

# **FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 21 June 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.**

## **PRESENT**

Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair) Cllr Brian Tipper  
Cllr Wendy Thomas

## **Substitutes:**

**Apologies:** Cllr Bernard Fisher, Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington, Cllr Vernon Smith and Cllr Pam Tracey MBE

**In Attendance:** Cllr Dave Norman, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries, GCC  
Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer, GFRS  
Stephen Bace, Lead Democratic Services Adviser, GCC

## **Attendance via Video**

**Conference:** Laura Powick, Democratic Services Adviser, GCC

## **50. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Cllrs Mark Mackenzie-Charrington, Bernie Fisher, Vernon Smith and Pam Tracey.

## **51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

## **52. FIRE REFORM WHITE PAPER - REFORMING OUR FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer (CFO), delivered a presentation on the 'Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service' white paper and public consultation. The presentation would be circulated to Committee members following the meeting.

It was understood that the white paper reflected the recommendations made by the outgoing HMICFRS Chief Inspector in the State of Fire and Rescue annual report, as well as those raised by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and Local Government Association (LGA). The white paper had been commissioned by the Home Secretary and published on 18 May 2022. A 10 week public consultation period would end late July 2022.

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Members were advised that the paper addressed three principal areas for reform: people, professionalism and governance; and of the 48 proposals, 8 related to people, 20 to professionalism and 20 to governance.

The white paper addressed the role of fire and rescue services (FRS) and recognised that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the response of FRS was affected by a lack of flexible and modern working practices. The paper also recognised that national negotiation processes were a barrier to rapid and flexible responses, and that chief fire officers should be empowered to make decisions on the basis of risk and resources.

It was noted, following a query, that the paper was proposing an independent review of the pay negotiation process, which would include looking at pay review bodies for other sectors.

One member raised a concern about different pay and conditions within the devolved nations of the UK. In response, it was understood that all FRS based their procedures on national operational guidance, and therefore there was consistency with national operations, however the concern raised regarding pay in different areas of the UK was acknowledged.

One member suggested that there should be a national pay rate with regional adjustments to address the cost of living.

Another member raised a concern about the marginalisation of trade unions, and welcomed thoughts as to how chief fire officers could have more operational independence alongside the role of trade unions. In response, the CFO advised that increased decision making powers for chief fire officers would not prevent national negotiations on pay.

One member suggested the paper alluded to increased control by central government and overriding local democracy. In answer, it was explained that the independent reform of the pay and conditions process was fundamental.

The member queried whether this review could be implemented without legislation. The CFO replied that the white paper drew together a range of issues into one report, some of which would require legislation to resolve, whilst others, such as the independent pay review, would not.

The CFO continued to explain the proposals for recruitment, talent management and leadership. It was noted that more needed to be done to support future leaders and diversity in senior positions, as, for example, there were currently only three female chief fire officers across the country. There was a proposal to reintroduce consistent entry requirements, and the CFO was supportive of the proposal to reintroduce consistently applied development and progression which would develop the management and leadership of staff for the future. The white paper also proposed high potential leadership schemes.

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One member was surprised that the white paper did not address the impact of pensions on retaining senior leaders within the sector. It was proposed that a comment be included in the CFO's feedback to the consultation on addressing the issue.

Clarification was sought on the impact of the older pension scheme. In response it was understood that once the pension reached a certain level, the taxation incurred was a significant deterrent for an individual staying in role. It was noted that the situation would resolve itself over time as those on the newer pension scheme overtook those on the older scheme.

Mark Preece continued to explain the proposals relating to data and research, which included the establishment of a central fire and rescue research capability.

One member repeated that it did not require legislation to increase data capability within the sector. In response, it was explained that the data captured by FRS would be driven by the Home Office, would be mandated and would be shared with Local Resilience Forums.

The Committee was informed about the proposals for codes and ethics in the white paper, which included potentially introducing a fire and rescue oath.

One member commented that GFRS endorsed Gloucestershire County Council's (GCC) code of ethics and expressed the view that the introduction of a national oath for the sector was an unnecessary control mechanism by central government. The CFO replied that the white paper was trying to modernise the sector by having the right culture, however that would not mean GFRS would step away from GCC's values.

The CFO explained the white paper's ambition to create a College of Fire and Rescue to provide a permanent independent body of expertise, and to drive forward professionalism within the sector.

The Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries highlighted the importance of creating an independent body at arm's length from the Government to drive forward the professionalism of the sector, to enable FRS to meet the needs of communities rather than those of the Government.

One member countered that the college could in fact be seen as an arm of the Government.

The CFO acknowledged that the College represented both opportunities and challenges. For example, he queried where the staff to lead the College would come from, particularly as FRS would be reluctant to release their staff as they needed to improve their own services before they could help others.

Mark Preece continued to explain the proposals relating to governance, with the Government's preferred governance model being one that met certain criteria: a single, elected individual accountable for the service; clear demarcation between

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the political and strategic oversight by this individual and the operational independent running of the service by the CFO; the individual with oversight had control of necessary funding and estates; and decision-making was transparent and linked to local public priorities. It was understood that there was an option to retain fire services within county councils, under a clear accountable leader, such as a designated cabinet member.

One member commented that the argument for a single individual being accountable for a fire service was not convincing, and stated that the Council needed to determine that it would continue with its current governance approach in its response to the consultation.

There was a discussion around fire budgets and funding. The Cabinet Member expressed their concern about proposals for ring-fencing operational fire budgets where a FRS remained part of a county council.

Members were advised that under proposals for governance, each Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) could determine whether they wanted responsibility for fire. The Cabinet Member assured members that as far as they were aware, the PCC for Gloucestershire had no interest in taking over GFRS, preferring a collaborative approach between services.

The Cabinet Member continued to express the view that, whilst accepting some central oversight, the more decisions were determined locally, the better for the community.

The CFO continued with his presentation to discuss the white paper proposals for operational independence and corporate sole, whereby the Home Office should take steps to give chief fire officers operational independence providing clear guidance on the demarcation between governance and operational decision making.

The CFO commented on the important relationship between himself and elected members.

One member sought clarification on the numbers of fire services under control of PCCs, and expressed concern over the mixed models of governance.

The CFO clarified that the Government was proposing a clearly identified political leader which could be held accountable for FRS. He assured the member that this Committee's feedback would be incorporated into his consultation response, which would be shared with the lead Cabinet Member and the Leader of the Council before submission.

The member asked the CFO for his view of the current governance arrangements and asked whether anything was preventing him operating a good service for the public.

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In response, Mark Preece commented on the effective relationship with the police; the benefits of the GCC governance arrangements in terms of reaching communities, particularly the most vulnerable; the positive and accountable relationship with the Leader of the Council and the Lead Cabinet Member; and the support provided by GCC for GFRS's improvement journey. He added that they were also looking to provide training for this Committee to support scrutiny of the service.

In response to a further question, the CFO explained that in terms of the governance proposals set out in the white paper, GFRS was already set up in one of the preferred governance model options.

The Chair summed up the discussions, noting the general agreement on the way forward.

It was requested that the draft consultation response be shared with the Committee before its submission.

It was also suggested that members submit any comments they want included in the response to the Chair of the Committee by 15 July 2022.

#### **53. WORK PLAN 2022**

It was noted that the Committee meeting scheduled for the 15 July had been cancelled and that the HMICFRS Inspection Report would now be considered at the meeting in September.

#### **54. FUTURE MEETINGS**

The dates of future meetings were noted.

### **CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 11.30 am

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