



Thames Valley Fire Control Service Joint Committee Meeting

Monday, 15 December 2022, 2.00pm

Minutes

Present: Councillor Simon Rouse, Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority
Councillor Matthew Walsh, Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority
Councillor Jenny Hannaby, Oxfordshire County Council
Councillor Simon Werner, Royal Berkshire Fire Authority
Councillor Morag Malvern, Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (Substitute)

In Attendance: Jason Thelwell, Chief Fire Officer (BFRS)
Graham Britten, Director of Legal and Governance (BFRS)
Simon Tuffley, Area Commander – Senior Responsible Officer (BFRS)
Mike Adcock, Area Manager – Senior Responsible Officer (OFRS)
Simon Harris, Group Manager (TVFCS)
Jim Powell, Area Manager - Senior Responsible Officer (RBFRS)

Remotely:

Rob McDougall, Chief Fire Officer (OFRS)
Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer (RBFRS)
Conor Byrne, Head of Finance and Procurement (RBFRS)

1. APOLOGIES

Councillor Jo Lovelock, Royal Berkshire Fire Authority
Councillor Glynis Phillips, Oxfordshire County Council

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest received.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 11 JULY 2022

Action

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2022, be approved as a true record to be signed by the Chairman.

4. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS (WRITTEN QUESTIONS)

None received.

5. MATTERS ARISING.

None.

6. QUESTIONS SUBMITTED UNDER STANDING ORDER 9.5 (QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC)

None received.

7. TVFCS BUDGET 2023/24 – TO AGREE

The Head of Finance and Procurement presented the proposed TVFCS Revenue Budget for 2023/24 shown in Appendix A of the report. It showed a total budget of £2.639m excluding contingency of £150k which was an increase of £126,581 or 5.04%. One of the main factors for the increase in the budget requirement for 2023/24 related to pay assumptions. The current year's budget was based on a pay award of 2%, however, an offer of 5% had been rejected, and a ballot for strike action was being held. The uncertainty around the pay awards for this year and next, made setting a budget more difficult than in previous years. The assumptions behind the 2023/24 budget were a pay award of 5% which was effective from July 2022 and a further 4% effective from July 2023. This approach had been discussed and agreed with all three Services.

The staffing budget allocation for 2023/24 was based on one less post than in 2022/23, where an additional post had been included to provide additional resilience and capacity due to cover for a number of maternity arrangements and budgeting for the additional post had not been deemed necessary. Recharges were set each year to cover support costs for the Control Room and the facilities recharged had increase by 23%. This reflected the impact of the current economic climate and the significant enhanced rate of inflation for many utility costs over which there was little control. RBFRS was subject to a 96% increase in electricity costs, and this had driven a large proportion of that increase. Another cost within the facilities recharge which had increased significantly was the annual business rates charge that was applicable to TVFCS. There had been a 16% increase in the underlying rateable value, and the TVFCS element of this charge was increased by just over £4k. The recharge in other areas was largely driven by support staff costs and systems provided by each support function to TVFCS.

A new budget line for 2023/24 captured the cost of the contract contingency call handling. This would provide a level of business continuity cover for any possible period of industrial action and had been agreed by the three Services.

Technology costs had increased in total by 9%, each respective contract had its own inflation mechanism costs, which were being closely monitored and increases minimised wherever possible, but they were largely outside of direct control.

A medium term financial plan had been produced and was included in Appendix B. This reflected potential budget pressures or cost reductions in the medium term and future salary awards, which from 2024/25 had been shown as 2% per annum.

It was proposed that each Service continued to contribute £50k per annum towards capital replacement costs. The fund currently sits at just over £2m, including the contributions in 2023.

The Proposed Capital Expenditure Programme for 2023/24 was detailed in Appendix C. The three items of expenditure identified totalled just under £182k including contingency, and this would be paid from the renewals fund. The longer term forecast of payments into and out of the renewals fund based on two scenarios as shown in Appendix D. Scenario one assumed a system replacement in 2028, whereas scenario 2 assumed a replacement at the end of the Inter Authority Agreement in 2030. Currently, it was anticipated that the annual contribution of £50k would continue until 2030.

Councillor Werner asked about the 2% pay increase, which was still in negotiation, what would happen if it went up further, was there contingency.

The Head of Finance and Procurement advised there was contingency built into the budget of £150k. Members would be asked to approve this as part of the budget and recommend to their respective Authorities.

Councillor Werner asked how much the percentage would go up to before TVFCS ran out of contingency.

The Head of Finance and Procurement advised that it would need to go up substantially and each 1% equated to around £20k.

The Chairman asked about the recommendation to delegate authority to the three CFO's, was this a new proposal, or a restatement of a pre-existing delegation.

The Head of Finance and Procurement confirmed it was a restatement of a previous delegation and had been in the report for a number of years.

The Chairman was surprised by how low the training budget was, £1k, and asked what training it covered.

Area Manager (RBFRS) advised that the majority of training was in the HR recharge within budget, training directly provided by RBFRS. The £1k, was for additional training, control room specific that RBFRS could not provide. This year it had been used for Tactical Advisor Training.

The Chairman asked about the £95-£98k for the planned period HR and LD recharge, how much of that was for Learning and Development.

Area Manager (RBFRS) did not have the information to hand, but would provide it at a later date.

SROs to provide the information

RESOLVED -

1. That the proposed TVFCS revenue budget for 2023/24 as detailed in Appendix A be agreed.
2. That a contingency budget allocation of £150,000 which would provide an upper limit of expenditure without further Authority approval be agreed.
3. To delegate authority to the three CFOs (unanimous decision required) for any unplanned expenditure between £10,000 and £150,000 be agreed.
4. To set aside £150,000 (£50,000 from each partner) in 2023/24 towards capital replacement costs be agreed.
5. That the Capital Expenditure Programme for 2023/24 (Appendix C) be agreed.
6. That the Medium Term Financial Plan (Appendix B) and Renewals Long Term Forecast (Appendix D) be noted.
7. It be recommend to their respective Authorities the TVFCS budget for the financial year 2023/24 and the individual Authority contributions to this budget.

8. TVFCS MEMBERS WORKSHOP SUMMARY – 1 DECEMBER 2022- TO AGREE

Area Commander (BFRS) advised Members this was a summary of the workshop that took place online on 1 December 2022, reconvened from its original September date due to the death of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. There were a number of areas covered, future expansion options of the TVFCS, and in summary there were no immediate opportunities to expand the remit, but it was agreed that it should remain open to exploring any options as and when they arise in future.

Performance Measures and the new performance management framework and matrix was covered, which was really helpful getting feedback from Members, and further enhancements had been made following the workshop. The matrix would be used for future performance reporting to the Committee. Also covered was the TVFCS Staff Health and Wellbeing stress survey and the action plan, legacy and pre-pandemic, Covid and the return to a new normality, the physical environment and the changes that had been planned for the future and a budget overview for new Members.

RESOLVED –

That the Joint Committee agree the contents of the report as an accurate record of the business conducted at the workshop.

9. TVFCS PERFORMANCE REPORTS QUARTER 1 AND QUARTER 2 2022/23 – TO NOTE

Area Manager (OFRS) advised that the Quarter 2 report covered 1 July to 30 September, and Members would be aware how hot it was during this period. Through July and August, there were 50% more calls than normal for that time of year, which resulted in approximately 1000 more mobilisation of assets.

Members were advised that the services supported London Fire Brigade along with a number of other bordering services, as well as the Thames Valley.

Area Manager (OFRS) advised Members that the report showed the sickness figures, both long term and short term, and how well it was being managed. The equality, diversity and inclusion figures showed there was just under a 75% female and 25% male workforce. Staff had continued to undertake development activity during the quarter, with a number of staff completing their development programmes. TVFCS staff had contributed to prevention activity during the quarter through the identification and referral of 38 residents with defective smoke alarms and handling 41 safeguarding notifications.

TVFCS also dealt with notifications from partner agencies, primarily Thames Valley Police, when a credible threat of arson had been received against a person or premises and action needs to be urgently taken. The notifications were then passed to the relevant FRS to be dealt with in line with their respective procedures. TVFCS received 2 urgent notifications during the quarter but were notified of threats against 46 addresses during the period which were passed via other routes.

Area Manager (OFRS) advised Members that the response measure of answering calls had gone into amber, below target for answering calls within 5 seconds and 10 seconds in July and August, this was due to 50% more calls being received within this period. In September, the figures went back to green, meeting target and calls were back to business as usual.

Councillor Werner commended the staff for their hard work, but asked that with climate change which was likely to be happening more and more, had officers started looking at what could be done in those situations.

Area Manager (OFRS) advised Members than when talking about 50% more calls, a lot of the calls were for the same incident, i.e. members of the public driving by a field fire, or an RTC, and whilst that would always happen, what TVFCS was working towards was how the control room could stand up even quicker, what does the resilience look like and how people can be brought into the environment to support those staff. Also, what could be done on the operational side to support the control environment. Officers were looking across the Thames Valley at how wildfires were attended in the future and what type of assets were needed to send to wildfires, that would have a positive impact on the control environment, and the same with flooding.

Area Manager (RBFRS) advised that RBFRS was currently undertaking its CRMP at present, and there was a question around how the TVFCS fits within the community risk management planning because its sits independently on its own, but because of issues like climate change, flooding, wildfire etc., how could it be incorporated across the three services.

Councillor Malvern asked if there was any provision for joint working with the Police, or specialist equipment they might have that our service doesn't.

Area Manager (RBFRS) advised that there was already a lot of work with the police and ambulance service, an example of that would be effective entry. Officers would look at every opportunity possible, and collaboratively support

where possible.

The Chairman asked around primary and secondary fire and RTC performance and while understanding the complexity of importing locations etc. did not know 'what good looked like' and thought it would be helpful to get an external comparison about how other fire service controls were performing, so Members could get assurance that the current performance was good, or not good.

Area Manager (OFRS) advised that officers hoped the new performance measures agreed at the workshop would help to understand them better, but going out to other fire and rescue services was something that officers could do more of. The challenges were the types of call received, the control operators call challenge and that takes some time to ensure whether or not to send an asset. Secondary fires and RTC's, and the issue was people don't generally know where they are, and that takes the call operators time to decipher and understand using a number of pinpointing ways, mobile phones, what three words etc.

Officers would take this action away, and present their findings at the next workshop, with a caveat that officers were currently dealing with industrial action planning, but would do their utmost to come back with some information.

Chief Fire Officer (BFRS) advised Members that there had been some recent problems with South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) in terms of their performance, would it effect the next performance report, and would it be logged if it does. Also, when there had been previous industrial action, the calls and attendance times had been logged in a different way so they don't change the attendance times, would that be included in the work that was currently being undertaken for strike action.

Group Manager (TVFCS) advised that it would be logged in the same way on Vision, but some work could be done with those statistics, to separate out the performance during periods of industrial action, from the business as usual performance. With regards to SCAS, it was difficult to measure, but it does impact the resources available, including the call operator.

The Chairman asked about industrial action, and felt it would be helpful to understand what goes on in terms of service delivery from stations, pumps etc., but if the contingency in place had to be invoked, what would be expected to happen to performance in the control room as a result of having contingency staff and not the usual control room staff.

Area Manager (OFRS) advised the Chairman that calls would be taken in the same way, but by contingency staff and appliances would still be deployed, but there would be different ways of doing it which would ultimately slow down the operational response times.

The Chairman asked if it would take those call handlers longer to answer a call, than the usual control room staff, due to identification, location, etc.

Area Manager (RBFRS) advised that contingency staff had come into control and had training and also undertaken a number of exercises. Officers were doing everything possible to try and build familiarisation with the control environment, but equally they were not from the fire and rescue sector and

SROs to
present at
next
workshop

because they lack specific sector knowledge, they would be slower. Also, during industrial action, the resource allocation would be slower, because it would involve face to face conversations and decision making around limited resources. If and when the first period of industrial action takes place, officers would be far better placed to answer some of these questions because it would have been experienced in real time. Also, if necessary, during short periods of industrial action, working with the Secondary Control Room and setting up resilience arrangements, could be transitioned between one and the other very quickly. Officers assured Members that as much planning and preparation was being undertaken as possible.

Chief Fire Officer (BFRS) asked that although the TVFCS was embedded within Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS), how was culture measured within the control room, as it was the responsibility of all three services.

Area Manager (RBFRS) advised, that as RBFRS employees, control room staff take part in the RBFRS staff survey, but the control responses could be separated out and come to this Committee. Also, as discussed at the workshop, the health and well-being of control room staff could be looked at by this Committee.

SROs to advise in the future.

In response to a question from the Chairman, Area Manager (OFRS) advised that any long term sickness was managed through RBFRS Human Resources Department to ensure the individual was supported for whatever they needed or to get back to work, but going through the appropriate processes.

RESOLVED –

That the Joint Committee note the report.

10. TVFCS JOINT COMMITTEE MARCH 2023 WORKSHOP – TO NOTE

The Chairman asked Members to reflect on and notify him of what they would like to discuss at the Workshop, in addition to the items identified already during the meeting, to be held on Monday 20 March 2023, 2.00pm at Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) Headquarters.

Officers to finalise the agenda by the end of January 2023.

RESOLVED – that the intended workshop be noted.

11. FORWARD PLAN – TO NOTE

RESOLVED – that the Forward Plan be noted.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Annual Meeting July 2023, 2pm Oxford Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Sterling Road, Kidlington, Oxford, OX5 2DU

(Dates to be provisionally agreed, and reviewed at the Workshop on 20 March 2023 due to published Local Authority meeting dates will not be available until the New Year)

(The meeting closed at 14.55pm)