

# **FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 19 July 2024 commencing at 10.00 am at the Committee Room - Shire Hall, Gloucester.**

## **PRESENT**

Cllr Bernard Fisher	Cllr Steve Robinson
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair)	Cllr Brian Tipper
Cllr Mark Mackenzie- Charrington (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Kathy Williams
Cllr Alan Preest	

## **Substitutes:**

### **Cabinet**

**Members:** Cllr Dave Norman MBE, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries

## **Apologies:**

## **2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 May 2024 were approved as a correct record.

## **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **4. TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Committee noted the Terms of Reference.

## **5. BLUE LIGHT COLLABORATION**

5.1 Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer (CFO), introduced the item on blue light collaboration. He explained that the Emergency Service Collaboration Board, involving Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS), Gloucestershire Police, and South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWASFT), oversaw the collaboration of the three emergency services.

5.2 Nick Ashcroft, Area Manager for Business Planning and Transformation, GFRS, gave a presentation detailing blue light collaboration activities. The presentation was attached to the agenda for the meeting.

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- 5.3 Members were advised that collaboration was about aligning the values of the emergency services and working together to ensure efficiencies, increased productivity, and safer communities in Gloucestershire.
- 5.4 Members were informed that there were four areas of focus for tri-service collaboration. These were estates, communications, operational capabilities, and learning and development and health and wellbeing. Specific teams met to consider collaboration in these areas.
- 5.5 In terms of estates, it was understood that GFRS and Gloucestershire Constabulary (and SWASFT where possible) collaborated on the use of estates. It was noted that on-call fire stations at Newent and Winchcombe were used by the Police. Three further sites at Chipping Campden, Fairford and Wotton Under Edge had been identified as potential opportunities for further shared use of facilities, based on data collated by the Police.
- 5.6 The CFO recognised the concerns that had been raised previously relating to the blurring of lines between GFRS and the Police and the impact the shared use of facilities could have on GFRS's reputation. However, he highlighted the positive benefits of collaborating in this area for the Fire Service, including that the presence of the Police at fire stations acted as a deterrent for break-ins.
- 5.7 Members were advised that consideration was being given to the employment of tri-service safety officers to support these shared-use stations. These officers would have several roles across the emergency services, working to make communities safer. They had already been used in other areas, such as in Cornwall and in Hereford and Worcester.
- 5.8 Members were informed that, in terms of operational capabilities, collaboration related to the sharing of information and resources to improve service delivery across Gloucestershire. This included GFRS attending police daily management meetings, a memorandum of understanding for GFRS to use police drones, and quarterly operational and capabilities away days.
- 5.9 Attention was drawn to the data which determined the incidents GFRS had assisted the Police and SWASFT with between March 2023 and March 2024. Whilst collaboration was increasing, the importance of recognising each service's limitations in providing support was highlighted. The role of GFRS in taking the pressure off SWASFT in terms of helping to deal with call volumes was also highlighted.
- 5.10 Members were informed that all three emergency services had taken part in a school emergency preparedness event, following an incident at Tewkesbury School in July 2023, to raise awareness of the emergency response to a lockdown incident within an educational environment.
- 5.11 The Committee was advised that involving SWASFT in blue light collaboration remained a challenge, given that they were one of the busier services in the Tri-Service Agreement, and consideration was being given as to how to encourage

them to be more actively involved in collaboration. Next steps also included GFRS further assisting the Police with missing persons cases and anti-social behaviour hotspots.

- 5.12 Members were informed of collaboration activities relating to communication and were presented with staff comments highlighting the benefits of collaborative working.
- 5.13 It was confirmed, following a question from a member, that the Emergency Service Collaboration Board had been in existence for some time and that it met at least quarterly.
- 5.14 A member sought clarification as to what collaboration looked like on a day-to-day basis, whether it differed on a weekend, and what the threshold was for SWASFT to seek support from GFRS.
- 5.15 Jane Whichello, Head of Volunteering and Community Services at SWASFT, delivered a presentation to the Committee on SWASFT and GFRS collaboration activities.
- 5.16 Members were informed that there were two types of fire co-responders operating in Gloucestershire. The first covered retained firefighters operating from 10 co-responding stations in Gloucestershire. They would be required to respond to Category 1 calls in either a SWASFT or GFRS vehicle if SWASFT resources were not immediately available and they would be able to respond more quickly. The second type were cardiac care fire co-responders who were fulltime firefighters and responded to cardiac arrests in a fire appliance if they were not required at a fire incident.
- 5.17 It was noted that GFRS had attended incidents on behalf of SWASFT almost 600 times in the last 12 months, and that co-responders from Coleford, Tetbury and Lydney attended 60 percent of incidents.
- 5.18 In an update on what was going well with collaboration between SWASFT and GFRS, members were informed of the good working relationship SWASFT had with Mike Lovegrove at GFRS. It was noted that vehicles owned by SWASFT for co-responding were now being maintained by teams based at Staverton, rather than by clinical staff. Additionally, GFRS and SWASFT were working to understand modelling which looked at the impact of each station on Category 1 response times in order to maximise contribution.
- 5.19 Moving forwards, members were advised that a memorandum of understanding was being developed with all five fire and rescues services within the SWASFT region in order to achieve consistency in terms of the level of training, the types of incidents attended and the kit and equipment that was carried by co-responders.
- 5.20 Consideration was also being given to the use of the National Mobilisation App to improve the process for despatching co-responders.

- 5.21 A member highlighted their concern regarding the time it took for co-responders to be despatched to an incident where SWASFT did not have the resources to immediately attend, and sought clarification on the process. In response, Jane Whichello explained that as soon as a call was answered by the ambulance control centre, officers would be looking at the resources available to despatch from either SWASFT or the fire service.
- 5.22 A member queried why there were no co-responders operating from Chipping Campden fire station and asked what was being done to address this, as well as to address the problems with co-responding at Newent. In response, the CFO reminded members that firefighters volunteered as co-responders, and that he had no duty to direct them to take on this role. The need for clinical governance for co-responding was highlighted in order to ensure that the emergency medical care being provided by firefighters was of the appropriate standard. The CFO also explained that resources needed to be available to deal with any fire incidents as a priority over co-responding.
- 5.23 A member asked how firefighters were accepting this additional role, raising a concern that it was based on the good will of firefighters. In response, the CFO explained that co-responding was an emotive issue that was often raised by the fire trade unions. All firefighters put the community first, and some were prepared to put the fire unions' stance on co-responding to one side to volunteer. However, others felt that co-responding should be recognised in the role map of a firefighter, and that they should be paid for the role before undertaking it. Jane Whichello added that SWASFT did pay GFRS on a not-for-profit basis for the attendance of firefighters at incidents, and firefighters that volunteered also had the opportunity to develop the skills and experience that they could then apply in their day-to-day role.
- 5.24 A member commented on the value of firefighters co-responding in terms of helping to save lives. They expressed the view that generally co-responding benefitted GFRS as firefighters developed their emergency response skills, as long as it did not affect response times to fire incidents.
- 5.25 Cllr Dave Norman, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries, informed members that co-responding on a voluntary basis had existed for many years. He recognised the benefit of more firefighters volunteering, however reminded members that it would not be appropriate for the CFO to pressurise firefighters to undertake a role that they were not required to do. He added that on-call firefighters were reliant on their primary employers releasing them for co-responding.
- 5.26 A member suggested it would be of value for all emergency services to listen into an emergency call at the same time so that incidents were responded to quickly. In response, it was explained that control rooms worked together to ensure a quick and appropriate response to an incident.
- 5.27 A further member asked for clarification as to what constituted a co-responding team. It was noted that co-responders attended incidents either in pairs or

singularly if they were confident to do so, in either a SWASFT or GFRS vehicle that was based at the co-responding station.

5.28 The Committee thanked officers for their presentations.

## **6. COMMENTS, COMPLIMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND FOI REQUESTS**

6.1 Mark Preece presented the report which provided an overview of the comments, complaints, compliments, Freedom of Information Requests (FOIs) and Subject Access Requests (SARs) received by GFRS over the last 12 months.

6.2 It was noted that GFRS had received 23 compliments regarding incidents, 13 comments, and two complaints. The complaints related to vehicles or individuals responding to fires.

6.3 It was noted that if a comment or complaint related to someone's driving, this would be investigated.

6.4 FOIs tended to relate to operational incidents or procurement. SARs tended to relate to individuals requesting to know what information was held about them.

6.5 A member asked whether complaints and compliments were shared with firefighters. It was advised, in response, that generally these were shared with individuals, and any compliments or thanks were uploaded onto the staffnet pages.

6.6 The member highlighted the importance of sharing compliments for workforce morale.

6.7 Phil Dennis, Watch Manager, GFRS, shared an example of a compliment that had recently been received.

## **7. GFRS HR PROCESSES**

7.1 Mark Preece introduced and Matt Armstrong, Area Manager, GFRS, presented the report which provided an overview of GFRS HR processes, including promotions, disciplines and grievances. The report was attached to the agenda for the meeting.

7.2 A member asked for clarification regarding retirement age. In response, it was explained that there were two levels of retirement age: after 30 years and at age 55 years up to 60 years under the new pension scheme.

7.3 A question was asked regarding the number of staff currently employed by GFRS. It was noted that there were approximately 180 whole time firefighters and 240 on-call staff. Including support staff, there was currently approximately 460 staff employed by the Service.

7.4 A member queried what was being done to actively recruit young people to the Service. In response it was explained that firefighters needed to be at least 18

years old, and that in the past there had been a cadet programme. Reimplementation of that scheme was being considered.

- 7.5 In response to a further question relating to apprenticeships, it was explained that a number of apprenticeships were available, including a managerial apprenticeship and a firefighter apprenticeship.
- 7.6 A member asked whether it was more difficult to recruit on-call firefighters in rural areas. It was recognised that on call firefighters were primarily employed elsewhere, and that given most people worked away from where they lived, this could limit their ability to serve as a retained firefighter. Consideration was being given as to whether retained firefighters could potentially work from fire stations in order to address this. It was noted that whilst recruitment was a growing challenge, compared to other services, GFRS on-call availability was around 77-80 percent.
- 7.7 There was a question regarding the reasons for firefighter sickness absence. It was noted, in response, that stress and musculoskeletal injuries accounted for the majority of operational staff sickness leave. A programme was in place to monitor sickness absence and address any learning.

## **8. UPDATE ON GFRS CORPORATE STRATEGY**

- 8.1 Mark Preece presented the update report on the GFRS Corporate Strategy. The report was attached to the agenda for the meeting.
- 8.2 A member requested an update on the rollout of the new uniform. It was explained that there had been a delay due to some staff incorrectly measuring their size for the uniform. It was expected that the launch for the new uniform would be 29 July 2024.
- 8.3 A member suggested that GFRS could increase its engagement with the military community. The CFO confirmed that there were GFRS staff members that were part of the military covenant. Consideration would be given as to how to engage with the community regarding recruitment.

### **ACTION – Mark Preece**

- 8.4 A member queried whether capital investment into a training facility for GFRS could be justified, given the size of the Service. In response, the CFO advised that the training facility would provide staff with the equipment and infrastructure to frequently and effectively train in realistic scenarios. It was understood that external providers would always be required for some types of specialist training, such as water, however this facility was crucial for basic firefighter training in order for the Service to be fit for purpose.
- 8.5 A member asked whether a conversation could be had with other services, such as the military, on a shared facility. The CFO explained that they would work with

partners however it was key for GFRS to have this facility for constant use and to provide resilience.

- 8.6 Another member expressed the view that it would be more cost effective to have a shared training facility with neighbouring fire services. They asked whether a conversation had been had relating to this. In response, the CFO determined that money was currently being spent on Severn Park, and that would be reinvested into a facility that could be used constantly and accessed more easily. In the long term, it was therefore more cost effective for GFRS to have its own facility than to continue with current arrangements. In terms of involving other fire services, the CFO explained that plans were not for a large training facility but for a facility providing realistic scenarios for fire training.
- 8.7 A further member commented on the value of shared facilities, and suggested that sharing the use of any GFRS facility be considered, similar to how the Police share the use of their training centre at Berkeley. The CFO advised that GFRS did currently make use of the facilities at Berkeley but explained that the GFRS facility would be designed to solely provide training for firefighters.

## **9. GFRS PERFORMANCE DATA AND UPDATES**

- 9.1 Mark Preece introduced the Quarter 4 2023/24 performance data for GFRS.
- 9.2 A member asked how GFRS would attract fire safety officers. In response, the CFO explained that the Service was constantly actively recruiting in this area. He advised that they had just recruited to ensure capacity in the team, however the focus was now on developing competency. It was acknowledged that the Service could not compete with the private sector in terms of pay, however the importance of training and treating staff well was also important in recruiting and retaining staff. It was suggested that an update be provided on developments in this area at a future meeting.

### **ACTION – Mark Preece/ Laura Powick**

- 9.3 It was understood, in response to a further query, that retired staff were unable to earn more when retired than they would have done if in employment by the Service, which was why many undertook consultancy roles in the private sector following retirement.
- 9.4 A member suggested that it would be helpful to include the figures for response times for on-call and whole-time stations separately in the performance data. The CFO would consider whether this was possible.

### **ACTION – Mark Preece**

## **10. IMPROVEMENT BOARD PROGRESS UPDATE**

- 10.1 Mark Preece gave a presentation on the analysis of the GFRS HMICFRS inspection report. The presentation was attached to the agenda for the meeting.

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- 10.2 The annual State of Fire and Rescue report, produced by HMICFRS, and recently published, would be circulated with Committee members.

**ACTION – Mark Preece**

- 10.3 A member asked whether HMICFRS was happy with the timescales for the action plan to address the concerns raised in its inspection report. In response, the CFO emphasised that the bar for the sector had raised and that public sector resources were limited. However, he hoped that they would continue to see investment in order to support GFRS's improvement journey. He confirmed that HMICFRS had accepted the improvement plan. It was hoped that in the next 12 months the Service would move from the engage phase to working towards 'good'.
- 10.4 It was hoped that an interim inspection focused on the areas identified as causes for concern would take place in Spring 2025. It was anticipated that the next full inspection would take place between 2025 and 2027. It was noted that the CFO had been lobbying for GFRS to have their inspection towards the end of this period to enable progress to be embedded and evidenced.
- 10.5 A member highlighted the importance of continually improving. The CFO agreed that standards should continuously improve but highlighted the importance of recognising the work of staff and the progress that had been made so far.

**11. WORK PLAN**

The Committee's Work Plan would be updated as follows:

- An overview item on Trading Standards to be added to the agenda for the September 2024 meeting.
- An overview item on Coroners to be added to the agenda for the December 2024 meeting.
- An update on the GFRS training facility to be provided at a future meeting.

**12. FUTURE MEETINGS**

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings.

**CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 12.20 pm