

CLEVELAND FIRE AUTHORITY

MINUTES OF AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE MEETING



24 NOVEMBER 2023

PRESENT: **CHAIR:-** Councillor Steve Kay - Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council
MIDDLESBROUGH

Councillor Kabuye

STOCKTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

Councillors Jim Beall, Gardner

INDEPENDENT PERSONS

Mr Steve Harwood

Mr Paul McGrath

AUTHORISED OFFICERS

Chief Fire Officer, Legal Adviser & Monitoring Officer, Treasurer

Assistant Chief Fire Officer - Strategic Planning & Resources

Acting Assistant Chief Fire Officer - Community Protection

MAZARS

Mr Gavin Barker - Audit Engagement Lead

IN ATTENDANCE

Intelligence Manager - Risk & Performance

Head of Finance & Procurement

Partnerships & Evaluations Manager

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillor Henry Ashton - Hartlepool Borough Council
Councillors Naweed Hussain, Dennis McCabe - Middlesbrough Council
Councillor Stefan Houghton - Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

52. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS INTERESTS

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

53. MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Audit & Governance Committee held on 30 June 2023 be confirmed.

54. REPORT OF MAZARS

54.1 Audit Progress Report – November

The Audit Engagement Lead (AEL) updated Members on the progress of the 2022/23 Audit and outlined the reasons for delays in closing the 2020/21 and 2021/22 audits.

He reported that the 2020/21 audit certificate had been issued on 15 September which formally concludes this audit. Discrepancies with the Teesside Pension Fund auditor assurance had caused delays in completing the 2021/22 audit and work was ongoing with Middlesbrough Council and Teesside Pension Fund to resolve the issues. The AEL anticipated these issues would be resolved in time for the 2021/22 Financial Statements and Audit Completion Report to be considered by the Authority on 8 December 2023.

54.1 Audit Progress Report – November cont.

He outlined the following National Publications:

- National Audit Office (NAO)
- Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA)
- Department for Levelling-Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC)
- Chartered Institute of Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA)

The Chair expressed concern at the level of progress being made. The AEL confirmed that delays were not related to the Authority but were caused by technical accounting issues which are being experienced nationally.

(11.20am) Councillor Beall declared an interest as a Stockton representative of the cross-authority Teesside Pension Fund Committee. The Legal Adviser and Monitoring Officer (LAMO) confirmed this was a civic duty therefore not a disclosable pecuniary interest.

Members discussed the on-going staffing issue Mazars has which had caused delays for the Authority over the last three years. The AEL confirmed it was a national issue that was affecting all local authorities. Councillor Beall stated that despite delays concluding the audits, the financial management findings had been very positive.

RESOLVED – that the Audit Progress Report be noted.

54.3 Audit Strategy Memorandum 2022/23 – Year Ending 31 March 2023

The AEL presented the Audit Strategy Memorandum for the year ending 31 March 2023 which summarised Mazars' audit approach, highlighted significant audit risks and areas of key judgements.

The AEL informed Members that former Audit Manager Ross Woodley had been invited back to work on the Authority's audit due to staff shortages at Mazars. He also noted that audit fees for 2022/23 were less than the previous year which had required additional work to be done.

RESOLVED – That the Audit Strategy Memorandum 2022/23 be noted.

55. REPORTS OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

55.1 Organisational Performance Report April – September 2023

The Intelligence Manager gave a presentation outlining the performance of the Brigade for the period 1 April - 30 September 2023, which had been aligned to the Brigade's strategic goals, aims and associated outcomes.

The presentation highlighted the following key performance areas:

- Total incidents were 5,774 (+6 / 0.1%) compared to the 5-year average for the equivalent period. Total mobilisations were 8,988.
- Special Services were up 17% with 1,005 incidents recorded.
- Secondary Fires saw a decrease with 2,247 incidents reported (-39%).
- Primary Fires were up 9% with 525 incidents and False Alarms were up 34% with 1,962 incidents.
- There was a 1% reduction in Emergency Control Calls (-117 incidents) with a total 8,106 calls taken in comparison to the 5-year average.

55.1 Organisational Performance Report April – September 2023 cont.

- There have been 16,955 Safer Homes Visits targeted with 9,942 completed which was a 1,490 (+18%) increase on the 4-year-average.
- 325 audit inspections of Industrial and Commercial Premises were carried out – an 11% decrease (42 fewer audits). 218 Building Regulation and Licencing Consultations were completed.
- 2,772 fires were recorded making up 48% of the total number of incidents. This is a 35% reduction in fires (-1,514) compared to 2022/23 and a 10% reduction (-312 fires) on 5-year-average. 523 were Primary Fires – a 19% reduction compared to 2022/23 (-119 incidents). 2,247 were Secondary Fires (38% reduction to 2022/23 (-1,394 incidents).
- Dwelling Fires made up 28% of Primary Fires with 146 incidents; Industrial & Commercial was 7% with 35 fires and Vehicles 41% with 213 incidents.
- 29 Brigade vehicle accidents were recorded – an increase of 81% (+13) compared to 2022/23. 22 of these involved appliances and 11 were on blue lights.
- Response Standards:

• Call answering:	Target set at 7 seconds, Actual 6.22 seconds
• Call Handing:	Target 100 seconds, Actual 86 seconds
• Building Fires 1st Appliance	Target 7 Minutes, Actual 5.57 minutes
• Building Fires 2nd Appliance	Target 10 Minutes, Actual 8.01 minutes
• RTC	Target 8 Minutes, Actual 6.19 minutes
- Sickness Absence is 6.91 shifts per person compared to 5.26 Nationally. CFB is 31% higher year-to-date.
- There was an increase in Whole-time sickness levels at 7.15 shifts (5.08 shifts National average), Fire Control was down at 5.20 shifts (5.24 National average), Green Book at 5.86 shifts (4.24 National Average) and On-call staff sickness at 7.67 (7.22 national average).
- Total 3,761 Duty Days lost to Sickness Absence in 295 occurrences by 234 individuals.
- Total estimated cost of sickness absence April 2023 to September 2023 is £932k.

The Chair thanked the Intelligence Manager for the presentation and asked whether wildfires at Eston Hills had increased since last year. The CFO reported that action by Friends of Eston Hills and initiatives to prevent quadbikes and motorcycles accessing the area has resulted in a reduction in wildfires this year, however the weather will also have impacted the figures.

Councillor Kabuye asked why the Brigade's sickness figures were higher than the national average. The CFO confirmed that while there was a general trend nationally the health index of the North-East compared poorly to other areas of the UK which may be a causal link to staff sickness. The ACFO-SPR reported that the Brigade has an active Health & Wellbeing Board and staff have access to an Occupational Health service and policies and practices to support them back into the workplace.

RESOLVED – that the report be noted.

55.2 Internal Audit Progress Report

The ACFO-SPR presented the audits undertaken to date and highlighted the outcomes relating to limited/satisfactory assurance.

RESOLVED - that the progress made against the 2022/23 and 2023/24 Internal Audit Plans be noted.

55.3 Annual Statement of Assurance

Members scrutinised the Annual Statement of Assurance 2022/23, detailed at Appendix 1, 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.

RECOMMENDED – That the CFA consider and approve the Annual Statement of Assurance 2022/23 (Appendix 1) at its meeting on 8 December 2023.

55.3 Evaluation of Safer Homes Visits 2022/23

Members considered a detailed presentation on the findings of the Evaluation of Safer Homes Visits (SHVs) carried out between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. This related to the impact of SHVs on Accidental Dwelling Fires and considered the delivery of the service, value for money and resident feedback.

Members thanked the Partnerships & Evaluations Manager (P&EM) for the presentation and acknowledged that it was difficult to fully quantify the impact of this preventative work. They agreed that SHVs were valued in the communities by individuals and by partner agencies and enhanced the reputation of the Brigade.

The P&EM confirmed that the next evaluation of SHVs will focus on the Brigade's partnership work and consider the process of referring in and out of the Brigade and how these are monitored.

RESOLVED – That the findings and recommendations contained within the evaluation report on Safer Homes Visits at Appendix 1 be noted.

55.4 Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Members considered the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) which had been reviewed by the Active Risk Team and the Executive Leadership Team in October 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
 - Reinforced Aerated Autoclave Concrete (RAAC)
- Changes to existing risks – none
- Risks to be deleted from the CRR – none

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

55.5 Progress Against Revenue & Capital Budgets 2023/24

The Head of Finance (HoF) presented the current position as at 30 September 2023 as an underspend of £0.221m and informed Members that the forecasted outturn position was an underspend of £0.160m. She noted that this position reflected the external financial challenges of high inflation, the Green Book Pay Award and additional one-off costs for a Fire Control Mobilising System and replacement of Breathing Apparatus Equipment.

The HoF reported a forecast outturn position of £1.511m underspend against a revised Capital Budget of £5.543m for 2023/24 which included a significant element of capital expenditure to be deferred to 2024/25. Members were referred to Appendix 2 for the progress for each project within the Capital Programme.

RESOLVED - that the position as at 30 September 2023 be noted.

56. REPORT OF THE TREASURER

56.1 Treasury Management Strategy 2023/24 – Quarter 2 Update

The Treasurer provided Members with an update of the Treasury Management Strategy 2023/24 which had been approved on 24 March 2023. This covered:

- Economic Background and Outlook for Interest Rates
- Treasury Management Strategy 2023/24 – 2nd Quarter Review
- Investment Strategy – financial markets not currently providing 2-year investment periods due to the Bank of England holding base rate at 5.25%
- Borrowing Strategy

He informed Members that this update had been prepared before the Autumn Statement and since then the Office for Budget Responsibility had revised the growth forecasts for March 2024 from 1.8% to 0.9%.

RESOLVED – That the Treasury Management Strategy 2023/24 Quarter 2 update report be noted.

**COUNCILLOR STEVE KAY
CHAIR**