

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE



Held on Monday, 26th January, 2026 at 6.30 pm

RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading RG31 7SD

Members:
*(*present)*

Councillor Billy Drummond		Councillor Zafar Satti
Councillor Dennis Benneyworth	*	Councillor Dilbagh Parmar
* Councillor Greg Bello	*	Councillor Andy NG Siu-hong
* Councillor Tricia Brown	*	Councillor Owen Jeffery
* Councillor Mohammed Nazir		

In Attendance: Angela Smith (Deputy Head of Corporate Services, DHCS)
Annie Pratt (Head of Corporate Services, HCS)
Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources and Learning Development, HHR&L&D)
Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P)
Daniel Harris (Internal Auditor, RSM)
David Crease (Area Manager, Prevention and Protection, AM P&P)
Frank Long (Group Manager (B) Intelligence Risk and Performance Manager)
Grace Hawkins (External Auditor, Grant Thornton)
Graham Britten (Monitoring Officer, MO) - Virtual
Katie Mills (Assistant Chief Fire Officer, ACFO)
Liza Bennett (Business Support Officer)
Lukasz Wrona (Head of Business and Information Systems, HBIS)
Melissa Jackson (Performance Officer, Intelligence, Risk and Performance)
Michaela Smith (Democratic Services Officer)
Tim Readings (Area Manager, Policy and Assurance)
Tom Brandon (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R)
Wayne Bowcock - (Chief Fire Officer, CFO)

26. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Drummond and Councillor Satti.

Action

27. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest from Members in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Authority's Local Code of Conduct. There were no Declarations of Interest received from Officers.

28. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 OCTOBER 2025

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting on 20 October 2025, be approved as a true record to be signed the Chair.

29. CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTERS PROPERLY REFERRED TO THIS COMMITTEE FOR DECISION

There were no matters properly referred to this Committee for decision.

30. INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Conor Byrne (Head of Finance and Procurement, HF&P) stated three audits had been completed since the last Committee meeting and two received a positive assurance rating. The third audit was split into two components, one received a positive assurance rating, the other received a partial assurance.

Daniel Harris (Internal Auditor, RSM) explained the progress report confirmed where RSM were with the delivery of the plan. Appendix A detailed the internal audit plan and included details of three reviews that commenced in January – Cyber, Procurement, and Key Financial controls. Daniel Harris confirmed RSM were making good progress with the plan.

Appendix B detailed the partial assurance opinion as mentioned above, Daniel Harris assured Members this would not affect the year end opinion and further details relating to this would be presented at the March meeting.

The executive summary included information on three agreed medium priority management actions in relation to risk management, service plans and governance of the service plans. A further five low priority management actions had been agreed, details of which were recorded on page 14 of appendix A.

Two positive options were discussed. For the payroll provider review, three medium priority actions in relation to the contract had been agreed, and actions from the last review were followed up and investigated. The other positive review was the Equality Impact Assessment review and actions had been agreed, with one related to staff training.

In answer to a question from the Vice-Chair about missing proof of age data, Daniel Harris confirmed that the action was completed and implemented.

Councillor Nazir raised a question about the review of the pension provider and Becci Jefferies explained the design process of the on-boarding of the new provider was in progress, dual pay runs were planned through February and March with a go-live date of April.

The Chair moved the recommendations, and it was seconded by Councillor Drummond.

It was **RESOLVED** that RSM's Progress Report be noted.

31. EXTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

Grace Hawkins (External Auditor, Grant Thornton) confirmed the update was a progress report from Grant Thornton given where they were with the audit cycle. She reiterated they presented their audit reports at the meeting in October 2025 and at that point all work was completed with the exception of receipt of the IAS letter from the pension fund auditor for LGPS. The letter was still outstanding, and it had been promised by the end of January. Once the letter has been received, Grace Hawkins confirmed it will be straightforward to finalise the audit in advance of the 27 February backstop date.

Grace Hawkins added that Grant Thornton would be running two webinars, details of these were in the appendices and one in particular 'After the backstop' maybe of interest to Members.

It was **RESOLVED** that Grant Thornton's Progress Report be noted.

32. ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ASSURANCE 2024/25

Angela Smith (Deputy Head of Corporate Services, DHCS) confirmed details of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England in relation to the annual Statement of Assurance.

The Royal Berkshire Fire Authority Statement of Assurance provided headline judgements about the adequacy of arrangements associated with financial, governance and operational matters. The internal assessment had been conducted with RBFRS Officers against the framework criteria and the resulting findings were gathered by the Portfolio Office.

The Chair moved the recommendations, and it was seconded by Councillor Bello.

On being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that:

- 1) The summary judgements within the Statement of Assurance for each of the four key areas of Finance, Governance, Operations and delivering the National Framework be noted; and

- 2) The Statement of Assurance for 2024/25 for publication, subject to any amendments to be made by the Head of Corporate Services in consultation with the Chair of the Audit and Governance Committee. Auditor's Annual Report be agreed.

33. PAY POLICY STATEMENT

Becci Jefferies (Head of Human Resources and Learning Development, HHR&L&D), informed Members the Authority is required to publish a pay policy statement each financial year and all data collated was based on data available as at 31 October 2025. Aside from standard annual updates to the budget, population of staff figures, pay awards and pay multiples it had not been necessary to amend the format or content of the Pay Policy Statement for 2026/2027.

Councillor Bello felt the statement was very good and the Vice-Chair quoting from page 6 of the report that '*RBFA has a fair, transparent and controlled approach to pay*' was a good principle.

Councillor Nazir moved the recommendations, and it was seconded by the Vice-Chair.

On being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that the draft Pay Policy Statement for 2026/2027 (Appendix A) be noted and recommended to the Fire Authority for approval.

34. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT 2025-26 – QUARTER TWO (JULY - SEPTEMBER 2025)

Frank Long (Group Manager (B) Intelligence Risk and Performance Manager), presented the Quarterly Performance Report and informed Members the report was a single consolidated view of how the Service was performing against agreed measures and priorities.

Quadrant 1 – Service Provision, page 10 contained the summary of key highlights.

Referencing page 12 of the report Frank Long explained the graph format in particular wildfires, and fires in the open.

Moving on to the Corporate Measures section of the report Members were informed there were no fire deaths recorded for the quarter, and the number of non-fatal fire casualties had decreased when compared to last year. A higher number of deliberate primary fires were recorded; these were mainly vehicle related and the Service were working with partners to address these instances.

In answer to Councillor Bello's question about nitrous oxide, Frank Long confirmed this type of incident had increased over the past few years, that the

gas (commonly known as laughing gas) was now a controlled substance, relatively easy to obtain and the use of the gas can lead to anti-social behaviour.

The Vice-Chair asked if further detail could be provided on the availability of nitrous oxide and Frank Long said they would investigate this.

Within the Corporate Measures section safe and well referral visits were discussed, and in response to a question from the Chair, David Crease (Area Manager, Prevention and Protection, AM P&P) confirmed that prevention managers met monthly to ensure visits had been made, and to investigate reasons when a visit was not able to take place. Reflecting on Corporate Measure 12, Frank Long confirmed that the reason for the target not being met was due to staff shortages.

In response to the Vice-Chair's comment about targets, Katie Mills (Assistant Chief Fire Officer, ACFO) confirmed this was a complex area within the Service and RBFRS had moved towards a risk-based triage system of current work. David Crease (AM P&P) added it was very important that the Service carry out due diligence for all work carried out.

Response Standard was the final measure discussed within this quadrant and Frank Long stated the target was lower than the previous quarter and the same quarter last year, and it was believed the hot dry weather impacted the response standard.

Quadrant 2 – Corporate Health, page 21 contained the summary of key highlights.

Sickness in quarter 2 was 4.9%, this was below the 5% target and down on the past quarter and same time last year. When compared to other fire and rescue services RBFRS sat in the middle band of all services. It was noted that sickness within the Control room was significantly higher than average and it was believed this was due to fluctuations in a relatively small workforce.

RIDDOR accidents and diseases were the same as the last quarter with 2 incidents each and there were no recordings of the Service having breached Information Rights Legislation.

In response to a question from the Vice-Chair about the 'Protecting Information Course', Lukasz Wrona (Head of Business and Information Systems, HBIS) explained the Service had improved on this measure and the course had moved to the new platform which would assist with staff learning.

There were four Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) objectives and three were on green assurance and had progressed well. The amber assurance for 'Improving our service delivery by creating strong links with our community' objective was an opportunity to improve rather than an issue for the Service and further work was being carried out to strengthen this area.

Quadrant 3 - Priority Programmes.

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The Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) had six main priorities, two of these (P4 and P6) had been delivered, P2 and P5 remain green and P1 and P3 were in amber.

The Culture Plan on page 41 detailed several statuses in red. These areas have been revisited, and adjustments made as it was clear the plan would not be achievable. Lukasz Wrona (HBIS) stated the first phase of the Staff Development System (SDS) went live in mid-January this year, phase two was planned for April, and phase three in July. Tom Brandon (Area Manager, Response and Resilience, AM R&R) added that the SDS had a visual dashboard which clearly showed outstanding learning and this feature would positively impact other Corporate Measures.

Within the Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF), the red status for Langley was due to budgetary pressures, planned re-evaluation of the works would re-set the budget with the hope it would progress to green soon. Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP) was another red status, and this area was out of RBFRS' control. Lukasz Wrona (HBIS) confirmed that although it was still a red status, visible progress had been made within the ESMCP project plan.

Quadrant 4 – Assurance.

There were 64 risks on the corporate risk register, since the last meeting a number of risks had been closed whilst new risks had been logged.

Headlines within this quadrant included Risk ID 934, Alternative Energy Systems, which had been closed from the corporate risk register but was open on the organisational risk register. The recent audit flagged that RBFRS had logged risks that do not sit within their area, therefore Risk ID 968, Boss Mobile, had also been closed as this risk belonged to Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS). New risks added included Martyn's Law, Command Support Alliance and Effectiveness and Command Support Deployment.

In closing, Frank Long stated within the audit plan section the only red status was for pensions and was due to the issue relating to delivery of benefit statements. Work on His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) action plan was on-going and progressing well. Fire Standards, now aligned with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and HMI, set professional standards within fire and rescue service, the process was robust and aided implementation and review of the required standards.

The Chair commented on Digital & Cyber and Frank Long advised that a case study on this area could be brought to the next meeting to assist with Member understanding and to explain what the Service was working on in this area. The Chair agreed this would be interesting to see.

Councillor Bello said he saw nothing within the report that was a cause for concern and it reflected the high standards within the Service.

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The Chair moved the recommendations, and it was seconded by the Vice-Chair.

On being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that:

- 1) the performance against Service Provision and Corporate Health measures for the targets agreed by the Fire Authority for 2025-26 be noted; and
- 2) the progress made on the priority programmes be noted; and
- 3) the position of corporate risk be noted.

36. FORWARD PLAN

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

37. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Monday 16 March 2026, 6.30pm at RBFRS Headquarters, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading RG31 7SD.

(The meeting concluded at 19:39)