



joint audit & risk committee

Building trust in policing and fire and rescue



Minutes of the Joint Audit and Risk Committee (JARC)

Fire & Rescue Meeting

Date: Thursday 25 September 2025

Location: Fire HQ, Room 1

Present:

JARC members	Officers
Chris Key (CK) CHAIR	Rob Barber - Chief Fire Officer (RB)
Bryon Preece (BP)	David Greensmith FARS Director of Finance & SCO Section 151 Officer(DG)
Craig Brown (CB)	Corrina Bradley - FARS Assistant Director of Finance (CBR)
Emma Christmas (EC)	Louise Clayton - SCO Chief Executive (LC)
Gurpreet Singh (GP)	Kathryn Grattage - SCO Governance Manager (KG)
Louisa Harrison (LH)	
	External Officers in attendance
	Louise Davies – RSM Auditors (LD)
	Paul Grady - Azets Auditors (PG)
	Azola Dudula - Azets Auditors (PD)
SCO - Staffordshire Commissioner's Office	
Force - Staffordshire Police Force	
FARS - Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Services	

No members of the public were in attendance today.

Prior to the meeting today JARC members held their pre-meeting

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

Declarations of Interest: None

Apologies: Victoria Adams (FARS) Dan Harris (RSM).

Minutes & Actions of the meeting on the 25 June 2025:

AGREED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2025 are confirmed as an accurate and true record.

ACTION 1 – Request for the Workforce Strategy Document. This was shared with JARC prior to the meeting.
COMPLETED

ACTION 2 – Request for Value for Money report to be added as a standard annual agenda item. This has been added to the 3rd Quarter Meeting on the JARC Annual Plan. **COMPLETED**

ACTION 3 – JARC requested that pay slips are issued by email rather than post. KG liaised with Finance, and this has been actioned. **COMPLETED**

2. Questions from members of the public

There were no questions from the public submitted to this meeting.

3. Update from Chief Fire Officer Rob Barber - including Governance Report

RB presented the governance report and confirmed that FARS are pleased with the positive progress against all the areas within the report.

From a HMICFRS perspective the service has made good progress against all Areas for Improvement (AFI), all of the remaining AFI's are on track or have been signed off. The work is robust, and the papers are taken to the Service Delivery Board (SDB), which is chaired by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer, before being signed off as completed. There have been some areas with slight delays, which have been caused by increased operational demand, this has resulted in some of the training for managers being slightly delayed.

In relation to Fire Safety Audits and the quality assurance around these FARS has requested some external peer review prior to sign off, and Shropshire FARS have agreed to come in and support this.

In terms of Thematic Reviews, there was a national inspection of misconduct which Staffordshire was involved with, the AFI's from this are across the whole of the sector, not specific to Staffordshire. All AFI's are in progress and there are only three remaining that have not yet been signed off.

In terms of inspections, the next round of inspections have started. Staffordshire has not received formal notification of the date but are expecting this will be around April or May 2026, there is a lot of work ongoing in preparation for this. There are a couple of new areas to be reviewed this time, one of which is Leadership at all Levels, there is a lot of work ongoing with this piece, previous reports related to senior leaders but there was no definition of a senior leader, and this could include a watch manager. The inspection is reviewing the whole chain from supervisory management, and leadership roles through to strategic. There is a lot of work ongoing with managers, relating to how they are managing performance, managing misconduct, planning training, or planning the day, and how does this impact on the individual. Focus on leadership at all levels positive to the sector.

Another area is looking at the Commissioner's Office, and although the inspectorate does not have the powers to inspect the SCO, this will be looking at the impact of governance on service performance in relation to how the SCO is interacting with FARS, how they are scrutinising, and how does the SCO become embedded in all the governance elements of FARS.

From the Manchester Arena Enquiry all 40 AFI's relevant to FARS have been completed. There were an additional 17 AFI's related to Fire Control, which Staffordshire shares with West Midlands, 9 of these have been completed and the remaining 8 are in progress, with good progress being made around these.

In relation to the Strategic Risk Register a review has just been completed and no risks were removed although two have been reduced, Environmental strategy and Service Data Issues. There have been lengthy discussions around the risk of financial pressures on the organisation, and there has been a recent consultation from central government about a Fair Funding Formula. Representations have been made to government through the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) in relation to the Formula and RB has also

spoken and written to all local MPs. This risk has now been raised to the highest level on the register, following the last review.

Budgets for FARS have been reducing over the last 12 years, and further reductions would be very impactful, conversations have been ongoing with the Commissioner regarding any further reductions to the FARS budget. This comes at a time when demand is changing, with new technologies e.g. battery energy storage systems being built all around the county, the impact of climate change, higher temperatures and flooding, all of these demands are increasing and the impact on the service needs to be managed and comes at a cost. The Commissioner has also met with all local MP's and together they are trying to push in terms of changes to the Fair Funding Formula.

CK Thanked RB for the report.

Q: CB regarding risk mitigation strategies, the Committee were talking earlier about Cyber Security, particularly around hacking which can also be through Apps such as WhatsApp. Is there a policy around this at FARS? So not just Cyber Security but the cultural element of this and how people interact with the systems?

A: RB FARS has a very robust procedure and guidance in place and are particularly aware of individual phishing attacks. There is a Protective Security Group, chaired by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer, and regular testing is done through the business continuity planning approach. There are several Fire and Rescue Services that have recently had Cyber-attacks which have taken down their systems, there was a Third-Party provider who did DBS checks that was attacked. This was not in Staffordshire, but FARS re not only checking their own systems but also any Third-Party services to ensure they are compliant.

RB added that an important prevention is training for all members of staff, spotting things, making sure they are checking email addresses, and if they are worried where to report and how. There is a policy in place around this, and the organisation has Cyber Security insurance in place through FRIC (Fire and Rescue Indemnity Cover). The organisation is in a good place, but FARS are not resting on their laurels as the methods are changing all the time. With regards to AI there is a risk that some organisations are not considering the security risks that this brings. The NFCC have recently issued guidance in relation to AI which is being reviewed and looking at how Staffordshire can apply that in terms of developing their own policy locally.

DG added that organisations can never be doing enough given the ever changing environment. In terms of preparation the organisation is in a good place but there is always more that can be done. FARS has excellent antivirus measures, regular testing emails to check vigilance, acceptable use policies and IT send instructions out regarding the policy and ensuring everyone can follow these.

Q: CB what do you have in the interim, in the absence of a current policy on AI, what is the guidance to staff?

A: RB it is about educating staff, FARS are engaging at a low level with AI at present and there are a couple of staff who currently have licenses for Co-Pilot, but training is key, ensuring people know what it can and can't be used for. Human behaviour is a key concern, and this is always being worked on.

ACTION 1: For JARC to review that the AI policy in relation to Cyber Security has been implemented.

Q: EC there was mention of the Protective Security Group, how often does the group meet? And who is the lead or owner of Cyber Security?

A: RB the group meet quarterly, they review all the policies and Cyber Security sits with this. VA is the Strategic Risk Manager and Richard Evanson, who is the head of ICT also sits on the group along with all department heads, but it is everyone's responsibility. Deputy Chief Fire Officer is the Chair of the group to make clear how importantly this is taken by organisation.

DG added that within the group the Deputy Chief Fire Officer is the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) so is ultimately accountable. The group is not just focused on Cyber Security but also physical security in relation to thefts and making sure the premises are secure as well as the systems.

Q: EC regarding the policy on AI, this may be something that needs to be visited in an audit, maybe internal audit. There is a lot of work going on which is fantastic, but an audit perspective can feed into this.

A: DG generally the focus is on Cyber Security for the audit, but maybe the wider protective security envelope could be an idea.

RB added that members of the Committee were welcome to attend the Protective Security group to get an understanding of the meeting content. CK thanked Rob for the offer and added that this can be discussed.

Q: CK asked if the Protective Security Group is running through both organisations, including Police, or is this just FARS?

A: LC it is just FARS, but Police will have a similar group. There is an officer that works across both FARS and the SCO as Data Protection Officer, and has been assisting with the development of AI policy guidance.

There was a discussion regarding the importance of sharing across all three organisations in relation to this, even though the organisations are different there could be shared learning and policies at top level where applicable. It was confirmed that this is already done within the Strategic Governance Boards for collaboration and sharing of best practice, and this could be the perfect place to discuss these policies.

Q: CK asked to broaden the discussion to risk as it was introduced in the report. There is no specific mention of finance transformation savings on the register, the saving was around £1million are you achieving the savings and is that why it is not on the register?

A: DG in terms of the additional £1million savings, this is discussed at the Transformation Board and CBr is on this board along with the Deputy Chief Fire Officer, who is Chair. I am happy to report that the organisation is well on track, in fact ahead of schedule to meet these savings. In terms of the savings that were set for this year, these have already been achieved. Not quite at the £1million figure but on track to achieve this. There are concerns regarding what comes after that under the Fair Funding Review, which is a concern over the medium term, as if further savings are required this would need a review of other areas for transformation.

Q: CK there is good information provided on the process for deciding which risks appear on the register but it would be beneficial to also see comment as to the current risk status for each risk listed.

A: RB the other piece that needs to be considered is the impact of decisions that FARS has no control over, such as the Fair Funding Review. The Chief Fire Officer can't lobby so this has been handed over to the SCO, to make sure that lobbying is being picked up and that the Commissioner is engaging with the representative bodies. It is important to have these discussions in this environment about the expected impacts. This is the way the organisation deals with risk mitigation, it looks at the worst-case scenario and what the mitigations are, and the organisation needs to consider the impact on community in the worst case.

Q: CK in relation to the inspection looking at risk and leadership at all levels, is the organisation comfortable if for whatever reason the Chief Fire Officer was out of action that the Deputy and the team could confidently, sustainably take forward the policies and procedures to serve the community as strongly as it is doing now?

A: RB absolutely and comfortable to say. FARS have done a lot of testing with this scenario, including the removal of DG and RB. Support is also available through the NFCC, and other neighbouring organisations would also offer support. This has just happened in Derbyshire when the CFO passed away suddenly, and the Deputy had only been appointed two days before, the national machinery kicked in straight away to offer support and Staffordshire have also offered their support.

4. Internal Auditors – Louise Davies RSM

i. Progress Report September

Since the last meeting one report has been finalised, Insurance, which is in the papers today. The report on Rope Rescue is almost completed and will be at the next meeting. RSM is confident that all the work will be done before the year end and it will be able to issue the Audit Opinion on time.

Q: GK What does the Rope Rescue audit entail?

A: LD this report is currently in draft. It is looking at how the service is provided; it could be provided in house as is currently done or the service could be outsourced.

DG added the purpose of the audit was around supporting the service and inform and help with the decision moving forwards. The report is in draft and will come back to the board before Christmas. In Staffordshire there was a very serious accident whilst doing training previously, resulting in prosecution by the Health and Safety Executive. Following this Staffordshire stopped delivering this service for a period of two years but this has now been introduced back in. It is a high risk and therefore we need to have a full understanding, the report is to help with this decision making.

RB added some further details regarding the severity of the incident and that the organisation has taken a very cautious approach to the re-introduction of Rope Rescue and needs to ensure that everything is in place to ensure safety.

Q: GK in the audit report there are a number of areas that identified improvements such as user access reviews, Cyber Security, account password management. Given the recent environment around Cyber Security with other organisations do you think that this should be considered again for the audit plan, either for the remainder of this year or next?

A: DG Will be something to consider in the future; this is discussed most years and relates to the discussion around the wider picture of security. It is on the risk register and always comes up on internal audits so it will be considered.

ii. Insurance Report

Looking at the Insurance Provision which from April 2024 is now with FRIC. The report offered Substantial Assurance with just one low action identified, this was to update the insurance strategy to reflect the recently implemented claims approving process. It is a very positive outcome and provides assurance that the new arrangements are working.

Q: BP is the policy one large policy or a number of separate policies for fleet, buildings etc. and is there an impact on renewal prices going forwards on multiple claims? And how is this managed internally?

A: DG – Moved to FRIC, because it is slightly different in the way it operates. Using, for example fleets, FRIC deal with any collisions or damage caused to the vehicle, if there is a high incidence of vehicles damaged in Staffordshire then that would ultimately impact on the renewal. FRIC deals with several FARS and looks at incidents and compares these across other authorities as well. This could affect the renewal price, but FRIC use their knowledge and are sharing information so that FARS can learn from this, to for example understand why there are collisions or small low speed collisions. It is also not as volatile as going out to the open market in relation to how this is dealt with through the indemnity policy.

RB added the peaks and troughs you can see with normal insurance are smoothed out to a certain degree. There is far better buying power as there are 18 FARS now insured through FRIC, as opposed to three or four a few years ago. This has saved a large amount of money on premiums, also it is on a performance basis so could get money back from the insurers, additionally they are identifying aspects that need to be reviewed at a national level. This has been underlined by the Substantial Assurance rating through RSM, and it is not only value for money but there is a benefit to the organisation.

Q: CB Cyber Security Insurance has been discussed, is there a clause against negligence that could make it invalid?

A: RB Unsure of the specific details, but it is not an unlimited policy and there are some caveats.

Q: CK asked LD if RSM are aware of other FARS using FRIC?

A: LD confirmed there were other emergency services using FRIC, and the feedback is positive.

CK thanked LD for her report

5. External Auditors – AZETS presented by PG

i. DRAFT ISA 260 Audit Findings 2024 – 25 and ii. Auditor's Draft Report

The Audit Findings report shares all the key findings that have arisen from the work done in terms of the final accounts audit and the returns based in terms of value for money. The aim of the report is to set out any key issues that management needs to be aware of. The good news is that Azets are anticipating an unqualified opinion on the financial statements, have not identified any significant weakness and there were very few findings to report.

PG went on to highlight some of the key aspects of the report:

From Page 5, the only thing outstanding in terms of the financial statements audit are the queries in relation to the firefighter's actuary pension fund. These are not significant queries, they relate to demographics. PWC are used as an expert, and they independently review all of the work of the actuaries and then provide their own view in terms of life expectancies. They are slightly out, but this is not concerning as they are fractions of a year, or maybe one or two years over a range that spans over 20 years.

Azets are waiting for the IS19 letter from the pension fund auditor, the only news is that in doing their audit of the overarching assets value of the pension fund for Staffordshire as a whole, they closed on estimates which is absolutely fine. From closing to now, the actuals become available, there was a £19million increase in the value of the pension fund assets, therefore when the letter is received, Azets will need to work that through to see what difference that makes to the authorities' particular figures. It is highly unlikely this will have any impact approaching material change and the conclusion will be not materially different.

Azets anticipates being able to issue an unqualified opinion on the quality of the accounts, this is a fairly unique position, and is only possible because of the quality of the accounts that are submitted, the quality of the supporting working papers behind those accounts and the quality of engagement, knowledge and awareness from CBr and the team. The accounts were materially accurate, the only amendment is related to a slight difference in the estimated and actual figures, which Azets were fully aware of.

Page 9 of the report shows all green, and is a good indicator that the team are working well and that the working papers and quality of engagement is good.

Page 11, the overarching materiality is just over £1million, when the final statements are received this is updated and Azets can consider the assessment to see if it has changed. It is possible to increase the materiality thresholds very slightly on the basis of the expenditure being higher than the assumptions made during planning. Importantly the trivial threshold is £54,000 and will report any issue that has risen above this amount.

The Audit Plan considered any significant risks to audit, these are not arising due to concerns with the authority, they are either inherently risky or mandatory risks. In all cases there are no adverse issues to report and the risk was fully materially mitigated.

This is the first year of IFS16, this is the right use of assets. This is the accounting standard whereby all bodies are required to plough through their contracts and their lease registers and identify if there are

either any operating lease assets or other assets in a contract of which they have the right to use. CBr has done some really good preparatory work for this. Azets concur with the judgements management have made and their compliance with the standard. There is nothing material to be drawn out in terms of these because the authority does not have a material volume value of quite a few assets, other than what is already on the balance sheet.

There are a number of pages starting from page 19 where Azets set out in a bit more detail categories that they are required to report share. The minimum revenue provision is also considered from two aspects; has it been calculated in accordance with the regulations? And if it is compliant, is it still prudent? FARS is sufficiently prudent in all respects of those ratios, which is encouraging as it reduces the risk for longer term finances.

Q: CK does putting aside over £4.5million for minimum revenue provision adversely affect the ability of leadership to invest in the business?

A: PG the accounts are prepared on the basis of international financial reporting standards, then there is a series of statutory overrides and extremely complicated accounting, in and out of the unusable reserve section of the accounts, which ultimately gets replaced by what's called the minimum revenue provision, which does essentially the same job, which is, is it setting aside from today's revenue such that those assets are financial difficulties in the future. If nothing is set aside now in 10 years' time, then there is no money to replace equipment but equally if there is too much being set aside then that is restricting the business. From an auditor's perspective it is ultimately a matter of policy, and we cannot comment on the policy, but we can comment on whether the decisions made increase the risk to the business and clearly in this vision they do not. My personal view is that I don't think they are over prudent but ultimately this is a matter of governance.

iii. DRAFT Management Letter of Representation

There is nothing nonstandard in the letter. All the third-party confirmation requests have been received, and these were consistent with the management's own records and narrative. The narrative statements and the annual governance report were compliant and consistent, and there is no material difference in terms of the views. The holding government accounts, and the closure of the audit is dependent on the NEO, the accounts get pulled together into the UK PLC Accounts and the audit cannot be concluded until the NEO is finished with their work. This is the only thing that is holding the certificate open, the past two years at a national level this has been disclaimed because of the volume of disclaimers across the country.

Value for Money will be reported in the next meeting in November, in the Auditors final report, however no significant weaknesses in the arrangement have been identified.

The recommendations all relate to internal IT general controls and there are no red risks, what has been identified are amber and green and these are moving into good practice. The only additional work that was reported in the plan the IFS 16 was not including in the fee and will affect charges. Inventories as a whole became material this year, so additional procedures were required from the current position and then the procedures were rolled back to confirm the balance sheet position and that is also reflected in the fees.

Q: CK thanked PG and welcomed the unqualified opinion within the time deadlines, that reflects the work of the organisation and the auditors. The positive report highlights the quality of work and just to triangulate can we ask how the organisation would mark the auditors' terms of response, value for money and engagement.

A: DG firstly thanked PG for bringing the report, it is very positive, and the organisation is pleased with its position against other authorities. This is not just because of the organisations work it's been supported by the auditors. DG thanked CBr for the quality of the work and thanked PG and AD for the timing of report, the engagement and the consistency of the team, it has been a very positive experience this year

and we find ourselves in a good position. The organisation is really hopeful that the pension letter is coming through soon so that everything can be finalised.

CK added that it is important to understand that part of the Committees remit is to look at value for money and that there are efficient partnerships with third party organisations that are specialists in their area, and that the organisation is working comfortably and efficiently with them. CK asked if there were any further questions from the Committee.

GK added that they had had some questions in relation to report, but that these were all answered in the presentation.

RB added that it was a great outcome, but the finance team is new team and the leadership by DG and CBr needs to be recognised. Having DG sat at the table as the principal officers raises the financial acumen of the senior team. If the head of responses is talking about the provision of new fire appliances, DG is more than capable of making the individual understand the wider implication of the decisions that have to be made, so that doesn't need to be lost. Having the different perspective to very operational conversations is really important for the organisation, and it puts the findings into focus.

CBr added that in terms of new team, the internal audit that was done earlier in the year on financial controls has really helped the team. What came out of that internal audit was the fact that the team needed to keep the evidence, keep the working papers and all the information, the new team came from a different background not the public sector so were not used to the ways of working, so it really helped at year end.

Q: CK is the team altogether in one place now and does that help?

A: CBr yes the team is altogether, and it is fabulous for the service, we are really pleased, and it has helped.

Q: GK what is the size of the team?

A: DG it is relatively compact, CBr, DG and one other manager, then four in finance, four in payroll and two in pensions, so it has been really helpful being together. Most of the team are in five days a week, there is flexible working, but most people are in office full time.

CK added that JARC is evolving as Committee and the Financial Papers, submitted separately due to the level of detail, have been read and that the ways of working will evolve. If there were any concerns with the papers then these will be raised through SCO support.

DG added that the reports will continue to be shared on a quarterly basis. This year has been interesting as the organisation has seen a 29% increase in the incidents attended over the first five months of the year, so there have been additional pay costs. The organisation is not overspending at the moment, but it has been a challenge this year. There has been additional upward pressure but fortunately the weather is changing and that should mean that the organisation will be back to normal as it moves into Autumn and Winter.

Q: CK regarding the £1 million savings that are currently on track, this isn't easy to achieve, is that affecting service delivery?

A: DG the organisation was aware of the savings target before the start of the year and had already started implementing changes. An administration review has been done, which is delivering savings, and there are other pieces of work that are on track, and these are starting to take effect. There is a tracker document to plot the savings which is shared with the Deputy Fire Officer at the transformation board, but things are changing rapidly. The organisation is still awaiting the Fair Funding Review in December, and then there will need to be further conversations with the Commissioner regarding the precept.

RB added that the Fair Funding Review is also based on maximizing the Council Tax increases and this is not guaranteed. There has been an impact on the organisation, it is a much smaller organisation than it was five or ten years ago, and there have been impacts. FARS is not a demand led organisation and should not be a demand led organisation, it should be an organisation that is resourced against the risk that is prevalent in the county, the risks are still there and increasing and changing.

6. Gifts and Hospitality Report – CBr

The report provides an update on the senior managers expenses and credit card transactions, and includes the Gifts and Hospitality register. As in previous years there is not a huge amount of spending in this area.

Expenses that are incurred by all staff whilst they are on duty are paid out of their own pocket and then reimbursed through payroll. It is unusual for senior managers to incur expenses, but it does happen and is illustrated in the table. The overall spend of the organisations is approx. £74,000 and 93% of this is mileage.

All of the Senior Leadership Team are issued with a corporate credit card, but they are only used in exceptional circumstances, and generally to purchase items for the service. FARS operates a strict credit card policy and part of the training and instructions given to credit card holders is that the card is not to replace a preferred method of spending.

The Credit Card spend is unusually high, there were a number of spends relating to the NFCC conference held in person, and the Chief Fire Officer attended the Chief King Fire Service Medal award. The other big spend was for a new oven for the kitchen, and this didn't go through the process of setting up a supplier as it was a one-off purchase.

With Gifts and Hospitality, the organisation has taken feedback from the administrators across the organisation, who keen to look at a more automated process. There is now an automated Gifts and Hospitality register online which was implemented in November last year.

In addition, the Gifts and Hospitality policy was updated this year, and was brought to ETAP earlier in the year. The most significant amendment was increasing the threshold to £50. There are 28 items listed and 27 of these entries were for raffle prizes, and the other one was a donation of a food hamper to a fire station, which was accepted and then donated to a food bank. There is now a SharePoint for FARS and the team want to use this to promote the use of the register.

Q: CB just on that point do people record if an offer has been declined?

A: CBr yes, we ask that everything is recorded and the rationale as to why accepted or declined. We have also added a field for a Community Day, as this is the largest number of gifts added to the register. There was nothing declined this year.

Q: GK in relation to the £74,00 for mileage how does that work in relation to the claims?

A: CBr this would be for example support staff on detached duty at a different station from their home base and the difference in mileage is claimed.

Q: LH do you have a contract for a corporate travel provider?

A: CBr we used to have a portal, but the demand is so low that individuals sort out their own travel now.

RB added there is not as much travel now, as a lot of people now dial in to meetings rather than attend in person, and this comes back to the behaviours and the financial acumen of the organisation.

CBr added if presence is required at a conference then officers will attend, most of senior team have national roles so if they are presenting a paper then they would have to attend.

7. **Strategic Risk Management Information – Papers shared and for any questions to be fed back to Victoria Adams for response.**

Covered over discussion throughout the meeting.

8. **AOB** no other business today.

CK thanked all for attending and thanked everyone for their time.

The date and time of next meeting is:

Wednesday 26 November 2025 at 10:30am