

**MINUTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 29 MARCH 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.26 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Emma Hobbs (Vice-Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Clive Jones, Abdul Loyes and Pauline Helliard-Symons

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey and Angus Ross

Officers Present

Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist) and Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist)

80. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Graham Howe and Alison Swaddle.

Pauline Helliard-Symons attended the meeting as a substitute for Graham Howe.

81. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 19 January 2021 and the Minutes of the extraordinary meeting of the Committee held on 22 February 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date.

82. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Pauline Helliard-Symons relating to agenda item 85, on the grounds that she was one of the Council's Member representatives on the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service Fire Authority. Pauline stated that she would continue to take part in discussions related to this item.

A declaration of interest was submitted from Paul Fishwick relating to agenda item 85, on the grounds that he was an owner of a small business which was inspected by the Fire Authority once every five years.

83. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

84. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

85. LOCAL FIRE SERVICE UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 23 to 24 and supplementary agenda pages 3 to 15, which gave a strategic overview of the work carried out by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) over the past 12 months.

The update highlighted the RBFRS's financial position, including the progress made towards achieving a £2.4m savings goal. Two Tri-service stations have been opened, one in Hungerford in 2017 and the second in Crowthorne in 2020. A third Tri-service station was scheduled to open in Theale towards the end of 2021. Since 2017, 11 new generation Volvo fire appliances had been delivered, with a further 4 scheduled to be delivered in 2021. The update noted a committed drive to educate the public about prevention,

including the 'Safe and Well visits' scheme and a targeted programme for motorcyclists based on risk. The update noted that during 2021/22, it was proposed that the RBFRS would undertake a review of their technical rescue capabilities in order to ensure that it continues to be aligned to local risk and national best practice.

Tregear Thomas, Area Manager, attended the meeting to answer Member queries. In addition, Angus Ross and Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey (Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) Member representatives on the RBFRS Fire Authority) attended the meeting to provide additional context and background for Committee Members.

During the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and queries:

- When the RBFRS carried out training sessions, could they place an emphasis on the dangers of being distracted by their phone, especially when near waterways? Area Manager response – This was an area that was already covered within training sessions, however a greater emphasis could be placed on this going forward. Due to an expected increase in 'staycations' this year, training was also being offered around staying safe at seaside locations.
- Had there been any noticeable impact due to the closure of the Wargrave Fire Station? Area Manager response – There had been no noticeable impact on response times or coverage, and the new Tri-service stations were functioning very well.
- Where and how did the RBFRS generate additional income? Area Manager response – The service was very limited in the ways that it could generate income. When the Tri-service station opened up in Theale, and the existing station in Pangbourne was no longer required, the usage of the Pangbourne site could be maximised if that is what the community agreed to.
- Was there a benefit to purchasing new fire appliances together with other Fire Services? Area Manager response – More competitive prices could be negotiated when purchasing with other Fire Services.
- Were the new fire appliances Euro 6 compliant (a measure of how much pollution is generated from a vehicle), and were non-frontline vehicles being switched to electric or hydrogen powered? Area manager response – The new Volvo fire appliances were low emission vehicles, and this was a requirement when they were purchased. Non-frontline vehicles, referred to as the 'White Fleet', were being replaced with hybrid or electric vehicles where possible at the end of their lifespan. A WBC Fire Authority representative commented that the procurement of vehicles was being aligned between Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire to allow the same techniques and equipment to be used in any of the three areas.
- How were households of additional risk identified? Area Manager response – Different datasets were used, including from the NHS, which identified a number of characteristics including the age and socio-economic background of 'super output' areas. This enabled the RBFRS to focus on specific areas of potential risk, rather than individual households, which may benefit from additional support.
- What was done to assist people with sensory needs? Area Manager response – People with sensory needs were identified as an 'at risk' group. Safe and Well checks could be organised for people in need. For people with additional sensory needs,

detectors could be fitted with strobe lights in addition to vibrating pads for people when they slept.

- Had the RBFRS noticed more issues of hoarding, and additional residential fires as a result? Area manager response – More instances of hoarding had been identified, and the RBFRS was working alongside other agencies to provide safeguarding support.
- What work was being done to ensure that Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) were safe from a fire safety perspective? Area Manager response – The RBFRS was working closely with Local Authorities and other agencies regarding HMOs, including providing advice to the landlords. Student homes did not usually pass the legal threshold of an HMO as the occupants had a common pursuit of being students.
- What was being done to ensure that small businesses such as restaurants were safe, including residential units that were located above them? Area Manager response – It was the responsibility of the responsible person, usually the employer or business owner, to maintain an up to date risk assessment and have in place all of the fire safety precautions necessary. The RBFRS carried out risk based inspections of businesses to ensure compliance.
- Were areas such as Grazeley, where there could be an emergency involving nuclear leakage, a responsibility for the RBFRS in the case of an emergency? Area Manager response – The Fire Safety and Civil Contingencies Act sets out that the Fire Authority must be in a position to respond to any emergency. Sites of risk were required to have on and offsite plans, whereby the offsite plans would include a response by the RBFRS.
- Had any rehearsals been carried out with regards to the nuclear protection zone at the Burghfield site? Area Manager response – On and offsite plans were kept up to date for a number of sites within the county, and rehearsals were regularly carried out.
- Would there be a possibility of a merge between local Fire Authorities? Area Manager response – Not at this present time. Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire already operated a 'closer is closer' response method, meaning the closest vehicle at the time would attend an emergency in any of those areas, regardless of its starting destination. In addition, procedures, techniques and skills had been aligned between the three areas.
- Had there been any increase in the numbers of residential fires, or a decrease in highways incidents, as a result of national lockdowns? Area Manager response – The most noticeable change had been reports of, and responses to, outdoor fires.
- What support could WBC offer to the RBFRS? Area Manager response – Continued attendance from WBC Members at Local Safety Plan sessions would be a great example of closer working. RBFRS and WBC were already well connected through the Community Safety Partnership, which was another good example of close working relationships between different agencies such as the Thames Valley Police. If WBC could continue to encourage the installation of sprinklers wherever possible that would go a long way towards saving lives. No one in England had ever died from a fire in a property with a properly installed sprinkler system.

- Was recruitment and retention an issue for the RBFRS? Area Manager response – Recruitment and retention was not a significant issue, however on call firefighters were a challenge due to the time commitments and compatibility with people’s personal and work lives. Full time recruitment was not an issue, and workforce planning was constantly taking place.
- Did the Area Manager have any opinion of the safety of smart motorways? Area Manager response – Smart motorways were designed with safety in mind. It would not be right for the Area Manager to provide an opinion regarding their safety, however it had been designed with road safety in mind.
- Would it be helpful for WBC to provide guidance on what could and could not be burned in bonfires? Area manager response – There was an opportunity for an educational piece to advise appropriate materials that could be burned on a bonfire. Unless a fire was at risk of causing damage to property or was in danger of becoming out of control, the RBFRS were limited in their response. If pollution was a serious issue, then it was up to Environmental Health to respond.
- WBC Fire Authority representatives commented that collaboration was at the forefront of the RBFRS’s operation. The Fire Minister was looking at governance of Fire Services across the country, which the RBFRS would be carefully watching.
- WBC Fire Authority representatives commented that the RBFRS were enjoyable and productive to work with, and the authority was totally non-political. There was a lot of Member development on the Fire Authority, particularly when new Members joined. The objective of the service was to respond to fire within ten minutes, which was usually achieved. Trevor Ferguson would be retiring as the Chief Fire Officer, and would be replaced by Wayne Bowcock. There was a lot of local Member involvement in the Fire Authority, and the whole arrangement worked very well for our residents.
- WBC Fire Authority representatives commented that the new tri-service stations were very effective, and became the centre of their communities. There was cross party support within WBC for the installation of sprinklers in schools and learning facilities.
- The Committee extended their thanks to the Fire Service for their support and hard work over the past 12 months, especially when considering difficult periods of national lockdown.
- The Committee welcomed the Safe and Well visits conducted by the RBFRS, and hoped that these would help to save the lives of at risk persons within the Borough.
- The Committee implored residents to come forward for Safe and Well visits and additional support if they were at risk, or knew of people who were at risk. Safe and Well visits could be the difference between saving a life, and losing one.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Tregear Thomas be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Angus Ross, Pauline Helliard-Symons and Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey be thanked for attending the Committee;

- 3) Links between WBC and the RBFRS be maintained and strengthened;
- 4) Individuals be encouraged to come forward for Safe and Well visits if they were, or knew of others, who were at risk;
- 5) A further update be considered during the 2021/22 municipal year.