



**ethics, transparency
& audit panel**
Building public trust in policing and fire and rescue



Draft V02

Item 1 (i)

**MINUTES OF THE ETHICS, TRANSPARENCY AND AUDIT PANEL (ETAP) FIRE & RESCUE MEETING held on Wednesday 22 February 2023
Conference Room 2, Block 7, Police HQ**

Present:

ETAP members	Officers
Bob Simpson (BS) Chair	Rob Barber - Chief Fire Officer (RB)
Ben Thompson (BT)	David Greensmith - FARS Director of Finance (DG)
Martyn Rochelle (MR)	Victoria Farrar - Head of Governance and Assurance (VF)
Craig Brown (CB)	Ralph Butler - SCO Head of Policy and Strategy (RB)
Jane King (JK)	Jean Cass - SCO Governance Lead (JC)
John Wheatley (JW)	
Sue Westacott (SW)	Also, in attendance
	Angela Ward - Senior Manager, RSM Auditors (AW)
	Sarah Jassal - Sector Audit Manager, Grant Thornton (SJ)
SCO - Staffordshire Commissioner's Office	
Force - Staffordshire Police Force	
FARS - Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Services	

1. Declaration of interests, apologies, minutes and actions.

Declarations of Interest: - no declarations of interest were received.

Apologies: ETAP members Chris Gill (CG), Jane Barr (JB), Sue Finney (SF) and Emma Christmas (EC). Louise Clayton SCO Chief Executive (LC), Corrina Bradley, FARS Deputy Chief Finance Officer (CBR), Daniel Harris Partner RSM Auditors (DH) and Mark Stocks Partner Grant Thornton Auditors (MS).

Minutes & Actions from of Previous Meeting 31 October 2022.

AGREED - That the minutes of the meeting held on the 31 October 2022 were confirmed, as an accurate and true record.

Actions

Updates to actions from previous meetings

Item1 – Implementation of New Accounts software package - BS asked for further updates at the Finance Panel. Update given at the Finance Panel meeting on the 30 January 2023 - complete.

2. Deputy Chair's Feedback

i. **Finance Panel – Emma Christmas (EC)**

EC was unable to attend today's meeting.

BS advised that the finance updates including the precept papers are covered on the agenda today.

RB's advised that – Glynn Luznyj (GL) attended the last ETAP meeting and gave an update on the possible industrial action relating to pay awards. There is a new pay offer from the employees of 7% for 2022 and 5% for 2023. This offer will have an impact on the Medium-Term Strategy (MTFS). The Fire Brigade Union, (FBU) are recommending acceptance of this offer.

RB advised that FARS are awaiting the publication and recommendations from Grenfell phase 2 report. FARS are currently working though the 20 areas for improvements from the HMICFRS report. The next inspection is due Autumn this year.

RB, FARS are working on culture reports and a statement of intent has been published which includes a zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour of FARS officers and staff.

Q: BS, some of the recent dismissal by FARS, have these been to tribunals and been successful?

A: RB, yes in the past 12 months, FARS have been to tribunals to dismissal a number of colleagues for their inappropriate use of WhatsApp Groups.

Q: BS, are you taking outside assistant looking to look at culture changes?

A: RB, FARS are in the process talking to a number of independent consultations around well-being.

Q: JK, has the 'Know the Line' (KNL) the practices, introduced by the Force been adopted by the Fire service?

A: RB, yes, the KNL practices will be rolled out to all of the supervisory managers and in addition FARS are reinstating the Inclusion training covering Equality & Diversity and across the service. This has started with the Executive Team having receive the training. In addition, FARS have been adopting the National Chief Council's Core Code of Ethics, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioner's (APCC) and the Local Governance Association (LGA).

Q; JW, what is the current position on the upgrades to the Finance System?

A: DG, the upgrades to the Integra system has been worked on over the weekend and CBR is working on the system to resolve some minor issues. The Integra system was built by FARS's Finance Team with some support from consultants.

Q: BS, can you comment please on the staffing issues?

A: DG, there has been some staffing issues in the IT team over the past two years. Recruitment has now taken place and staff are all in place. The upgrades have now taken place to the telephone and conference systems and the Wi-Fi at Fire HQ.

ii. Review update - Jane King (JK)

JK presented a verbal update at the meeting today.

Inspection process Review - SW & BT have had an initial meeting with GL looking at the project management of HMICFRS recommendations.

RB advised that he expected a dashboard to be created, this would contain a tracker system containing all 20 recommendations and areas for improvements.

Following a discussion at the meeting today, it was agreed to SW & BT would return to FARS and meet with Will Parkinson (WP) Performance and Assurance Manager.

Q: BT, is there a training in opportunity to up skill officers

A: RB, FARS are working across a number of areas with Staffordshire University, looking to bring in secondments or internships to help on a number of projects.

VF, asked RB for a flow chart on the areas for improvements of the recommendations; this would members assurance of how the recommendations are being reported and how they are being monitored.

ACTION 1: SW & BT to meet with WP and Nick Jones at FARS

ACTION 2: RB to supply of a copy of the flow chart of HMICFRS Inspection recommendations

Copy of all ETAP thematic reviews published to date can be found on the SCO website <https://staffordshire-pfcc.gov.uk/transparency/etap>

BS thanked JK for her update and report.

3. Police, Fire and Crime Panel (PFCP) (verbal feedback)

BS, the PFCP have met three times in February, at the meeting on 13th February, the panel received the Precept papers, as on today's agenda and the Fire and Safety Rescue Plan 2020-24 Update Report, which included details of the Falls Response Team.

RB advised that FARS have created the Response Team, working with partners, to deal with low level calls of trips and falls in homes and Care Homes. This saves patients a considerable amount of time laying on the floor waiting for ambulances to arrive. The team also carry out Fire Safety checks whilst in homes and this project went live as a pilot in East Staffs with £150k funding from the NHS.

RB advised that the pilot has very successful with lots of fantastic feedback from family members and as at the start of January the team have had been to over 100 calls. This service has now been extended to all of Staffordshire with funding until the end of March 2023. The next part, of this work is for FARS to carry out care packages in homes looking to help those patients coming home from hospital.

Q: BT, can care homes not lift up their own residents after these falls?

A: RB, FARS have invested in a specific piece of equipment that inflates to a seated position to enable them to help patients off the floor. Care homes do not have the capability or the equipment to lift patients in this way.

Q: BS, have the results of this scheme been shared with other Fire Services?

A: RB, yes, the details of the scheme has so far been shared with Humberside Fire who have had a similar service for a number of years.

4. Precept reports

- i. Budget and MTFS
- ii. MTFS Supplementary Report
- iii. Capital Strategy
- iv. Reserves Strategy
- v. Treasury Management Strategy

DG advised that the pack of precept papers were submitted to the PFCP on the 13th February. The Precept increase was unanimously agreed by the panel and the notifications have been submitted to the billing office.

This has been a challenging process, the assumptions may not be all right, and a supplementary paper was prepared in light of recent pay increases.

The papers included the Commissioner's proposal to increase the 2023/24 precept for the fire element of the council tax bill by 4.85% or £3.90 per annum which is equivalent to 7.5p per week, increasing the council tax to £84.25 for a Band D Property.

The Council Tax base has increased to 360,299 properties equivalent to an increase of 1.46%. The Council Tax collection fund has also been finalised delivering a surplus of £405k. Note this includes the option to spread the £102k per annum deficit attributable to COVID-19 over 3 years and this is the final year.

Following the proposed pay increasing, 5% for this financial year and 7% for next year, a supplementary paper was produced showing a revised position includes a saving requirement increasing to c.£1.4m during the MTFS period and a net use of earmarked grants/reserves of £1.142m.

Q: CB, how do you decide on your crewing models, are the savings being tracked?

A: RB, the traditional level of crewing appliances was 5 officers throughout the establishment. There is now an agreement with the FBU to crew appliances with four officers and savings from this reduction in crew members are being tracked.

DG added, as a direct result of this action, there has been a significant drop in the overtime costs, these savings have been reported to the Finance Panel.

Q: BS, can you give an update on the Stafford project?

A: DG, FARS are working through option appraisals for combined stations at either the Fire station at Hydrant Way or the Police Station at Eastgate Street.

BS thanked DG for his reports and asked for his thanks, on behalf of the ETAP members, to be passed to the FARS Finance Team.

5. Internal Auditors

AW presented three reports from RSM during the meeting today.

i. Progress Report

AW advised that there have been no changes to the current plan for 2022/23.

Appendix outlines the progress to date made against the plan.

A draft report has been issued on Cyber security, there are issues in the report, but these areas are common in this area including updating areas of vulnerabilities and not out of sync. with other clients of RSM.

Payroll and follow up reports are going well

ii. Financial Controls - Pension Arrangements

Assurance Opinion – Substantial

'Taking account of the issues identified, the Service can take substantial assurance that the controls upon which the organisation relies to manage this area are suitably designed, consistently applied and effective'

One Low priority housekeeping management action

iii. Financial Controls - Freedom of Information request (FOI)

Assurance Opinion – Substantial Assurance

'Taking account of the issues identified, the Service can take substantial assurance that the controls upon which the organisation relies to manage this area are suitably designed'

Two low priority housekeeping management actions

Q: JK, what type of FOI requests do FARS receive?

A: RB, FARS receives on average approx.10 requests per month. These requests come from can be for variety of items including how many days sickness have FARS had per month, the number of appliances attending particular fires, data inquiries and requests for pension information.

BS thanked AW for these reports and updates.

6. External Auditors

SJ gave a verbal update at the meeting today.

Following the last ETAP meeting in October, the audit opinion report has now gone through and was issued in November. This was clean 'audit opinion' report, after the audit valuations were resolved. The External Audit plan for 2022.23 will be presented at the May meeting.

There have been some revisions to the International Auditing Standards 315, will be add to the audit for the 2022.23. This will increase the work on the audit on the financial statements including the work on risk and IT general controls.

Q: JW, will there be additional fees for this work?

A: SJ, yes there will be some cost implication for this additional work.

7. AOB

- (i) Annual report – VFM (value for money statement)

SJ presented this VFM report for 2021/22 for FARS and Grant Thornton are now able to issue a completion document.

SJ advised that this is a very positive report with very few recommendations around financial sustainability and the use of benchmarking data.

Q: CB, have there been any outcomes following the Financial challenge roadshows from last years

A: RB, the joint estates work can have a big financial benefit to both organisations. The gap in the MTFS is still very large and FARS have further concern with the amount of further reductions.

Action 3: DG to provide an update on the Benchmarking group at a future meeting of the Finance Panel meeting

BS thanked SJ for her report and updates.

The date and time of next meeting is the Wednesday 24 May 2023 14.00 - 15.30.