

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 16 July 2021 commencing at 2.00 pm at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT

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

Substitutes:

Apologies: Cllr Bernard Fisher

In Attendance: Cllr David Norman, Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries
Mark Preece, Interim Chief Fire Officer, GFRS
Clive Webber, Head of Business Planning and Performance, GFRS

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Bernie Fisher.

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the newly established Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee. Members introduced themselves and stated their prior level of knowledge on the Committee's remit.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chair advised members of the Committee's terms of reference.

Following a query as to whether education fell within the Committee's remit, members were informed that it did, coming under the umbrella term of 'prevention'.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

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

Mark Preece, Interim Chief Fire Officer, provided the Committee with a presentation on the national picture for fire and rescue services. The presentation was published alongside the agenda papers for the meeting.

An overview of the national governance arrangements for fire and rescue services was provided, along with a brief background to the Fire Reform programme which was introduced in May 2016. It was understood that the independent Fire Standards Board was established as part of this reform to ensure professional standards were coordinated nationally.

It was noted that the State of Fire Report was published in 2019, introducing four recommendations which were set out in detail to the Committee.

The Committee was advised that the consultative White Paper on fire services reform, which would be consulting on whether to mandate the transfer of fire and rescue functions to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner model across England where boundaries were coterminous; on how to address coterminosity challenges, including in the South West; and on legislating to create operational independence for Chief Fire Officers, would likely be released in autumn 2021, although no date had been indicated.

Members considered the potential reasons as to why there had been a delay to the consultative White Paper's release. One member commented that the view of the LGA had been that any move to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner model should be done only by the will of the local people and not mandated from above.

One member queried how members could be involved in the consultation process? It was understood that it would be an extensive consultation process and members would have the opportunity to be involved.

One member asked how often fire and rescue services were inspected and by whom? In response, they were advised that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) carried out full inspections every 12 to 18 months. These inspections were carried out over a 6 week period, however it was in reality a continual process.

5. GLOUCESTERSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Mark Preece continued with his presentation to provide members with an overview of the local fire and rescue service picture.

Members were reminded of the governance arrangements for Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) and were shown a map highlighting the locations of the County's 21 fire stations. Additionally, the mission and strategic aims of GFRS; an overview of the senior leadership team at GFRS; the service values of GFRS; and the financial context for the service were explained to the Committee.

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Members were provided with the workforce data for GFRS, which had been broken down by gender and ethnicity. It was noted that as of April 2019, there were 65 female firefighters (whole-time and on-call) and 10 from minority ethnic backgrounds. It was understood that GFRS was continuing to work to improve this through positive action campaigns.

Data was provided to the Committee regarding the activity of GFRS between April 2020 and March 2021, which included attending 5100 incidents in total and completing 2144 Safe and Well visits. It was understood that the number of these visits was reduced during this time due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

One member asked whether businesses also received Safe and Well visits? It was understood that businesses are categorised between low and high risk and that this determined how often they might be inspected. For example, Gloucestershire Royal Hospital might be inspected once or twice a year, whereas a local newsagent might only receive a visit once every 10 years.

The results of the HMICFRS Inspection 2018/19 were discussed with the Committee, in particular that two causes of concern had been identified relating to its fire safety strategy and the values and structure of the service. Work to address these was ongoing, however 11 new members of staff had been recruited to address concerns with fire safety, and new values had been introduced.

GFRS was also subject to a number of internal audits which resulted in 118 audit recommendations. These had now been actioned, subject to sign off.

Members noted that the second HMICFRS Cause of Concern visit in February 2021 had highlighted the positive progress and improvements that had been made, although acknowledged that more work needed to be done. It was explained that improvement was a journey and that it could take another 3 to 5 years before the service really made headway.

The Committee was provided with an overview of the response of GFRS to the Covid-19 pandemic, which had included ambulance driving; delivering PPE and medical samples; and delivering infection control and prevention training packages to care home staff.

One member asked for clarification as to how the HMICFRS inspection is graded. In response to a further query on receiving the results of the next inspection in September this year, it was explained that the full report would not be released until spring 2022.

The Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries, Cllr Dave Norman, confirmed, in response to a query, that additional money from the Council budget had been allocated to GFRS for the last two years in order to increase recruitment. They also advised that the next HMICFRS inspection may still be tainted as a result of GFRS having to deal with two challenges: firstly, the challenging first HMICFRS inspection report, and secondly the historical internal audit issues.

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One member queried what had brought on the decline of the service? In response, it was understood that a number of issues had contributed including previous efficiency savings and management style and culture, as well as changes in legislation.

Members discussed the limited scrutiny GFRS had received from scrutiny committees previously, and welcomed the opportunity to solely focus on properly scrutinising the fire and rescue service through this newly established committee.

Mark Preece continued his presentation to discuss details regarding the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) and the Improvement Strategy. It was understood that the CRMP was currently being worked on and was made up of 8 objectives. It was noted that the CRMP would be presented at this Committee before it is considered by Cabinet.

In response to a member query, it was explained that those identified as vulnerable were able to receive alarm fitting from GFRS.

There was a further member query as to what GFRS was doing to meet its objective for recruiting more female and minority ethnic fire fighters? In response it was understood that GFRS was hosting open evenings and taster days, however it had to overcome a damaged reputation, and address the lack of understanding as to how racism affects individuals communities amongst the service. Cllr Norman explained that recruitment issues were affecting fire and rescue services across the Country and that we should be going into communities to engage rather than expecting them to come to us.

The Committee noted that a members awareness session was being organised to take place in the autumn at the SkillZone.

6. WORK PLAN

The Committee agreed to add the following items to its work plan:

- Community Risk Management Plan (September meeting);
- Recruitment issues within the Fire Service, particularly relating to BAME (November meeting);
- Overview of the financial health of GFRS, including any pressures (November meeting);
- Consultative White Paper on fire services reform (additional meeting date to be arranged); and
- HMICFRS inspection feedback (additional meeting date to be arranged with the item to be exempt).

It was agreed that a report on performance data and other updates would be brought to each Committee meeting for information.

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7. FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the future meeting dates.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 3.45 pm

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