



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



Draft V05

Item 1

## MINUTES OF THE ETHICS, TRANSPARENCY AND AUDIT PANEL (ETAP) FIRE & RESCUE MEETING

Date: Thursday 5 December 2024

Location: Fire HQ, Room 1

### Present:

ETAP members	Officers
Bob Simpson (BS) Chair	Rob Barber - Chief Fire Officer (RB)
Bryon Preece (BP)	David Greensmith - FARS Director of Finance (DG)
Craig Brown (CB)	Corrina Bradley - FARS Assistant Director of Finance (CBr)
Chris Key (CK)	Heather Lees - SCO Director of Finance (HL)
Emma Christmas (EC)	Victoria Jones - Director of Governance & Assurance (VJ)
Gurpreet Singh (GS)	Kathryn Grattage - SCO Governance Manager (KG)
Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal (HI)	
Jane King (JK)	<b>External Officers in attendance</b>
John Wheatley (JW)	Daniel Harris - Partner RSM Auditors (DH)
Louisa Harrison (LH) – On Teams	
Chris Gill (CG) - On Teams	Paul Grady - Azets Auditors (PG)
	Azola Dudula - Azets Auditors (AD)
<b>SCO - Staffordshire Commissioner's Office</b>	
<b>Force - Staffordshire Police Force</b>	
<b>FARS - Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Services</b>	

One member of the public was in attendance today.

Prior to the meeting today, ETAP members held their pre-meeting 13.30 - 14.00

### 1. Annual Election to the ETAP Chair's Position

VJ advised that ETAP members were invited to express their interest in the position of ETAP Chair in November 2024. This is due to BS stepping down, as he nears the end of his tenure.

The SCO received one expression of interest from Chris Key (CK). As such CK will commence as the new Chair of ETAP with effect from the 6 December 2024.

BS offered his congratulations to CK.

### 2. Declaration of interests, apologies, minutes and actions.

Declarations of Interest: None

Apologies: Louise Clayton Chief Executive SCO (LC) ETAP Members Paul Atkins (PA) & Sue Westacott (SW). Who has announced that she wishes to resign from the committee with immediate effect for personal reasons.

Minutes & Actions of the meeting on the 26 September 2024

**AGREED** – It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on the 26 September 2024, are confirmed as an accurate and true record. \*On Page 4 – Actions, Corrina Bradley was noted in the minutes as CB and this should have been CBr.

**ACTION 1.** CBr to add a review of the Fire’s Gifts and Hospitality Register when updated.

**Ongoing:** CBr has updated the Policy. There were some minor changes to the Policy which have been updated and this is now out to consultation. The two main areas of change: -

- Previously used a manual form and updating of the register, now using online forms on the intranet and this feeds into the database, so the process has been automated.
- Threshold changes, currently £10 threshold and anything over this is included on the register. Felt this was too low and research across other organisations indicates a limit of circa £50. In the policy this has been increased to £50 and is currently going through consultation.

Policy has been updated but not finalised until after the 12-week consultation. Will bring to next ETAP in February 2025

### 3. Questions from members of the public

The question relates to the minutes of the meeting of 25 September 2024, referring back to the “ETAP Annual Report 2024”. Responses are shown in **GREEN**

1. At 4 December 2024, what is the current length of service of the fourteen members of ETAP? **There are currently thirteen members of ETAP. The longest serving member will leave ETAP by 31 May 2025 when they will have served their maximum tenure of nine years. The newest member of the panel commenced on 10 July 2024 and will have a maximum tenure of six years.**
2. Will any of the current ETAP members be permitted to continue as an ETAP member (including perhaps as successor to the current ETAP Chair) beyond the current permitted tenure of 6 years? **Yes, the permitted tenure for ETAP members is six years. During COVID due to an inability to recruit and to ensure Statutory Audit Committee duties were completed, this was extended for existing Panel Members to nine years. Of the current thirteen members there are seven members whose tenures were extended to nine years. The other ETAP members have a fixed six-year tenure in line with the usual permitted tenure.**

### 4. Update from Chief Fire Officer – Rob Barber

Aware that the panel had an update at the previous meeting in relation to the HMICFRS Report. Continue to track all 'Areas For Improvement' from the report through the tracker.

One of the suggested areas, and one ETAP also suggested was regarding project management. FARS had made an appointment to this role but the candidate has subsequently turned this down. The role is currently back out to advert and will keep the Panel updated on progress.

FARS were still awaiting what the new Government position is in terms of their opinion on Fire reform. There are ongoing discussions with ministers and civil servants regarding a new College of Fire and what this would look like. Discussions are ongoing with Home Office at a National level, no defined position or timeframe at present and RB will keep the Panel updated.

**Action 1: To keep ETAP updated with the ongoing discussions regarding a new College of Fire.**

Grenfell Phase 2 report published. Staffordshire is managing all the recommendations by the Service Management Board (SMB). There were 58 recommendations and 18 directly related to FARS, so focusing on these areas. Report critical of successive Governments, management companies and fire testing regimes.

**Action 2: For a further update regarding Staffordshire FARS progress in managing the recommendations from the Grenfell Phase 2 Report.**

Recently completed a public consultation, and had the best response in recent years, this is due to the fact the service has taken the decision to be more proactive with community engagement over last few years. Reviewed all responses and the document is out for publication at the end of this month, ready for a January launch.

The three-rider trial ended 1 December. Policy has been adopted with some minor changes to incident types that three riders can attend. This was on basis of staff feedback and representative bodies. The main change was that three-rider crews has been removed them being the first crew attending domestic incidents, they will still attend these incidents as support but not as first attendant.

Progress in Joint Emergency Transport Service (JETS). There have been testing times over the last few years. Structures and remedial actions were put in place have put the team in a really good position., with performance and efficiency having improved.

RB asked what topics ETAP would be reviewing at FARS over the next 12 months, and he suggested it might be good to look at a couple of small initiatives. He proposed ETAP look at the Falls Response Team and Home from Hospital. These had been highlighted in the Inspection report as promising practice. These activities have been really positive and they have had enquiries from other FARS regarding implementing similar services in other areas.

BS, Thanked the Chief Fire Officer for his update and congratulated him on the continuing improvements and good news. BS also agreed that the ERP team should consider a review of the Falls Team and Home from Home as new initiatives.

**Action 3: CB to consider adding review of Falls Response and Home from Hospital initiatives to the ERP workplan.**

RB stated there had been a lot of negative activity on Social Media in relation to the three-person crews. A lot of this has been inaccurate and follows on from false Social Media reports regarding an incident that was attended in Lichfield.

Q: HI, have you considered challenging the comments on Social Media?

A: RB, it can get quite abusive on social media. RB has on occasions had personal abuse towards him and his family on Social Media. The service won't challenge on Social Media but will respond to enquiries.

Q: BS, asked if RB could explain to the Panel the operating model for FARS as not all FARS operate with a Commissioner.

A: RB, yes there are a number of models, Staffordshire Fire Service previously had a Combined Fire Authority. This was a Staffordshire County Council organisation and had representatives from all local authorities in Staffordshire. The Fire Authority also had a number of sub groups looking at particular topics of business.

Staffordshire transitioned to a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner model in 2018. There are other Fire services with Commissioners and some have local mayors and one where the commissioner is a member of the Fire Authority.

Responsibility for all Police matters lies with the Chief Constable but the responsibility for all Fire matters ultimately lies with the Commissioner. There are some significant proposals in the Fire Services White Paper in regards to governance and operational independence and clearly defining responsibilities

Q: CG, it is positive that there has been a good response from consultation and is making good steps with public relations, that could overcome Social Media criticism.

A: RB, taking opportunity to engage face to face when possible and use other communication channels as an added opportunity. Data from the consultation showed that all communities responded, there were fewer from younger people, but the data means that they can do further work with underrepresented groups.

Q: BP, Grenfell response is due by a 2030 deadline will this put pressure on FARS?

A: RB, in Staffordshire only have one building with an issue regarding cladding, also Fire Safety issues with this building. Government is asking for this work to be sped up but it is a complex area. Building Safety Regulator, Legislation was changed in 2005 which removed the responsibility from FARS and therefore no need for large safety teams at that time. With demand returning and the need for experience, training and development puts additional pressure on FARS Safety Teams and will take some time to build up.

Q: CK, are there any early indications from new Government, in relation to changes to funding or governance arrangements?

A: RB, on the negative there are some funding grants which the service has previously received that might not be available, and it could be a challenging four years (particularly for the latter two years of the three year settlement). Staffordshire plan for the worst-case scenario and have

employed an external organisation to review the data, and already have some plans to deal with this.

BS thanked RB for his openness in responding to members questions.

## 5. Deputy Chair's Feedback

### i. Chair of the Finance Panel – Emma Christmas (EC)

The Finance Panel met in October, for an Insight meeting focusing on risk. Excellent presentation received from Vicky Adams (VA). This was very reassuring answered challenges and was very positive, will revisit in six months at the next Finance Panel Insight meeting.

BS, reminded all ETAP members that risk is one of main statutory priorities of the whole of the Audit Committee and the presentation from VA gave a lot of reassurance re ongoing improvement.

BS thanked EC for her update and was pleased to hear of the improvements on managing risk.

### ii. Chair of the Ethics and Review Panel – Craig Brown (CB)

Met November and had a presentation from Wez Jones regarding the Ethics Channel at Force, which replaced face to face sessions that were not well attended. Panel think this is a good thing. Reviewed the End to End Process for reviews and discussed this.

Regarding progress on other reviews; had been planning a review of CISP but this has been pushed back 6 months due to staffing issues within SCO.

Current and Future reviews; have Joint estates strategy with combined estates, are there cultural or ethical challenges regarding this? Grenfell Phase 2, potentially start a review in spring 2025.

Project Management was only a short review planned and aimed at establishing how the role settles in but will push this back until four to six months after the new appointment.

Falls Response Team and the Home from Hospital will look at a review into this. Will need to run the review through the decision matrix. This will be shared with FARS. The key individual for contact will be Ian Read.

RB confirmed have had some academic evaluation from University of Chester on the Falls Team and they are also looking at the Home From Hospital initiative as well.

**Action 4: CB to score this topic using the Matrix and report back at the next ETAP meeting.**

BS thanked CB for his report and update

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

## 6. MTFS Update - Presented by David Greensmith

Report considered by Police, Fire and Crime Panel 18.11.2024. Original MTFS was approved in February and was broadly balanced in the medium term and reflected positive view.

Continue to progress transformation options, have delivered number of savings over last 18 months. HMICFRS recognised this and the service was rated as good, with a positive comment from Inspectorate regarding Transformation.

Timetable on Page three of the report shows making good progress and are now looking at a first draft of the budget. Budget challenge sessions have been completed and there are a number of upward pressures on costs moving forwards. In a different position than previously. ETAP are aware of current financial position through the Finance Panel and in line with budget.

Pay; was budgeted at 5% for this year and this came in at 4%. Sticking with 3% for next year.

Capital Financing and use of reserves resulted in Capital Finance reduction. Reviewed non-pay costs particularly around utilities grant.

The Fire Fighter Pension Grant received this year to cover additional employers' contribution was around £150,000 less than budgeted, this is due to apportionment of the grant.

Investments; Project Management role and ICT Team, and in the shared Fire Control with West Midlands, investing in a new command and control system. The system is currently around £6million and Staffordshire pick up 30% of these costs spread over a 5-year period.

Some changes since Government released policy statement last week;

Funding guarantee has now gone, this was a £268million grant for Public Sector with £828,000 for FARS but that will disappear, it will be reallocated to more needy areas of the Public Sector. Special services grant has also gone, with the loss of circa £900, 000.

Gap of £1.1million by 2028-29, which is a different picture than previously. Met with the Commissioner on 4 December 2024 to discuss transformation options and how to address the gap.

Q: JW, is the £800,000 in the first year cumulative?

A: DG, it is a rolling position.

Q: EC, there is a blanket withdrawal of the grant funding, but based on deprivation may get some of this due to some of the areas within Staffordshire?

A: DG, Stoke On Trent may get some of the funding but this will probably go to the Council rather than FARS.

Another part of equation was around the announcement around Council tax. FARS referendum has been increased to £5 for next year. There is an opportunity to increase Council Tax by £5 if choose to take it, and this was discussed with the Commissioner. For FARS this is about 5.8% this increase would mitigate some of the loss of grant funding. However, will depend on

consultation feedback and the Commissioner is not comfortable with asking public to increase charges to effectively fund national grant funding reductions.

Q: EC, in relation to National Insurance contributions, employees rates were not changed but employers costs are unlikely to be funded and has this been factored in with contract cost increases?

A: RB, already seeing impact of this with rising costs of employment. May need to make difficult decisions that impact residents, as need to balance budget.

Q: BP, is budget ringfenced like in Police?

A: DG, just under 70% of the budget is people. Unlike Police there is no ringfencing on staffing but would have to make some difficult decisions.

RB: it was previously easier to make savings with trimming costs, that didn't affect frontline activities. All peripheral work has already been taken out and still need to make more savings.

DG from the report in terms of Capital, there are concerns as the pressure on this over the next three years and the level of debt increasing. Concerns regarding the costs of everything, equipment etc. increasing.

Q: CB, borrowing money, will interest rates have a knock-on effect on borrowing?

A: DG, should start to come down slightly, rates are high at the moment. Not borrowed additional funds since 2010, using reserves and internal cash. In the next 2-year window will need to review this.

Q: JW, borrowing could cost more but are getting more on investment money.

A: DG, yes, not all bad news

Q: CB, Brewwood Fire Station work was due to begin in 2024 but there have been cost increases, what were these for and what are the reasons for the postponement?

A: DG, the Estates Team employed consultant Wilmott Dixon to do this work, and worked with them previously. The budget was planned but then they were reporting cost increases of over £100,000, and this was too great. The work was pulled and will now be delivered in-house and will still deliver requirements. This causes the delay but should come in on budget.

Q: JW, capital spend should give revenue savings.

A: DG, yes.

Q: BS, picking up on Estates, what is the situation with Stafford station where are we?

A: RB, held off on Stafford for a number of years, latest estimates prices had doubled. Remedial work has been done so the station is fit for purpose and safe. Talking with Police about the site and potential sharing of the site and potentially Police wanting one of the building in site.

DG, Upstairs floor has been refurbished and next part is the changing facilities downstairs. Has been done in different stages.

Q: GS, in 6.2 of the report investments into SharePoint is this a sharing portal?

A: DG, yes, it is.

Q: GS in 6.5 states there are new topics to be brought into the sphere of work can you elaborate on these?

A: DG, there are a number of new topics being explored. Large project looking at cover review and service demand.

RB: doing a full review of administration, where are the efficiencies. Not reviewed the administration functions for the whole of the County for a number of years, so the distribution of resources is to be evaluated. Other part is around the Clean Concept work, the Contaminants of Fire and the impact of carcinogens on the body. The Fire Brigade Union are working with the service and have done a national report with the University of Central Lancashire on the impact of the job on health and wellbeing. A higher percentage of fire services develop certain types of cancers, so doing a piece of work on the Clean Cabs concept. It is about getting clothing and equipment out of the cab and also having designated clean and dirty areas at stations.

DG, still looking at shared sites. Uttoxeter is live shortly and Stone is now live. Both will allow savings for public purse; delivering significant savings and generating funds as the police paying for use of the premises.

Q: BS, previously let some premises out to other public bodies like the NHS etc.

A: DG, this has come to an end now, first port of call for shared estates is now Police Services.

Q: JK, with the Brewwood situation, external engagement is going really well, how do you communicate some more mixed messages internally, how do you share this to combat rumour mills?

A: RB, really pro-active with communications, will do videos rather than written text to engage. Push messages out through various pieces of technology, internal work place and chat groups. Inspectorate looked at the way communicate. RB does a regular blog. The HIVE system allows questions to senior leadership team, can be done anonymously, also Say So. A recent staff survey showed that communications have improved.

CBr: Also conduct Face to Face briefings monthly, this is then cascading to all teams.

Q: CK, in terms of budget pressure, in a corporate sphere here and regarding a rethink or reshape, are there plans regarding integrating outsourced back office and working in development with Police?

A: RB, integrated most of back office 2018, not IT at present but conversations are ongoing, not necessarily a complete amalgamation due to different security restrictions required within Police. Already have a joint Comms team and Estates, HR, Procurement and Occupational Health.

Q: JW, will ETAP be kept informed regarding the grant's situation?

A: DG, this will come back to Finance Panel at the January meeting.

Bs thanked DG for his report and thoroughness of dealing with the funding uncertainties.

## **7. Internal Auditors – Presented by Dan Harris**

### **i. Progress Report**

To bring up to speed with the program and flag any issues. Finalised three reports since last meeting, remaining three reviews to deliver in Quarter Four will bring program to conclusion. There is a report with a Partial Assurance Opinion and an Advisory report with a number of actions, but would urge caution across reports as this doesn't mean there are serious control



weaknesses. Strong controls in key Financial Controls and good service history in implementing actions, fairly confident there are no serious concerns.

## ii. Sustainability Strategy Review

Delivered by specialists within RSM, commented that the existing strategy in place is ambitious and demonstrates commitment in this area. Goals and initiatives are in-line with Best Practice.

Analysis shows that the service should to continue to build, there is evidence of progress and this is around further strides that could be made.

Three overarching themes were - direction from top, shared services and PFI.

Other factor to consider is it is unusual to get report where don't have responsible owners and dates, but when you look at the financial pressures this is sensible approach as will be determined by the environmental working group. May not be able to afford everything.

Q: BS, RB explained regarding the change of culture, this is same, doesn't happen overnight it will take time and good that positive steps moving forwards.

A: RB, discussion with Home Office and Chiefs Council, there will be some areas not going to be able to afford to do and these will be based on the budget.

DG: progress is being made, Solar panel investment at Head Office and other sites. Have looked at options like Heat Source Pumps but the figures do not balance.

Q: CK, benchmarking comments are really strong, and the learning Staffordshire is getting from other areas.

A: DH, yes and thank you this is what was agreed with DG at outset.

## iii. IT Cyber Risk Management

Different set of specialists undertook this review, and the review was directed from the risk register.

Partial assurance opinion with two high and four medium actions.

Acknowledging the fact that the service has implemented service controls, however further enhancements are required to further protect the IT control environment. It is an ever-changing environment with new threats which needs regular review.

Important to note in terms of the management action plan there are some tight timelines for actions, and a lot of action proposed to be implemented quite quickly.

Q: HI, what is Whaling?

A: CK it is Phishing aimed at senior management.

Q: CG, in view of the tight deadlines regarding the actions, who is managing this and are there any assurances that these deadlines will be met?

A: DG, sat with IT and auditors' and a number of these have already been delivered and are assured by the Head of IT the deadlines will be met.

DH added there was a debrief a while ago, so have been working on the actions over the last 3-4 months.

Q: EC, not a full exercise but given that risk is part of the audit panel and the risk in this area, as an interim could we have update at next Finance Panel meeting?

A: DG, undergoing another accreditation at the moment for Cybersecurity plus so need to achieve these or this will not pass either.

Q: EC would be really helpful to have a lift of where this is at the next meeting.

A: DG, agreed that this can be done

**ACTION 5: DG to provide an update on the progress of the IT/Cyber audit actions at the Finance Panel Meeting on 31 January 2025.**

Q: CK, would like to reiterate and underpin the feelings of the Panel on this, the head of GCHQ has stated that this risk has tripled in recent months. This is a red risk for the Panel and the gap between risk and defenses is of serious concern.

A: RB, accepts that this is a fare and valid point.

Q: BS, would be good to get an update at next Finance Panel meeting and ongoing dialogue.

A: RB, would be good to bring the head of IT to one of meetings

VJ added that in light of the security risk this should come to Finance Panel in a closed meeting.

DH the threat is ever evolving, always chasing this. Cyber Essentials Plus, is GCHQ recommended, the importance of the Plus shows evidence to how the service is meeting requirements, and demonstrates that controls are in place.

**Action 6: Invite the Head of IT to the Finance Panel meeting January 2025.**

#### iv. Absence Management

Substantial Assurance Opinion for this report. Only two actions for this report which were agreed.

BS, highest expenditure on people, and the biggest asset so it is good to know HR is treating them properly.

Q: GS, Capability last reviewed seven years ago, seems quite a long time was there a reason for this?

A: RB, previously the policy reviews were done by one person caused delay. In a far better position now and changed over to shared services, so the ownership has shifted and a Police employee is now responsible for policies now. Also have to negotiate through representative bodies as well.

BS thanked DH for the updates on the Internal Audit reports. The timing of future reviews appears to be on time as planned earlier in the year.

## 8. External Auditors – Paul Grady AZETS

Quick update, reported audit findings in detail at last committee, no changes.

Still awaiting external assurance from pension operator, this has still not been received so cannot close down the audit until this come through.

BS thanked PG for his update and was pleased to learn it was only the pension assurance that was outstanding.

**9. AOB -**

BS, VJ last day of working and thanked VJ for her service and support and working with ETAP. On behalf of ETAP members he presented a small gift and card to VJ and wished her every success in her new venture.

RB, presented VJ and BS (as his last meeting as Chair) with a plaque from the Fire Service to say thank you.

**The date and time of next meeting is on Tuesday 25 February 2025 at Fire HQ.**

DRAFT