
CLEVELAND FIRE AUTHORITY

MINUTES OF AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE MEETING



30 JUNE 2023

PRESENT:

CHAIR:- Councillor Steve Kay – Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council
MIDDLESBROUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL
Councillor John Kabuye, Dennis McCabe
STOCKTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
Councillor Stefan Houghton
INDEPENDENT PERSONS
Mr Steve Harwood
Mr Paul McGrath
AUTHORISED OFFICERS
Chief Fire Officer, Legal Adviser & Monitoring Officer
Assistant Chief Fire Officer – Strategic Planning & Resources
MAZARS
Mr Gavin Barker - Audit Engagement Lead

IN ATTENDANCE
Head of Risk & Performance

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Deputy Treasurer
Assistant Chief Fire Officer - Community Protection
Head of Finance & Procurement
Councillor Henry Ashton - Hartlepool Borough Council
Councillor Naweed Hussain - Middlesbrough Council
Councillor David Taylor - Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council
Councillors Jim Beall, John Gardner-Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

12. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS INTERESTS

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

13. MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Audit & Governance Committee held on 24 February 2023 be confirmed.

13.1 Matters Arising

Councillor Kay referred to the minutes and asked for further details relating to the reduction in violence to staff incidents and the increase in staff sickness.

The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) noted that these figures were relating to Quarter 3 and the latest position for the whole of 2022-23 would be reported later in the meeting (Min. No. 15.2 refers). He confirmed that the reduction in violence to staff incidents was due to a multi-agency approach including the local authorities and police which targeted resources in problem areas. In addition, all firefighters use body worn cameras to capture evidence and this is shared with law enforcement agencies.

14. REPORT OF MAZARS

14.1 Audit Progress Report

The Audit Engagement Lead (AEL) presented a verbal update to the committee, recognising that the Authority currently had a number of incomplete audits due to circumstances outside of the Brigade and Mazars' control. He provided a position statement on each one as follows:-

2020/21 Audit – the Audit Certificate cannot be issued as Mazars is still waiting for clearance from the National Audit Office on Whole of Government accounts. Once this is received the audit can be closed and published on the Brigade website.

2021/22 Audit - Mazars presented the draft Audit Completion Report to this committee on 18 November 2022 and reported that the auditor assurance was outstanding. Teesside Pension Fund Auditors were seeking to provide this assurance by early December 2022, then by the end of February 2023. This assurance is still outstanding and the audit has been halted by an additional technical accounting issue caused by a triennial re-evaluation of the Pension Funding which highlighted material misstatements requiring an updated IS19 report from the actuary. The Brigade's officers have now updated the accounts with the new figures and Mazars now needs to complete an additional piece of work on the accounts.

The AEL confirmed that Mazars also needed assurances from the Teesside Pension Fund auditors that they have tested the triennial data to ensure it is accurate. This will not be available until September 2023, therefore Mazars will complete the additional work by the end of July 2023 and issue an unqualified opinion on the accounts and report on the value for money arrangements. The final audit certificate will be issued once the Whole of Government Accounts reporting is received.

2022/23 Audit - the AEL confirmed that the Authority's Financial Statements have been published and Mazars was working towards a deadline of 30 November 2023 for completion of audit work. Nationally, the new statutory deadline of 30 September 2023 was considered unachievable and a delay in receiving assurance from the pension fund auditors was anticipated.

The AEL reiterated that the delays on all three audits were not the fault of the Authority which was considered as having sound arrangements. This was due to a series of accounting complications which affected the pension fund assurances which were based on assumptions.

The Chair thanked the AEL for the verbal update but asked that future reports be delivered in written format so to give Members chance to read the information prior to the meeting.

Paul McGrath expressed concern that the Authority had received no audit certification in almost 3 years. The AEL confirmed this was an unprecedented position to be in and reflected the current crisis in the audit sector. He confirmed that Mazars had invested heavily in recruitment to mitigate the situation.

The CFO noted that it was a requirement of the National Framework for authorities to provide fully audited accounts in order to receive government grant, which for this Authority was circa £1.409m.

14.1 Audit Progress Report cont.

Councillor Kabuye asked whether the current audit situation was a one-off or whether it was likely to affect the Authority's financial standing. The CFO confirmed he had been in discussions with the Home Office and they fully understand the Authority's position.

The AEL confirmed that Mazars would be the new pension fund auditors and hoped to minimise and future delays in providing assurance.

RESOLVED – That the verbal update be noted.

15. REPORTS OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

15.1 Forward Work Programme 2023/24

The ACFO-SPR outlined the Forward Work Programme for 2023/24, as detailed at Appendix 1, in accordance with the requirements of the Authority's Standing Orders. She noted that the Forward Work Programme will remain flexible to allow consideration of additional items should they arise.

RESOLVED – that the Forward Work Programme 2023/24, outlined at Appendix 1, be approved.

15.2 Organisational Performance Report April 2022 – March 2023

The Head of Risk and Performance (HoRP) gave a presentation outlining the annual performance of the Brigade for the period 1 April - 31 March 2023, which had been aligned to the Brigade's strategic goals, aims and associated outcomes.

The presentation highlighted the following key performance:

- Total incidents were 10,606 (+1,877 / 22%) compared to the 5-year average for the equivalent period. Total mobilisations were 15,724.
- Special Services were up 15% with 1,552 incidents recorded.
- Secondary Fires saw the largest increase with 4,709 incidents reported (+44%).
- Primary Fires were up 9% with 1,003 incidents and False Alarms were up 31% with 3,267 incidents.
- There was a 21% increase in Emergency Calls to Fire Control (+2,633 incidents) with a total 15,218 calls taken in comparison to the 5-year average.
- There have been 36,676 Safer Homes Visits targeted with 21,157 completed which was a 3,716 (21%) increase on the 3-year-average.
- 1,517 audit inspections of Industrial and Commercial Premises were carried out – a 15% decrease (272 fewer audits) compared to 2021/22 (including planned and re-active).
- Dwelling Fires had increased by 9% to 293 incidents (+24) compared to 2021/22 but CFB still remained one of the lowest rates in the country with the fastest response time. Of the 293 Dwelling Fires 216 were Accidental Dwelling Fires (ADFs) and 77 Deliberate Dwelling Fires (DDFs).
- Compared to the 5-year average there was a 14% increase in Dwelling Fires in Middlesbrough with 84 incidents (+10), Hartlepool up 7% to 48 (+3), Stockton up 34% to 91 (+23) and Redcar and Cleveland up 52% to 70 incidents (+24). The main causes being electrical (52 incidents – 24% increase); cooking (39 incidents – 18% increase) and careless handling (39 incidents – 18% increase).
- There have been 4 Dwelling Fire Fatalities and 17 Dwelling Fire Injures.

15.2 Organisational Performance Report April 2022 – March 2023 cont.

- Deliberate Fires have increased by 34% (1,228 incidents) to 4,847 compared to the 5-year average. Included within these, 538 (11%) were deliberate primary fires an increase of 120 incidents (29%) on the 5-year average. 4,309 (89%) were deliberate secondary fires an increase of 35% (+1,108 incidents) compared to 5-year-average. Main causes were vehicles (300 / 56% of all deliberate primary fires) and refuse (2,452 / 57% of all deliberate secondary fires).
- 300 Deliberate Vehicle Fires (DVF) – 35% increase on 5-year average (+77) and up 12% compared to 2021/22 (+31 incidents)
- 52% increase in Stockton DVFs with 91(+31) incidents recorded.
- 23% increase in Middlesbrough DVFs with 87 recorded (+16).
- 57% increase in Hartlepool DVFs with 58 incidents (+21).
- 16% increase in Redcar DVFs with 64 incidents (+9).
- 44 Violence to Staff incidents were recorded – 41% reduction compared to 2021/22 (-31 incidents) and 15% reduction on 5 year average (-8).
- Response Standards:
 - Call answering: Target set at 7 seconds, Actual 6.29 seconds
 - Call Handing: Target 100 seconds, Actual 80 seconds
 - Building Fires 1st Appliance Target 7 Minutes, Actual 5.26 minutes
 - Building Fires 2nd Appliance Target 10 Minutes, Actual 7.33 minutes
 - RTC Target 8 Minutes, Actual 5.44 minutes
- Sickness Absence is 12.70 shifts per person compared to 11.91 Nationally (CFB is 7% higher).
- There was an increase in sickness levels across Whole-time at 13.39 shifts (11.43 shifts National average), Fire Control at 24.62 shifts (14.49 National average) and Green Book at 13.95 shifts (9.56 shifts National Average). On-call staff sickness decreased 6.65 shifts (16.44 shifts national average).
- Total 6,814 Duty Days lost to Sickness Absence in 667 occurrences by 376 individuals.
- Total estimated cost of sickness absence April 2022 to March 2023 is £1.5m.

The Chair thanked the HoR&P for the optimistic presentation.

Councillor Kabuye asked how the Brigade achieves the best response times nationally. The HoR&P said this was due to a combination of using intelligence and risk modelling to ensure fire stations and resources are positioned for optimum performance. In addition, ongoing efforts to drive down false alarm calls by fire control operators helps free up resources. Councillor Kabuye asked how the response times were maintained against the rising level of staff absences. The HoR&P reported that the Brigade operated a duty system to optimise the number of appliances on the run at any one time. It also uses a dynamic cover toolkit and scenario planning to provide flexible cover to maintain an average of 16/17 appliances at any one time across the Brigade area.

The CFO confirmed that the financial impact of the Brigade's sickness levels equates to having 34 fewer people in the organisation annually and the additional cover to ensure appliances remain operational equates to a significant overtime bill.

RESOLVED – that the report be noted.

The ACFO Strategic Planning & Resources presented the audits undertaken to date and highlighted the outcomes relating to limited/satisfactory assurance. This included details of the two outstanding audits which are currently underway by Hartlepool Borough Council relating to Data Protection and Stores.

RESOLVED - that the progress made to date in the Internal Audit Plan 2022/23 be noted.

15.4 Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Members considered the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) which had been reviewed by the Active Risk Team in May 2023 and by the Executive Leadership Team in June 2023. The outcome of this review was detailed at Appendix 1 and the CFO referred Members to paragraph 4.4 which detailed the following changes:-

- New and Emerging Risks – none
- Changes to existing risks
 - Industrial Action
 - Pension Reforms
 - Public Perception
- Risks to be deleted from the CRR
 - Social Unrest and Public Disorder

RESOLVED – that Members noted the Corporate Risk Register, at Appendix 1.

COUNCILLOR STEVE KAY
CHAIR