response to the Fire and Rescue Service White Paper 2022 would be ready before the summer recess.

ACTION – To bring an item to this Committee on the government's response to the Fire and Rescue Service White Paper 2022 once it was published.

9.3 A member raised concern about the wellbeing impacts that inspections can have, citing a head teacher's suicide following an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspection. The CFO explained that there was a very good occupational health provision available to support staff but that sometimes staff weren't aware it was available.

10. GFRS PERFORMANCE DATA AND UPDATES

10.1 Mark Preece gave a brief verbal update on the performance data. Safe and Well visits were still not being achieved at the desired rate, but visit rates were growing on the last quarter. Safe and well visits for the most vulnerable were being performed at a high rate. The officer highlighted a reduction in the number of days that people were waiting for a visit. It was explained that these delays could sometimes be affected by external factors. There had been a decrease in accidental dwellings fires and measures such as providing slow cookers and electric blankets were being implemented to improve fire safety at the home. The CFO also highlighted three fire fatalities in the previous quarter.

10.2 There was some discussion around an increase in the time taken to reach home fires. It appeared that this was a larger difficulty for on-call firefighters than full-time firefighters and this was largely because of the time taken for on-call staff to get from home to the fire station.

10.3 In response to a question about fire cover across the County, the CFO explained that a fire cover analysis was ongoing, and he was expecting results in the next 6-12 months which would inform whether changes would be needed to fire station locations. The hope was that this would help resolve the issue of turn out timeliness and hit the 9-minute turn out target.

10.4 A member raised concern around major developments obstructing fire emergency response. The CFO explained that typically GFRS had conversations with developers and rescue services were typically allowed to use roads that had been closed for building works. He also explained that new developments would be accounted for in the fire cover analysis.

10.5 In response to a question about sick leave, the CFO explained that due to the job's physical requirements, staff were more likely to get injured (with musculoskeletal injuries being a big factor) and that minor illnesses or injuries that staff in other departments could still go in to work with, would require sickness leave for a firefighter. He explained that they were starting absence

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

management meetings and training was being given to managers to better equip them to handle mental health and wellbeing issues for their staff.

11. WORK PLAN

11.1 A visit to Waterwells GFRS HQ was confirmed for the afternoon of 17th July 2023.

11.2 The below items were added to the work plan:

- Detailed report on the move of GFRS staff from Waterwells HQ for 14th July 2023.
- A report on the plan for future training provision without Severn Park for 14th July 2023 or 15th September 2023.
- A report on the Government's response to the HMICFRS Spotlight Report for 15th September if the report is ready in time.
- Fire Station Cover Analysis to be brought to the 17th November 2023 meeting.

ACTION – DSU to add these changes to the work plan

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.55