
CLEVELAND FIRE AUTHORITY

MINUTES OF AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE MEETING



FIRE AUTHORITY

27 NOVEMBER 2020

PRESENT: **VICE CHAIR:-** Councillor Naweed Hussain - Middlesbrough Council

HARTLEPOOL BOROUGH COUNCIL

Councillor Stephen Thomas

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Councillors Teresa Higgins (sub), Ashley Waters

REDCAR & CLEVELAND BOROUGH COUNCIL

Councillor Billy Ayre

STOCKTON ON TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

Councillor Lyn Hall

INDEPENDENT PERSONS

Mr Steve Harwood

Mr Paul McGrath

AUTHORISED OFFICERS

Chief Fire Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Treasurer, Legal

Adviser & Monitoring Officer

MAZARS

Mr Gavin Barker - Audit Director

Mr Ross Woodley - Audit Manager

IN ATTENDANCE

Head of Risk and Performance

Head of Finance

APOLOGIES

FOR ABSENCE: Councillor Marjorie James – Hartlepool Borough Council
Councillor William Woodhead - Stockton on Tees Borough Council

In accordance with Standing Order No. 35, Councillor Higgins substituted for Councillor Bill Woodhead.

141. INTRODUCTIONS

The Legal Adviser and Monitoring Officer (LAMO) introduced Councillor Lynn Hall to the Committee.

142. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The LAMO sought nominations for the position of Chair and informed Members that in accordance with the committee's Terms of Reference this should be a Member outside of the majority group (non-Labour).

143. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR cont.

As no nominations were received, it was agreed that this item be deferred until the next Audit and Governance Committee meeting on 22 February 2021 and that the default position of Vice Chair be resumed for the purpose of this meeting.

RESOLVED – That the Appointment of Chair to the Audit & Governance Committee be deferred until the next meeting on 22 February 2021.

144. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS INTERESTS

It was noted no Declarations of Interest were submitted to the meeting.

145. MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Audit & Governance Committee held on 21 February 2020 be confirmed.

146. REPORT OF MAZARS

146.1 Audit Progress Report – Verbal Update

The Audit Engagement Lead (AEL) reported that following Members' approval of the Authority's Financial Report at the 16 October 2020 meeting, Mazars sought assurances from external auditors of the Teesside Pension Fund Ernst and Young before the Audit could be signed off.

This assurance letter had been received the day before (26th November) and evaluated by Mazars overnight and returned to Ernst & Young with a number of queries. The AEL informed Members that this delay put the audit at risk of not meeting the statutory deadline of being signed off by 30 November 2020 in which case the Authority would need to publish a notice on its website indicating that the audited statement of accounts had not been received.

The AEL expressed disappointment by the delay as both the receipt of the accounts from the Authority and the audit work by Mazars had been completed in accordance with the timescales.

Councillor Waters acknowledged the disappointing nature of the situation and asked if there was any recompense to the Authority. The AEL noted that the impact of Covid on investment values had clearly been an issue nationally and agreed it was frustrating.

RESOLVED - that the verbal update be noted.

(11:15) The Audit Engagement Lead left the meeting.

147. REPORTS OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

147.1 Organisational Performance & Efficiency Report April 2020 – October 2020

The Head of Risk and Performance (HoRP) outlined the performance of the Brigade for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 October 2020 which had been aligned to the Brigade's three Strategic Priorities. The report summaries, which take into account the Covid-19 pandemic, are detailed below:

- Total incidents stand at 4770 - a decrease of 826 incidents (15%) compared to the same period last year.
- The largest decrease is in Secondary Fires which have dropped to 1924 (-563) compared to 2019/20 followed by a decrease in Special Services (-165) and False Alarms (-115).

147.1 Organisational Performance & Efficiency Report April 2020 – October 2020 cont.

- There have been 7,242 HFSVs completed in first 2 quarters - a reduction of 2,621 (27%) compared to 2019/20. Included within these HFSV were 1,211 Safe and Well Visits with 50 people referred to other agencies as a result of these visits.
- 521 inspections of Industrial and Commercial Premises a reduction of 521 (50%) on the same period last year.
- Accidental Dwelling Fires had increased by 11 incidents to 78 – a 16% increase from 2019/20 with increases in Middlesbrough (+4), Hartlepool (+4) and Stockton (+6) and a decrease in Redcar and Cleveland (-1). The main causes being radiated heat (29%), cooking related (27%) and careless handling (19%).
- Deliberate Fires have decreased by 24% with 562 incidents compared to the same period in 2019/20. Included within these, 247 (12%) were deliberate primary fires (-5% on last year) 1777 (88%) were deliberate secondary fires (-26% on last year). Main causes were vehicles (132 / 53%) and refuse (1,322 / 74%).
- Response Standards:

▪ Call answering:	Target set at 7 seconds, Actual 5.8 seconds
▪ Call Handing:	Target 100 seconds - Actual 98 Seconds
▪ Building Fires 1st Appliance	Target 7 Minutes, Actual 4.53 Minutes
▪ Building Fires 2nd Appliance	Target 10 Minutes, Actual 6.51 Minutes
▪ RTC	Target 8 Minutes, Actual 5.37 Minutes
- Sickness Absence has reduced by 45% compared to the same period in 2019/20 (2.43 shifts per employee). 1,505 duty days lost to sickness in 156 occurrences by 131 individuals including 168 duty shifts lost to Covid and/or people displaying Covid symptoms. Average length of sickness was 9.65 shifts per occurrence. There was a decrease in sickness levels across all staff groups: Fire Control by 32%; Wholtime by 30%; Retained by 82% and Green Book by 53%. Main causes of sickness absence are Mental Health – 317 shifts (21%); Back – 240 shifts (16%) and Upper Limb (177 shifts (12%). Sickness absence so far this year has cost the Brigade £352,940.
- Violence to Staff Incidents – 29 incidents: 2 physical abuse; 12 verbal abuse; 5 physical and verbal abuse; 10 objects thrown at firefighters and appliances.

Councillor Waters asked whether the Brigade was supported by Cleveland Police during incidents of violence to staff. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer – Community Protection (ACFO-CP) confirmed that the Brigade was seeing support in pursuing offenders with a number of successful prosecutions over the last 6 months. He reported that the Authority had invested in Body Worn Cameras which had been influential in identifying and prosecuting offenders.

Mr Steve Harwood praised the Brigade for maintaining a level of inspection to commercial premises throughout the pandemic by offering alternatives to on-site visits. He considered this an inspiring initiative and invaluable to organisations in maintaining safety and raising queries. The ACFO-CP acknowledged that virtual engagement with the business community to help them understand their responsibilities is a tool that the Brigade will continue to use beyond the pandemic. There has also been targeted face-to-face activity which has been welcomed by the business community and where there has been a dangerous condition and clear breaches of the Fire Safety Order then the Brigade has taken a number of enforcement actions and a potential prosecution.

147.1 Organisational Performance & Efficiency Report April 2020 – October 2020 cont.

Councillor Naweed Hussain asked whether the increase in people working from home posed a greater risk of accidental dwelling fires. The ACFO-CP confirmed that they were exacerbated by behavioural issue including unclean grill pans, drugs and alcohol dependencies and dementia.

In addition there was an increase in incidents from radiated heat as people undertook DIY projects leading to targeted Safer Homes intervention aimed at influencing behaviour.

Councillor Hussain asked if the police attend every incident. The ACFO-CP confirmed that police assistance would only be requested if a crime had been committed such as a fire started deliberately, for public disorder or if there was a safeguarding issue. He confirmed that the Brigade had increased safeguarding training for staff throughout the pandemic and would use a referral route.

Councillor Stephen Thomas asked if there had been any particular trends causing the 31% increase in dwelling fires in Hartlepool and whether targeted work was being carried out in those areas. The ACFO-CP confirmed that Hub Staff received monthly targeted data at ward level and crews concentrate activities in these areas. In addition specialist community safety staff will work with other organisations and partners including the third sector.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted

147.2 Forward Work Programme 2020/21

The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) outlined the Forward Work Programme for 2020/21, as detailed at Appendix 1, in accordance with the requirements of the Authority's Standing Orders. He noted that the Forward Work Programme will remain flexible to allow consideration of additional items should they arise.

RESOLVED - that the Forward Work Programme 2020/21 outlined at Appendix 1 be approved.

147.3 Annual Statement of Assurance 2019/20

Members scrutinised the Annual Statement of Assurance 2019/20 outlined at Appendix 1 of the report which contained details relating to financial, governance and operational matters. The CFO reported that this document was a statutory requirement produced in line with the requirements of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2012.

The CFO informed Members that the Brigade had recently undergone a second inspection by HMICFRS, which is not contained within this Annual Statement of Assurance. This focussed on how well it had responded to the first wave of the pandemic between April to End of June. It concentrated on planning, statutory functions, working with others, looking after health, safety and wellbeing of staff, use of resources and what new ways of working has been learned for the future. Following evaluation, informal feedback received indicated an extremely positive outcome. The CFO suggested that the final published report could be included in the committee's 2020/21 Forward Work Programme for consideration as external feedback.

147.2 Annual Statement of Assurance 2019/20 cont.

Members commended officers and staff for their contribution in ensuring the Brigade remains innovative and for securing the positive outcomes from the HMICFRS inspection.

Councillor Ayre asked for further details on the Equality and Diversity improvement required as detailed at page 10 of Appendix 1. The CFO noted that the HMICFRS feedback report recognised that the make-up of the Brigade's workforce did not reflect that of the communities it serves and extensive positive action work was underway to address this issue. Similarly, the Brigade had commissioned an independent cultural survey to be carried out to address claims of unfairness in promotion processes and experiences of bullying and harassment. This identified some key issues and the Brigade is currently working through an improvement model to address these.

RECOMMENDED – That the Fire Authority consider and approve the Annual Statement of Assurance 2019/20 (Appendix 1) at its meeting on 11 December 2020.

147.3 Corporate Risk Register

Members considered the Corporate Risk Register which had been reviewed on 26 September 2020 by the Active Risk Team and by the Executive Leadership Team on 6 October 2020. The outcome of this review was detailed at Appendix 1 and the CFO referred Members to the outcome at paragraph 4.4 which concluded no new and emerging risks.

Mr Paul McGrath praised officers for providing a comprehensive risk register which included Covid and Brexit. The CFO highlighted the need for integrated risk management and outlined the potential impact of Brexit on the Brigade from a procurement perspective..

RECOMMENDED - that the report be noted.

147.4 Internal Audit Progress Report

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer – Strategic Planning and Resources (ACFO – SPR) presented the audits undertaken to date and highlighted the outcomes relating to limited / satisfactory assurance. She also gave a position statement regarding the actions set out in the audit action plans.

Councillor Hussain passed on thanks to staff for their continued hard work.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the audit position of the completed 2019/20 Audits be noted.**
- (ii) that the progress made to date in the Internal Audit Plan 2020/21 be noted.**

148. REPORT OF THE LEGAL ADVISER AND MONITORING OFFICER

148.1 Standards Report

Members received updates relating to two current national Standards issues:

- LGA Draft Model Member Code of Conduct
- Standards Matter 2: Public Consultation & Public Sector Survey issued through the Committee on Standards in Public Life

148.1 Standards Report cont.

The LAMO reported that following consideration of the draft Model (Appendix 1) by Members on February 2019, as detailed at section 4 of the report, it was expected that the final version would be published in October 2020. As this has now been delayed the LAMO suggested Members consider it at the meeting on 22 February 2021 with a view to comparing with the CFA Code of Conduct (Appendix 2) and any proposed changes could be incorporated into the Constitution prior to the annual meeting in June 2021.

Members also received details of the Standards Matter 2: Public Consultation & Public Sector Survey, as detailed at section 5 of the report. This contains a set of questions for consideration (Appendix 3) relating to best practice and maintaining high standards of conduct in public office and requires a response by 18 December 2020.

The LAMO suggested Members could forward any comments directly to himself and a draft response would be produced and circulated to the Vice Chair for approval and to Members of the Committee.

The CFO noted that the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and LGA Fire had also had a recent consultation on the code of ethics and this source may also need to be considered before a response is submitted.

(1215) Councillor Lynn Hall left the meeting

RESOLVED:-

- (i) That Members noted the draft LGA Member Code of Conduct.**
- (ii) That the Committee considers the 'Consultation Questions' of the Committee on Standards in Public Life open consultation "Standards Matter 2: Public Consultation & Public Sector Survey" and whether a response should be made by the Authority**

COUNCILLOR NAWEED HUSSAIN
VICE CHAIR