



**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
4 SEPTEMBER 2014
7.30 - 9.20 PM**

Present:

Councillors Leake (Chairman), Angell (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Birch, Ms Brown, Finnie, Gbadebo, Mrs McCracken, McLean and Virgo
Rev N Parish, Church of England (Oxford Diocese) Representative
Mr R Briscoe, Parent Governor Representative
Ms L Wellsted, Parent Governor Representative

Executive Members:

Councillor McCracken

Also Present:

Andy Fry, Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service
David Phillips, Area Manager for Prevention and Protection, Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service
Julie Waterworth, Community Safety Co-ordinator, Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Baily, Harrison, Heydon, Sargeant and Dudley

In Attendance:

Richard Beaumont, Head of Overview & Scrutiny
Victor Nicholls, Assistant Chief Executive
Alison Sanders, Director of Corporate Services

14. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 10 July 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

Further to Minute 8 of the last meeting, regarding proposals to decommission some of the Broadmoor sirens, it was reported that correspondence between the Council and West London Mental Health Trust was ongoing. A response to the Authority's most recent letter had not yet been received. The Chairman reported that he had spoken to Councillor Tim Holton, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at Wokingham Borough Council, who had agreed that it would be advantageous to hold a joint meeting between the Authorities and invite the Chief Executive and Chair of West London Mental Health Trust to explain their position and answer questions.

15. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Mrs McCracken declared an interest as the spouse of the Executive Member for Culture, Corporate Services and Public Protection. Councillor Mrs Birch

declared an interest as the spouse of the Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing.

16. Urgent Items of Business

There were no urgent items of business.

17. Public Participation

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Public Participation Scheme for Overview and Scrutiny.

18. Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service

Meeting as the Crime and Disorder Committee, Andy Fry, Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, Julie Waterworth, Community Safety Co-ordinator, and Dave Phillips, Area Manager for Prevention and Protection, of Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS), were welcomed to the meeting.

Andy Fry gave a presentation setting out Royal Berkshire Fire Authority's policy direction, which had been reset following a review earlier in the year, and stressed the importance which RBFRS attached to collaborative working with local authorities.

The presentation outlined the main drivers behind the new policy direction. The first of these was financial, where the Authority had seen its grant reduced by 20.5% during the period April 2011 to March 2015, resulting in the need to make savings of £4.7 million over the same period. To date these savings had been achieved with minimal impact on frontline services. However, continued reductions in grant funding were expected, in the region of 10% each year, which was equivalent to approximately £800,000. When combined with inflation this would require savings each year of around £1.1million. An increase in income from Council Tax of approximately £180,000 was anticipated as more houses were built in the area, plus an increase in business rates income of around £250,000. The second driver for change had been a dramatic reduction in demand for the Authority's core, statutory services. Demand had fallen by 50% in the last ten years, in a climate of increasing demand for other public services. The Authority needed to ensure that they were providing good value for money. Finally, the third driver for change had been consideration of the long-term viability of the Retained Duty System (RDS). A reduction in the number of emergency calls had resulted in reduced morale and income for RDS staff, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining new staff. The on-going national dispute over government changes to the pension scheme, and higher levels of staff sickness absence were additional pressures.

The presentation explained that the Authority's priorities were set out in the form of six Strategic Commitments, and highlighted three of these, as follows:

- (a) Commitment 1 – we will educate people on how to prevent fires and other emergencies, and what to do when they happen;
- (b) Commitment 3 – we will ensure appropriate fire safety standards in buildings;
- (c) Commitment 4 – we will seek opportunities to contribute to a broader safety, health and wellbeing agenda.

Julie Waterworth gave a presentation on the role and contribution of the service to community safety locally. The presentation detailed her role as Safer Communities

Co-ordinator, which included attending partnership meeting, working closely with local organisations, co-ordinating requests for the service to attend community events (there had been 129 requests in the previous year) and incident analysis. The presentation also gave details of the roles of the other members of the Prevention Team - Fire Stations; the Home Fire Safety Check Team; the Risk Reduction Team; and volunteers. The presentation gave details of the responsibilities of each of these, as well as projects and local initiatives contributing to community safety.

Arising from members' questions and comments the following points were noted:

- The Service had long-standing, well-established links with other public bodies, but was always keen to develop similar links with the private sector and voluntary groups.
- An increase in the number of houses in the area would not cause a significant increase in the demands on the Service, as new houses posed a comparatively low risk, for example as a result of the requirement to install a mains smoke alarm.
- Commitment 3 focussed on the installation of sprinkler systems in new commercial premises. If these were included as part of the initial design of the building they virtually eliminated the risk of a fire. However, there was no statutory requirement for this and the Fire Authority was often not consulted until much later on in the planning process, by which point the building design had been finalised. The Assistant Chief Executive said that the Council had encouraged property developers in Bracknell town centre to contact RBFRS at an early stage. Current building regulations did not take into account factors such as the importance of buildings in a community, for example the impact of a school building being unusable due to fire damage. In addition, 80% of business who suffered a serious fire were not able to recover, and including sprinklers in buildings could prevent this. The Authority was increasing efforts to start discussions earlier, for example when developments were first planned, but this needed more work with local partners to reinforce the importance of this. Mr Fry suggested that RBFRS deliver a briefing on this topic to the Council's Planning Committee.
- With regard to budget, there was a strong link between the proportion of funding made up by the Government grant and the level of deprivation in an area, with Fire Authorities in areas of greater deprivation receiving a higher percentage of their income directly from the Government. RBFRS received approximately 50% of funding from the Government, but in areas with a much higher level of deprivation this could be up to 80%. In these areas funding cuts were having a much greater impact. Consideration also needed to be given to the 'normal requirements' of the service to ensure that these were maintained during budget reductions. Standards had been set nationally until 2003, but these were now agreed at a local level.
- There was a need to focus on the sustainability of the Retained Fire Service, which would require reappraising the business model.
- Commitment 5 focussed on collaborative working, and this was already underway with RBFRS sharing a maintenance programme with Hampshire Fire Authority and a procurement programme with Buckinghamshire Fire Authority. A new Fire Control Centre to cover all three Authorities would be opening in December 2014, which would deliver significant cost savings and allow modern, effective technology to be used. This was a separate initiative to the earlier, unsuccessful, national government initiative for regional fire control centres.
- Morale was an issue at the present time, with ongoing industrial action. The discussions were between the Government and Fire Brigades Union but the

impact was being felt at a local level. This was also causing additional budgetary pressures with the need to provide strike cover. However, an Organisation Development Programme was being devised which would add value to jobs and help raise morale.

- Hoarding was a significant issue, as it greatly increased the risk of fire. The Authority received referrals from Housing Associations where concerns had been identified, and the Authority worked in partnership with other agencies to provide support and advice. The Authority also had strong links with the charity Hoarding Disorders UK.
- Fewer emergency incidents increased the need for fire fighters to attend regular training to ensure that their skills were up to date. This formed a large part of the Authority's budget and, combined with up to date equipment, kept fire fighters safe.
- A consultation on the removal of one of the fire engines at Bracknell Fire Station was currently underway. There was no plan to close that fire station. RBFRS was confident that they would be able to attend incidents within seven minutes, which was well within the ten minutes required of them. The fire station currently had two fire engines, one wholtime engine that was crewed 24 hours a day, and one On Call engine crewed by reserve fire fighters who attended as necessary. As a result of recent changes elsewhere in the service, in particular the conversion of the fire engine in Wokingham to a wholtime engine, there had been a significant reduction in the number of incidents attended by the On Call engine. This had resulted in low morale and reduced income for the On Call crew, as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining staff. As wholtime engines were staffed 24 hours a day, no additional costs were incurred when they attended an incident, while On Call firefighters received payment for each incident attended so this was a more expensive option. It was proposed that the On Call fire engine at Bracknell Fire Station ceased to operate. In addition the On Call engine was only available around 10% of the time due to the low number of on Call fire fighters.
- Work was underway to deliver two programmes that would facilitate different emergency services communicating effectively in the event of a large incident - Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP) and Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP). Protocols for communication between services were already in place. In the event of a large incident the different services would operate via the Strategic Co-ordinating Group, which was usually chaired by the police, but each service retained autonomy over their own resources. Significant work had been undertaken in work towards different services working and training together.
- Mr Fry said that RBFRS benefitted from pro-active and helpful engagement from the Council's officers.

The Commission expressed their thanks to RBFRS for their work during recent large incidents, including the flooding during the winter and the large fire in Swinley Forest. The Chairman also thanked RBFRS for allowing Members to visit Bracknell Fire Station in August, which had been very informative.

19. **Quarterly Service Reports (QSR) 2014/15**

The Commission noted the latest trends, priorities and pressures in terms of departmental performance as quarter of 2014 to 2015 (April to June) financial year for the Chief Executive's Office and the Corporate Services Department.

With regard to Corporate Services, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act inspection report from the Office of Surveillance Commissioners had advised that

there had been a lapse in the high standards demonstrated during the last inspection. The Commission was reassured by the Director of Corporate Services that this related to recording of information rather than any substantial concerns, but an action plan was in place to address the identified weaknesses.

The Commission expressed concern at the current consultation on allowing flights to the west of Heathrow, as this would impact on residents in the east of the Borough, and requested that they be given the opportunity to respond. Victor Nicholls undertook to pass on Members' concerns to the appropriate officers.

20. Executive Forward Plan

The Commission received and noted a report summarising forthcoming items on the Executive Plan of a corporate nature.

21. Work Programme and Panel Activity Update

The Commission received and noted a report providing an update on the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2014-15 and Panel activity, with particular reference to Working Groups of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission.

It was noted that the Business Rates Working Group, comprising Councillors Angell (Lead Member), Leake, Heydon and Virgo had met on three occasions to date. It was reported that the next meeting was scheduled for the end of September 2014.

Reverend Parish said that he was resigning his position on the Commission, owing to moving to a new post outside Bracknell Forest. The Chairman thanked Reverend Parish for his contribution to the Commission's work.

CHAIRMAN