

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 15 September 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT

Cllr Tim Harman
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair)
Cllr Steve Robinson

Cllr Brian Tipper
Cllr Pam Tracey MBE

Substitutes: Cllr Ben Evans for Cllr Bernard Fisher

Cabinet member: Cllr David Norman (Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Library)

Apologies: Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington, Cllr Bernard Fisher

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

2.1 The Committee accepted the minutes as an accurate reflection of the meeting held on the 14th July 2023 and the Chair signed them.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4. SKILLZONE DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDING REPORT

4.1 Mark Preece, Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service Chief Fire Officer, gave an overview of the services that SkillZONE provides. He explained that SkillZONE were alert to pressing local challenges that were currently centred around trespassing and water safety. He also explained that funding for growth was secured through partnerships with agencies and organisations like the Canals and Rivers Trust, the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution), Great Western Railway, Stagecoach, Gloucestershire Constabulary and Mid Counties Co-op. The CFO explained funding of £30,000 was being sought to develop an abandoned warehouse experience and to develop parks scenarios. These would teach visitors about the dangers of trespassing and youth violence respectively. Funding had already been secured from the Canals and Rivers Trust to develop a water safety scenario. £5,000 had also been secured from Barriers to Mobility to support special education needs. The CFO also highlighted the high levels of satisfaction and learning that visitors to SkillZONE had reported.

4.2 The CFO took on feedback from a member that the report had too much jargon and lacked clarity.

4.3 In response to a question about the security of SkillZONE's funding, it was explained that funding was typically secured through charities and partners and that funding was also secured through the County Council. The CFO cited £40,000 in funding that Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) had provided to support schools with transport to SkillZONE.

4.4 Members expressed their support for the work that SkillZONE did.

4.5 A member specifically congratulated SkillZONE for providing training around cold water swimming and shock, referencing incidents that had occurred when members of the public had been wild swimming.

4.6 A member asked whether there was space for the new abandoned warehouse experience and asked what would happen if the bid for the funding was unsuccessful. The CFO explained that the development of future scenarios would fit in SkillZONE's current footprint. He explained that the bid was being made to the officer for the Police and Crime Commissioner. If the bid was unsuccessful, it was explained that the team were very experienced with submitting such bids, but if they were unsuccessful they would seek funding through alternative partners.

4.7 Members asked for feedback on the success of the bid to come back to the Committee

ACTION – Mark Preece to feedback on the outcomes of the bid to a future Committee meeting.

4.8 Members expressed a willingness to support GFRS with finding alternative routes of funding should the bid be unsuccessful.

4.9 Cllr Dave Norman MBE, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries, explained that he met regularly with the Police and Crime Commissioner and that he would make sure that the Commissioner understood the need for funding support in this area.

4.10 A member asked whether GCHQ (Government Communications Head Quarters) had been approached for funding. The CFO said he would explore that option.

ACTION – Mark Preece to explore whether GCHQ could be a partner to SkillZONE.

5. GLOUCESTERSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE IMPROVEMENT BOARD PROGRESS REPORT

5.1 The CFO explained that good progress was being made against the areas of improvement and that a more detailed update would be ready for the Committee's next meeting.

ACTION – To add a an Improvement Board update to the work plan for the 17th of November 2023 meeting.

6. UPDATE ON FIRE SERVICE BUDGET 2023/24

6.1 In response to a question about the £106,000 overspend in the report, the CFO explained that that had been caused by a reduction in a central government grant that had been subsidising the cost of the Airwave radio system (used for communication between fire control and appliances).

6.2 A member asked whether the budget could be adjusted to account for these changes. The CFO explained that the budget had been set before the announcement of the reduction in the government grant, but moving forwards this was being accounted for in future budgets.

6.3 In response to a question about the introduction of new radio systems to replace Airwave, it was explained that there was a Monopolies and Mergers Commission investigation which had paused developments in radio infrastructure.

6.4 A member asked whether there were plans for further bids for investment in GFRS next year. It was explained that MTFs (Medium-Term Financial Strategy) bids were being made for additional personnel and capital bids for roughly £4 million would be submitted for new appliances. The CFO explained that they were also preparing for cost increases through inflation.

6.5 The Lead Cabinet member for Fire and Rescue explained that they were early in the bidding process and that the success of these bids would only be discussed with the Committee once the bidding process was complete.

7. FUTURE TRAINING PROVISION UPDATE

7.1 The CFO explained that the Property Board were due to meet the following Monday and that the full business case would be put forward for the capital investment necessary to provide training in-house. He explained a full update would be brought to the next meeting.

ACTION – A full report on the options for in-house GFRS training to come to the meeting on the 17th of November 2023.

7.2 A member asked for clarity over what fire strategic sites were and what kinds of investment would be necessary.

7.3 The CFO explained that there were GFRS and GCC that he expected could host certain training facilities. He also explained that full details of the investments would be available at the next meeting.

7.4 In response to a question about issues with equipment, the CFO explained that when equipment failed, or the right equipment was not available, there would be an equipment debrief. These debriefs were monitored and where necessary, investments were made in equipment to avoid future problems.

7.5 A member asked how GFRS moving out of the Severn Park Joint Training Centre would affect the centre's future. The CFO explained that were all partners to withdraw, then the site would be returned to its original Greenfield status. However, the CFO was aware of services at the site that were intending to retain the centre and so it would continue to operate. He also explained that even with increasing the in-house training provision, there were some scenarios that were too infrequent to be feasible to provide and in those cases there were training centres nationally that could be used.

7.6 In response to a question on whether Severn Park would still be used once in-house facilities were developed, the CFO explained that that would depend on what the Joint Centre was providing at that time, and what options were available from other training facilities.

7.7 A member raised concern about moving back and forth from having joint training facilities and in-house training facilities. The CFO explained that GFRS had no liability to Severn Park if they were to withdraw and that this change to in-house training was an adaptation to current challenges in the GFRS workforce. The workforce was young and inexperienced and required more training in the past and having training available locally meant that training could be accessed more readily, more frequently, and without impacting their ability to help in an emergency.

8. GFRS PERFORMANCE DATA AND UPDATES

8.1 The CFO gave a summary of the performance data in the report. Areas of strong performance highlighted were timeliness of response to dwelling fires, and the targeting of safe and well visits to the most vulnerable. The number of safe and well visits was highlighted as an area that was below target. He also explained that the Emergency Planning team had moved to the directorship for corporate resources so this was likely the last time he would be reporting to this Committee on Community Safety Strategic Risk. He highlighted the report of insufficient business continuity management in the report.

8.2 A member asked how 'vulnerable' members of the public were identified for safe and well visits. It was explained that GFRS had strong referral routes through adult services. People also saw or heard about fire emergencies in the community and would be more likely to ask for a visit when GFRS officers were knocking on doors.

8.3 In response to a question about members of the public who did not have English as a first language, it was explained that certain communities could be more adverse to the visits, particularly if they had had poor experiences with authorities before. He also explained that officers did do visits in plain clothes to make the visits more friendly and interpreters were used.

8.4 A member raised concern around the risk of impersonators offering safe and well visits. The CFO explained that all staff had ID cards and would arrive in a GFRS vehicle of some kind so it should be clear that the visiting officers were GFRS employees. He also explained that the timing of the visit would have been confirmed in advance and there was a helpline number that could be called to confirm who was running the visit.

8.5 A member raised that he was not aware of a GFRS officer attending Community Safety Partnership Meetings in Stroud. The CFO said he would look into why a representative was not attending those meetings.

8.6 In response to a question about being consistently over target for accidental dwelling fires, the CFO explained that there had been an increase in the number of accidental fires caused by young men under the influence of alcohol. He also suggested that an increase in the purchase of unsafe electrical goods could be contributing to the increase in accidental dwelling fires. The CFO offered to come back to the Committee with more information on the causes of fires.

ACTION – GFRS officers to create an information report for this Committee on the causes of accidental dwelling fires in Gloucestershire.

8.7 In response to a question about difficulties with recruitment and retention, the CFO explained that there had recently been a high turnover of GFRS, predominantly caused by retirements and promotions. He explained that operational firefighter positions were always oversubscribed but it was still important to focus on recruiting the right people and having a diversity of applicants. He stressed that there were key skills that were difficult to recruit for and this was caused by competition with the private sector that offered better remuneration. The CFO was hopeful that agile work allowed for a greater candidate pool and thus more qualified applicants.

9. WORK PLAN

9.1 There was some discussion around the “Government’s response to the White Paper” item scheduled for the 17th of November 2023. It was predicted that a paper was unlikely to be ready for then as the Government’s response was still pending.

ACTION – DSU to move this item to January.

9.2 It was also discussed that the “Fire Station Cover Analysis” item scheduled for the 17th November 2023 might need to come to the January meeting instead.

ACTION – DSU to move this Item to January.

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

9.3 A member asked who would chair the Improvement Board following Steve Mawson's, Deputy Chief Executive GCC, departure from GCC. The CFO explained that Pete Bungard, Chief Executive GCC, would take over. He also explained that a GFRS inspection had been announced for November 13th with the possibility that a favourable outcome could bring GFRS out of the Fire Performance Oversight Group arrangements and updates on that would come to the 19th January 2024 meeting.

ACTION – To update the work plan.

9.4 It was suggested that an offline lead member meeting may be required before the end of the year to discuss items for discussion in 2024.

For a full overview of this meeting, please use the following link to access the recording <https://gloucestershire.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.17.