

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
16 MARCH 2023
6.35 - 9.10 PM**



Present:

Councillors Angell (Chair), Virgo (Vice-Chair), Mrs Birch, Brossard, Gbadebo, MJ Gibson, McLean, Porter and Brown (Substitute)

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Mrs Mattick and Mossom

Also Present:

Susan Halliwell, Chief Executive

Kevin Gibbs, Executive Director: Delivery

Ann Moore, Assistant Director: Democratic & Registration Services

Tim Readings, Group Manager, Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service

48. Minutes of previous meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Commission held on 12 January 2023 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chairman.

Responses to all of the queries and requests for information raised in the meeting had been received or formed part of the agenda.

49. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no indications that members would be participating while under the party whip.

50. Urgent Items of Business

There were no items of urgent business.

51. Public Participation

No submissions had been made by members of the public under the Council's Public Participation Scheme for Overview and Scrutiny.

52. Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service - consultation on draft Corporate Plan and Corporate Risk Management Plan 2023-2027

Tim Readings, Group Manager introduced himself and asked Commission members to consider the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service draft Corporate Plan and the Combined Fire Authority's Corporate Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2023-27. The consultation was due to close in two weeks' time.

Tim Readings shared a Powerpoint presentation and explained a decision had been taken to put both documents into one to explain how the business of fire and rescue worked.

Priority no 1

It was explained that this priority was in two parts. RBFRS had considered how to apply the three organisational arms of the fire service including prevention and how to deploy units across Berkshire, a county of two halves, consisting of rural west and urbanised east. This meant different risks, so different cover was applied, including on-call fire fighters in some areas to mitigate less fire fighters where risk was lowest. Consideration was also being given to capacity to deliver against wildfire risk and climate change. Last year was their busiest period and indications being this would continue. One option was to have an increase in smaller vehicles to deal with those fires. The Force were seeing a spike in fires caused for green energy products.

Priority no 2

Risk prevention to people in their home was a statutory duty and the force was working towards a more person-centred approach. Safe and well visits were offered but there was uneven uptake. The force was keen to visit most vulnerable people in society as factors in house fires were well known. It was key to have links with other organisations. Traditionally, the Force visited by postcode.

Priority no 3

This priority had come about due to a review of the response model across Berkshire to ensure they met their statutory duties. Focus in the past was on location of fire engines. The force had several special appliances, water rescue units, high ridge and off-road vehicles. The Grenfell Tower incident showed the need to plan for unlikely scenarios.

Priority no 4

The Force intended to review statutory duties, such as deployment of rescue vehicles to fires, chemical spillage/fires, building collapses, train and tram accidents. They currently respond to water rescue, flooding and animal rescue but were not funded for these activities. It was appreciated it was not a simple case of not carrying out activities which were not statutory as it was unclear who would attend if the fire service did not attend. RBFRS were a member of the Local Resilience Forum and were discussing this with partners. One option was to lobby for the sector to be properly funded in order to respond to these types of incidents in the future.

Priority no 5

Enforcement and fire safety law. Legislation post the Grenfell Tower incident had been adopted by RBFRS. Enforcement consisted of a risk-based inspection programme but there was recognition the tier below high-risk buildings had less involvement from fires and rescue services. RBFRS were keen to talk to those responsible for those buildings and check the risk-based programme was targeted at those most in need.

Priority no 6

The consultation on this priority was that RBFRS would provide a minimum of 14 fire units. There were currently 19 fire engines and 14 were staffed by permanent staff. They were looking at using on-call staff to help with those 14, as well as the other five units. All staff were trained to the same standard. Those units staffed by on-call officers would be more suited to lower risk, more rural areas. It was acknowledged fire services struggled to recruit and retain on call firefighters.

Feedback so far was a 90% acceptance rate on priorities but priority 4 had proved more controversial.

The Commission were also informed there was a set of strategic commitments which included creating a sustainable environment; a financially stable organisation with the

right culture; resilience 24/7 and an awareness of national issues around other fire and rescue services.

Following the presentation members asked the following questions and received answers:

- It was queried if RBFRS had the manpower to staff the fire service currently and were assured the required manpower existed for 14 units. Nationally, it was a struggle to recruit on-call fire fighters another issue was having to extract staff regularly for training. RBFRS had considered six years of data and modelling showed 16 fire engines would be adequate. Peak usage was 14 at once but if a call required 5/6 engines at an emergency they would draw on neighbours to help.
- What powers does RBFRS have to shut down a building and are they sufficient? Changes to fire safety law requires people who own/manage buildings to state what they need in a fire risk assessment which RBFRS would then audit and advise if it is not felt to be adequate or issue fire safety certificates. More recently, the force has carried out risk assessments on high-risk buildings, such as those with cladding, to advise on work arounds if required. They also have the power to prohibit a building if it is considered there is an immediate risk to safety.
- Have you considered dumping water from planes on large scale fires? The force can request aerial firefighting through national resilience (in Liverpool) and could request they be deployed via national government. Councillors were informed the most effective way to tackle a fire was off road vehicles, training and specialist equipment.
- Are you safe and do you have enough people to carry out the job? It was acknowledged this question required greater reflection and may be underplayed in this document.
- Was there a gap in educating adults about fire safety? Education for adults was an area for development. There was a focus on interventions with children in school and staff carried out safe and well visits for the most vulnerable, water safety and road safety initiatives. Also, RBFRS used social media to deliver education more broadly but appreciated not everyone was able to access information online.
- Could you send us statistics on nuisance calls? Councillors were informed there were not many nuisance calls, but the service received a lot of calls to automatic fire alarms. There was a review about that currently which would go to the Combined Fire Authority and HMI Fire Inspectorate agreed this area required further work. **It was agreed Tim Readings would provide statistics on nuisance calls following the meeting.**
- Was there an issue with people throwing lithium batteries in the waste and electric vehicles? National research being undertaken showed 'zombie batteries' in landfill were a problem. It was also a matter for local authorities to look at recycling of these batteries. With regards to electric vehicle fires it could sometimes take up to 24 hours to extinguish and there were examples of them reigniting. They could be highly toxic and designed to be waterproof and sealed, so hard to put out. Continuous application of lots of water was the best way of tackling them currently and giant fire blankets were being produced. Fire services also must control any pollution they make and water from these fires could not go into the drain, so there was a need to find a solution of dealing with that water. RBFRS had staff involved in national developments but they were in their infancy.
- Was it appropriate to put a sprinkler system in new developments? Councillors were reminded the fire service was a statutory consultee as part of

the planning process but ultimately it was up to the planning department to enforce planning regulations. Sprinklers were routinely recommended.

- Was there an issue with permitted development of office blocks? The quality of development of office blocks into residential use is varied. Those buildings feature on a risk matrix but need to be aware of them. Currently RBFRS are not routinely made aware of them through the planning route so it is a challenge.
- What was the difference between RBFRS and the Fire Authority? The Fire Authority is made up of elected members from local authorities across Berkshire and carry out governance and scrutiny oversight. RBFRS is the operative arm and the Chief Officer, Wayne Bowcock reports to the Fire Authority.
- How do you determine how many engines for each area? There is risk mapping software with latest census data which shows what dwelling at risk or flooding risk and another piece of software shows travel time to a location. Used together they highlight the perfect spot for fire stations. However, fire stations are located for historic reasons so there would be an expense to move them.
- Is there an opportunity to incorporate Manchester arena enquiry into these plans? Consultation timings did not line up with the enquiry so no, not explicitly part of this piece of work but there was a separate strand in RBFRS looking at the outcome of the enquiry.
- Are you able to attend a terrorist attack? The Fire Brigade Union consider terror incidents as outside of the job role and are requesting pay, training and equipment to meet the needs of that response. The National Fire Chiefs Council and the Home Office consider terror an emergency and it to be within their role to attend. RBFRS linked into national interagency counter terrorism unit, as well as Thames Valley Police, who have a group of officers with enhanced training ballistic us so the force is ready to respond as required.
- How much does it cost to call out a pump? There is a set cost and it was agreed the costings would be sent to the Governance and Scrutiny Office following the meeting.

Once the consultation ended the Fire Authority would decide on 27th April vote whether or not to accept proposals following the consultation.

A wider discussion took place about requesting 'blue light' service representatives to attend O&S Commission meetings in the future to discuss what services are provided locally.

Members queried the Chief Executive's role in gold/silver/bronze command structure with reference to emergencies. The Chief Executive responded to say there had not been any substantial changes since its utilisation during the pandemic. The Council was currently reflecting on changes since then and there was an opportunity for scrutiny to look at coordination of services as part of the pandemic response and whether there were any issues in relation to the community.

Members also asked if an emergency response 'test' had been held recently and were informed they shared this responsibility with West Berkshire and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Regular scenarios with partners, and representatives from utility firms, were carried out but, even though a pandemic was no 1 on the risk register, it still caught everyone out so there was a recognised need to risk profile and

rehearse more extreme and terrorist scenarios. Also, climate change and extreme heat had not been scrutinised or well-rehearsed to date.

Councillors thanked Tim Readings for attending and the excellent work RBFRS officers carried out.

Councillors to let the Governance and Scrutiny Officer know of any contacts with whom Tim Readings might share the consultation with, following the meeting.

53. Council Plan Overview Report

The Chief Executive introduced the Council Plan Overview Report (CPOR) and explained it included a proposal for the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to scrutinise the draft CPOR prior to the Executive in the future. This would give the Commission the opportunity to consider recommendations which they may like the Executive to consider. **The proposal was agreed.**

It was reported there had been solid delivery in Quarter 3 against Key Performance Indicators. Seven community winter hubs and a winter wellness activity programme had been set up. There was also a hub for Ukrainian and other people who had been displaced. The Council had been part of the climate change 'running out of time relay' from Scotland to Sharm El Sheikh. 97% of schools in the borough were good or better although it was acknowledged that had improved since the CPOR had been published. The Council had been shortlisted for the iESE awards Bracknell Forest was highly commended in the SOLEIL awards for town centre regeneration projects and was the Council's first international award. Ongoing challenges included national economic uncertainty; the rising cost of inflation and recruitment remaining a major challenge across most services.

The following comments were made regarding the CPOR:

- **It was agreed a line be added to highlight 100% of schools in the borough were now rated good or excellent by Ofsted.**
- The number of customer transactions was RAG rated red because the Council was in the process of changing its technology which included changes to the customer self-service system. The KPI would be split into two eventually and one would track how many customers had an account.
- Councillors acknowledged the increase in the number of apprenticeships in the council.
- The number of visits to Everyone Active remained low as some targets were set prior to the pandemic.
- **It was agreed the Assistant Director responsible for leisure services would be asked to review the programme of activities prior to the pandemic, who was participating and where these activities were held as part of the new BFC Sports and Leisure Strategy.**
- **Trend analysis was being undertaken to understand why complaints had increased across the council and specifically to 75 in the Education Team and 61 in Children's Services.**
- Councillors queried the time taken to complete Disabled Facility Grant applications and were informed there was no performance target for this currently, but data collection may reveal more information.
- It was noted there was a project to align Reception and the Community Hub data as there were discrepancies, which would be ready for the next quarter.
- **It was agreed there was a data input error on page 37 for the number of planning permissions granted which needed to be revised.**

- **It was agreed L271, page 29, regarding superfast broadband coverage needed to be double checked as it did not correlate with a recent Core Business Survey.**
- **It was agreed L391 and L392 on page 27 should show numbers of agency workers rather than percentages.**
- A discussion took place about challenges collecting Bid Levy Funds but Councillors were assured the long-standing compatibility issue between the IT systems in the Council and the collector of these funds had now been resolved.
- **Councillors queried the community health chart data and the Chief Executive agreed it would be useful for the Commission to scrutinise the methodology behind collecting the national data.**
- It was confirmed Heathlands Care Centre was still open but not at full capacity as the Council was working with the provider to ensure all appropriate measures had been taken.
- Councillors queried what L1.07 business change savings related to and were informed the commentary related to Lookout phase 2 and Asset Review but that piece of work has not been concluded yet, so full savings could not be identified.
- It was acknowledged there had been an increase in demand on residents requiring help which had increased staff caseload in L346 Family Safeguarding Model. The target was to reduce staff caseloads to 16 and the Executive Director: People was looking at ways to address the issue.
- A discussion took place about Strong's Heath and it was noted the decision not to go ahead with the proposal was due to an intrusive survey of the site which showed it was not viable for housing. The plan was to replace the proposal with an electric charging hub, toilets and a café which formed part of future plans for a solar farm on that site.
- It was noted there was an issue with completing planning applications currently. This was due to an increase in small scale applications as well as difficulty recruiting to roles in that team. The service were looking at revising job roles and profiles to make them more attractive, as well as using agency staff. It was a national issue and the team were talking with other local authorities in Berkshire to try and resolve this issue, including in house training.
- It was noted short term sickness figures had seen peaks and troughs, often related to large scale events and Covid, but numbers were not high enough to cause real concern.
- **It was agreed indicators L385 and L386 on page 35 should be translated into actual figures rather than rate per 100,000.**
- **Councillors noted numbers of Facebook followers for Public Health were low according to L444. It was agreed the numbers would be ratified and brought back to another Commission meeting.**

54. **Overview and Scrutiny Commission Report 2019-2023**

The Commission noted the draft Overview and Scrutiny Report 2019-2023 which the Commission sends to Council annually to give assurances about support to scrutiny. This report takes stock of the past four years and the thematic approach to carrying out reviews.

The Executive Director: Delivery explained a discussion with Panel Chairs had highlighted increased and effective ways of working through reviews. The pandemic forced the Commission and Panel Chairs to carry out their work online, but this had opened participation. Hybrid working was now fully operational and used by the Commission and Panels effectively. There had been a total of 16 reviews undertaken - some lengthy reviews and some completed in a day. Learning from this way of working included the need for a structured programme but ability to deal with issues

speedily. The Commission had recognised a need to carry out specific health scrutiny and the plan was to bring forward blue light service scrutiny during its next sessions.

Councillors were informed a restructure in Democratic, and Registration Services had taken place. The same model and level of support would be available, but Kirsty Hunt had left and Derek Morgan: Head of Democratic and Scrutiny Services would be responsible for scrutiny, with Louise Connelly, Team Leader: Overview and Scrutiny as the lead officer.

The Chair of the Commission thanked officers for participating in reviews and Councillors who had been involved in changing the system to make the new model a success.

It was requested resources to the Commission be equitable to the Executive as the contribution by scrutiny to the lives of residents was well documented in the report.

Councillors were invited to send comments on the draft report to the Governance and Scrutiny Officer to incorporate comments prior to sending the final version to Council.

55. **Enforcement Strategy Review**

Following a review in September 2022 of Integrated Enforcement in the borough it was agreed a follow up review into enforcement was needed as it was a complicated area and involved a lot of agencies.

Commission members queried if problems on Silva Homes land had been looked into but were informed this was not part of the review as it was private land. Private landowners could use their own Enforcement Officers. It was also asked if there were enough resources to carry out enforcement and were informed at the time of the review there were three local authorities which had joined together, but Wokingham Borough Council had recently pulled out, which may impact on service provision. There were currently staff vacancies also.

The Chair of the Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel outlined the recommendations and thanked the Governance and Scrutiny Officer, Esther Prangley, for her support and commended the recommendations to the Commission.

The recommendations contained in the report were agreed.

56. **Evaluation of Recommendations - Blue Badge Review**

The Chair of the Health and Care Overview & Scrutiny Panel explained the original Blue Badges review had been completed in 2021. It was noted there had been some delays, which had sparked further consultation with customers via the Disability Advisory and Action Forum.

The Chair of the Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel commended the recommendations to the Commission.

The recommendations contained in the report were agreed.

57. **Child Criminal Exploitation Review**

The Chair of the Education, Skills and Growth Overview & Scrutiny Panel explained to the Commission that the original intention had been to scrutinise County Lines but, due to the pandemic, travel into and out of the borough was not taking place and evidence suggested there was a greater issue with Child Criminal Exploitation.

The Chair of the Panel thanked officers from all organisations that took part in the review and the Governance and Scrutiny Officer, Joey Gurney, for his support and outlined the six recommendations.

Commission members queried how the actions would be tracked and the Chair of the Panel explained the report would go to the Executive and the Executive Member would be responsible for working with partner agencies to complete the actions, if accepted by the Executive. The Panel had agreed to complete a survey with schools to consider the impact of their recommendations.

The Chair of the Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel commended the recommendations to the Commission.

The recommendations contained in the report were agreed.

58. **AOB**

The Chair of the Commission agreed the Vice Chair could write a report on the work of the Climate Change Advisory Panel which would be distributed to Commission members.

The Vice Chair of the Commission thanked the Chair for chairing the Commission over the past four years.

CHAIRMAN