

Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel

Minutes of a meeting of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel held at the Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton NN1 1DE on Thursday 30 November 2023 at 12.30 pm.

Present:

Councillor David Smith (Chair)
Councillor Gill Mercer (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jon-Paul Carr
Councillor André González De Savage
Councillor Dorothy Maxwell
Councillor Zoe McGhee
Councillor Ken Pritchard
Councillor Russell Roberts
Councillor Winston Strachan
Mrs Anita Shields

Also in Attendance:

Stephen Mold, Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Ann Batom, Chair, Joint independent Audit Committee
David Peet, Interim Chief Executive, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Helen King, Chief Finance Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Vaughan Ashcroft, Chief Finance Officer, Northamptonshire Police
Stuart McCartney, Governance and Accountability Manager, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Councillor Wendy Randall, West Northamptonshire Council
Catherine Whitehead, Director Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer, West Northamptonshire Council
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager, West Northamptonshire Council
Diana Davies, Democratic Services Officer, West Northamptonshire Council
Josh West, Labour Group Political Assistant, West Northamptonshire Council
Sam Dobbs, Chair, Northamptonshire Police Federation

There were also three members of the public in attendance.

178. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillor Baker and from Miss Woodhouse. Councillor Lunn had been due to substitute for Councillor Baker but had subsequently also given his apologies.

179. **Notification of requests from members of the public to address the meeting**

The Panel was advised that two requests to address the meeting on the Police, Fire and Crime Plan Delivery Update had been received, from Mr Craig Blacha and from Councillor Wendy Randall of West Northamptonshire Council.

180. **Declarations of Interest**

None declared.

181. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting and made the following points:

- The Chair had written to the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire about how panels' statutory confirmation hearing functions should apply to interim appointments. The Minister had responded, but only providing clarity regarding Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer appointments. A further letter could be sent regarding interim appointments of a Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer of the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC).
- Councillor Mercer had attended the Police, Fire and Crime panels annual conference in November 2023 and had circulated a report to Panel members.

182. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that:

- a) The minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel meeting held on 15 June 2023 be approved.
- b) The minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel Confirmation Hearing held in public on 27 July 2023 be approved.
- c) The minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel Confirmation Hearing held in private on 27 July 2023 be approved.
- d) The minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel Confirmation Hearing held in public on 14 August 2023 be approved, subject to the following amendments:
 - Amendment of the list of Panel members present to remove Councillor Zoe McGhee.
 - Amendment of minute 171 (Report and recommendation to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire on the proposed appointment of an interim Chief Executive) to read "On a vote of 6 members in favour and one against".
- e) The minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel Confirmation Hearing held in private on 14 August 2023 be approved, subject to the following amendments:
 - Amendment of the list of Panel members present to remove Councillor Zoe McGhee.
 - Amendment of minute 171 (Report and recommendation to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire on the proposed appointment of an interim Chief Executive) to read "On a vote of 6 members in favour and one against".
- f) The minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel meeting held on 7 September 2023 be approved.

183. **Response to recommendations by the Panel resulting from scrutiny of decisions by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner connected with the appointment of an interim Chief Fire Officer**

The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) introduced the report, which provided a considered, point-by-point response to the Panel's recommendations resulting from its scrutiny on 7 September 2023. The PFCC highlighted the following points:

- Clarification had recently been received from the Home Office that the appointment of an interim Chief Constable was not subject to the confirmation hearing process, as set out in guidance included with the report.
- The Panel had agreed to hold a future meeting with the PFCC and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) but should recognise the need also to include other representative organisations.
- The report represented the action plan requested by the Panel. He could provide further updates on progress achieved in future.
- He reiterated the importance that he placed on the working relationship between the PFCC and the Panel.

The Panel considered the report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Panel should seek continuing open dialogue with the PFCC and regularly review the response to its recommendations.
- Other relevant representative bodies should be involved in a future meeting with the PFCC and the FBU.
- The Panel should consider co-opting a representative of the FBU as a means of broadening involvement in scrutiny. Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) had adopted a similar approach in the past.
- Members of the public were able to request to speak at regular Panel meetings. The Panel could get external input in this way rather than broadening its membership.
- The approach taken by NCC was not an exact parallel. Any move to broaden the membership of the Panel would also need to consider that the FBU was not the only relevant representative body involved.

The Chair noted that when he had taken up the role he had stated the aim of improving the openness of Panel meetings and engagement in its work. This still stood. However, Panel meetings also needed to be conducted effectively.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel notes the update on actions taken by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner in response to the Panel's recommendations.
- b) The Panel agrees to review progress with actions taken in response to its recommendations on a regular basis.

184. **Joint Independent Audit Committee Annual Report 2022/23**

The PFCC introduced the Annual Report and emphasised the role of the Joint Independent Audit Committee (JIAC) in supporting effective governance and in

assisting him to hold to account the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer. Presenting the JIAC Annual Report to the Panel provided further assurance of this.

The Chair of the JIAC then presented the Annual Report and provided updates on particular points as follows:

- The JIAC had made an offer to a new member who would be appointed subject to successful vetting. The JIAC would then have a full complement of appointees.
- Two existing members had had their appointments extended for a second term.
- The JIAC had carried out a workshop on the Fire and Rescue Authority accounts in November 2023 and the topic of the external audit of the annual accounts had been considered.
- A workshop would take place in mid-December to consider the Police accounts, to assess the JIAC's performance against its current aims and objectives and set key objectives for 2023/24
- The PFCC and the OPFCC were complemented on their work with the external auditors.
- A new external auditor would be appointed following a procurement exercise.
- The transition to in-house financial systems was successful and progressing.
- The JIAC had also reviewed the capital programme and the Medium Term Financial Plan, the governance framework, and the internal audit assessments.

The Panel considered the Annual Report and members reviewed the following points during the course of their discussion:

- Whether there was the power of redress through a penalty clause in the PSAA contract for external audits not being signed-off sooner.
- The significant increase in costs of the annual audit fees.
- The experience of the transition to in-house financial systems.
- The meeting arrangements for the JIAC, the efficacy of a meeting taking place with two members present and the number of meetings per year.

The Chair of the JIAC made the following additional points during the course of discussion:

- It was not possible to implement sanctions in relation to the PSAA external audit contract. The Chair had made representations to the Head of Audit but had yet to receive a reply.
- PSAA set the scale for the annual audit fees outlined in the contract. The increase from £30K to £95K had been anticipated and incorporated into the budget
- JIAC meetings were public and held quarterly. JIAC members also attended workshops during the year. Meeting attendance was good and the frequency was considered acceptable.

The Chief Finance Officer made the following additional points during the course of the discussion:

- JIAC meeting attendance and frequency was considered acceptable and comparable with other Police and Crime commissioner audit committees
- PSAA would be required to justify the increase in the annual audit fee.

RESOLVED that: the Panel notes the Joint Independent Audit Committee Annual Report 2022/23.

185. **Northamptonshire Police – Acting Chief Constable arrangements**

The PFCC provided the Panel with an assurance of his commitment to informing it about the situation regarding the Chief Constable of Northamptonshire and actions being taken. The PFCC then presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- The report set out the background and process leading to the appointment of Ivan Balhatchet as the Acting Chief Constable.
- It was vital to maintain continuity in the leadership of the force and in the response to the challenges it faced.
- He could not comment on the ongoing investigation into Nick Adderley by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).

The Panel considered the report and members sought further information and reassurance on the following points

- The terms of suspension of Mr Adderley and the financial implications of these.
- The support being provided to Mr Adderley and arrangements to keep him informed of the situation.
- Whether it would be appropriate for the Panel to write to the IOPC to request information about the timescale for the investigation.
- The benefit of the Acting Chief Constable coming from within the force.

The Interim Chief Executive provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- Mr Adderley was suspended on full pay in line with regulations.
- He was acting as the single point of contact with Mr Adderley on welfare matters, reflecting the decision-making responsibility of the PFCC. Mr Adderley also had access to support through the Chief Police Officers Staff Organisation (CPOSA).

The PFCC made the following points during the course of the discussion:

- A suspended officer had their access to technology and warrant card removed and was not involved in operational discussions. The Acting Chief Constable would take all operational decisions whilst Mr Adderley was suspended.
- He would make appropriate representations to the IOPC to encourage it to expedite the investigation whilst recognising that it needed sufficient time to investigate serious matters.

RESOLVED that: the Panel notes the update.

186. **Police, Fire and Crime Plan Delivery Update**

At the Chair's invitation Mr Craig Blacha addressed the meeting and made the following points:

- The PFCC had been in office for some time, the Council Tax precept for policing had risen and the public were informed that Northamptonshire Police had a record number of officers.

- In these circumstances it was unacceptable that the force had taken 22 minutes to respond to a grade one incident Mr Blacha had experienced in Wellingborough in July 2023 involving threats of violence against him. The OPFCC had subsequently advised that the response time was not unreasonable or disproportionate. The Police, Fire and Crime Plan Delivery Update acknowledged that response times had been slower.
- The PFCC should recognise this was not the public's expectation, take action to improve response times and apologise for the current situation.

The Chair invited the PFCC to comment in response and the PFCC made the following points:

- He was aware of the incident raised by Mr Blacha and did not propose to discuss it in detail at the Panel meeting.
- The OPFCC Customer Service team had provided Mr Blacha with an explanation of the response. The matter had subsequently been the subject of a complaint to the force's Professional Standards Department, which had concluded that the response was reasonable. Mr Blacha had sought a review of the complaint by the OPFCC, which was not upheld. The PFCC believed that a good standard of customer service had been provided to Mr Blacha.
- He took the issue of police response times seriously and pursued any issues about performance with the Chief Constable when this was necessary.

The Chair invited Councillor Wendy Randall to address the meeting but the Panel was advised that she was not yet present.

The PFCC went on to present the Police, Fire and Crime Plan Delivery Update and highlighted recent examples of positive activity as follows:

- The OPFCC had been successful in securing funding in round five of the Safer Streets Fund. This would be used for a forensic property marking and asset recording scheme in Weston, Northampton, and Kingswood, Corby; implementation of new security measures on and around Junction 15A and the Watford Gap services; and various measures to help to protect women and girls using public transport.
- The OPFCC had now secured nearly £4m from the Safer Streets Fund to invest in crime prevention, augmented by a further £1m that the PFCC and partners had committed to community safety.
- Since the launch of the Safer Nights Out (SNO) Van, Northampton Guardians had assisted 12,200 people. A new SNO Van had been provided in Kettering.
- The Early Intervention team continued to carry out valuable work, supporting vulnerable people, preventing entry into the criminal justice system, providing support to the force's missing persons unit and helping to protect and support vulnerable children.
- The Serving with Pride survey of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) staff members formed an important part of work to shape the organisation and culture of the fire service of the future. He could provide fuller information on the outcomes of this consultation to a future Panel meeting.

The Panel considered the report and members raised the following points during the course of discussion:

- It was questioned whether the use of £20K to support a training package for 1,000 students at Northampton College on recognising and addressing harassment was a standard approach and how its impact could be judged.
- The PFCC was challenged about the effectiveness of actions to counter anti-social behaviour by young people, given that this seemed to be an increasing issue.
- It could be useful to carry out a survey of the organisational culture in the OPFCC as well as NFRS.
- The report did not provide information to enable performance in Northamptonshire on issues such as repeat victimisation or referrals to the Sunflower Centre to be compared with that of nearest neighbours and the national average. Attacks against women and girls were also not reducing. The report did not provide reassurance that the PFCC was giving sufficient attention to these issues.
- There were good examples of police officers and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) engaging well with local communities and responding to issues in different areas. However, it would still be helpful to re-establish the previous Joint Action Groups, which had been an effective way of discussing and resolving local issues.
- The force's performance against key targets could be affected if mobile crime such as drug dealing that originated in other areas was detected here.
- Good community engagement should be part of work to address the difference between the reality and perceptions of community safety. Northamptonshire Police should be part of service delivery through community hubs.
- PCSOs were effective and an increase in numbers would be welcome.
- There had been a significant increase in retail crime in Northampton and the PFCC was challenged about how this was being addressed.
- A positive local summit on retail crime had been held earlier in November.

The PFCC made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The OPFCC made use of different approaches as part of its work to address violence against women and girls. This included education about what a good environment looked like. The benefit of these approaches should be judged in terms of a reduction in violence.
- Anti-social behaviour by young people was actually reducing. There was a broader challenge around community safety in that performance was improving but people did not feel safer. This needed to be addressed and part of the work being done was about the use of different remedies, such as conditional cautions.
- Performance on issues such as domestic violence needed to be set out in more detail to give the Panel a fully contextualised understanding of the position. It could be helpful for the Panel to have a separate briefing on this.
- Ipsos had been engaged to survey the organisational culture of Northamptonshire Police, NFRS and the OPFCC 10 months' ago. The three organisations were in different places and needed to be clearly understood.
- Doubling the number of ANPR cameras in Northamptonshire had increased the ability to identify and track criminals.

- It would help force representatives to attend parish council meetings if their item could be put at the start of agendas.
- He was aware of good work done by Joint Action Groups and community safety panels in the past. The new serious violence duty gave commissioners a greater role in holding to account partners for delivery. Addressing violence in society was not just a policing issue but one that needed to involve a range of partners.
- PCSOs often did tend to be in a better position than police officers to engage with people in the community. The employment and deployment of PCSOs was the responsibility of the Chief Constable not the PFCC.
- A partnership sponsored action on retail crime in Northamptonshire. He could provide further information to the Panel if required.

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Wendy Randall then addressed the meeting and made the following points:

- Members of the public had raised concerns about the fact that the PFCC had identified a preferred candidate for appointment as Chief Fire Officer who did not have a professional background in the Fire and Rescue service. The Panel was urged to ensure that it asked thorough questions when it carried out a confirmation hearing for the proposed appointment.
- The response to retail crime in Northamptonshire could learn from the Businesses Together Radio Scheme used in Daventry to share information about crime and anti-social behaviour.

The PFCC made the following additional points:

- The identification of the preferred candidate for appointment as Chief Fire Officer had resulted from a robust two day interview process, which included a cross-party stakeholder panel.
- The appointment of a chief fire officer from a different professional background was not new as this approach had already been taken in other areas such as Kent and Buckinghamshire. A chief fire officer's primary role was to run their service, not to attend fires.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel notes the Police, Fire and Crime Plan Delivery Update.
- b) The Panel requests to receive a report from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on the findings of survey work carried out by Ipsos on the organisational culture and values of Northamptonshire Police, Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service and the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.
- c) The Panel requests that a briefing session be organised for Panel members on action being taken in Northamptonshire to address domestic violence and the outcomes produced.

187. **Fire and Rescue Authority Finance Update**

The PFCC introduced the report, which set out the latest forecast outturn position for the Fire and Rescue Authority for 2023/24.

The Panel considered the report. The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- The forecast net underspend of £395K had been significantly aided by business rates in 2023/24 being much better than anticipated. However, this was a one-off benefit.
- The Autumn Statement had not provided much information on the draft settlement for 2024/25. The OPFCC was modelling different scenarios as well as continuing to make a case for the best possible funding for Northamptonshire.
- The PFCC aimed to sell the vacant Kettering Police Station and was working with North Northamptonshire Council on this. Discussion was at a crucial stage and it was hoped to have an outcome soon.
- It was anticipated that the final outturn would show a slight surplus. In this case the PFCC would consider requests for carry forwards and also look at how resources might be used for reserves.
- A significant part of the unavoidable and unexpected pressures contributing to the current forecast overspend on the Chief Fire Officer's budgets should be one-off costs, as they related to updating specific vehicles or facilities. A zero-base budgeting exercise was carried out each year.

The PFCC made the following points during the course of discussion:

- Northamptonshire remained in the bottom quartile of fire and rescue authorities for funding and he had pushed for further precept flexibility to reflect this.
- It was likely that he would propose an increase in the Fire and Rescue precept for 2024/25 but would consider the consultation feedback received from Northamptonshire residents when deciding the amount. However, NFRS was also in a stronger position than when governance responsibility had transferred to the PFCC and was approaching the point where it could be asked to look at opportunities to use resources more efficiently.

A Panel member welcomed that the PFCC was challenging services to be more efficient whilst enabling them to retain the benefit of savings that were generated. The PFCC responded that this approach also linked in with other work on developing organisational management and culture.

RESOLVED that: the Panel notes the Fire and Rescue Authority Finance Update.

188. **Policing Finance Update**

The PFCC introduced the report, which set out the latest forecast outturn position for policing for 2023/24. The PFCC went on to highlight that this would be the last report produced by the Chief Finance Officer before her retirement at the end of 2023. He thanked the Chief Finance Officer for the significant support and advice that she had provided over the past six years. This was the foundation for the innovative work now being done in Northamptonshire. The Chief Finance Officer could be very proud of the legacy she would leave.

The Chair expressed thanks on behalf of the Panel to the Chief Finance Officer.

The Chief Finance Officer thanked the PFCC and the Panel and emphasised that she had enjoyed working with both.

The Panel considered the report. The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- The forecast underspend on Early Intervention and Youth provision reflected vacancies during the year that had taken longer to fill than anticipated. Further recruitment had been carried out and only five vacancies now remained, with plans to fill at least three of these.
- A breakdown of all reserves could be provided to the Panel if required. There was expected to be £5.3m in general reserves and £18.96m in specific reserves for policing at the end of 2023/24. The PFCC had never increased the precept to put resources into reserves.
- CIPFA advised that a commissioner's chief finance officer should take a local view about the appropriate level of reserves. Her view was that 3 per cent should be the level for policing. Northamptonshire was at the lower level of reserves for policing nationally.
- It was anticipated that there would be a surplus on the policing budget of approximately £913K at the end of 2023/24.

The PFCC made the following points during the course of discussion:

- He had challenged whether all five vacancies in Early Intervention and Youth provision needed to be filled as the services had operated effectively in the meantime. Recruiting to three further positions seemed the optimum number. These were all additional posts.
- He was willing to look into all opportunities to share facilities if this would achieve better outcomes, including the development of blue light centres. The updated Estates Strategy would set out a clear blueprint.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel notes the Policing Finance Update.
- b) The Panel requests that a breakdown of current reserves be circulated to Panel members.
- c) The Panel records its thanks to Mrs Helen King for her work as Chief Finance Officer in the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

189. **Police, Fire and Crime Panel Work Programme**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager presented the report setting out the latest version of the Panel's work programme, highlighting the following points:

- The Panel was asked to consider what action it wished to take regarding scrutiny work on support for early intervention activity that it had begun earlier in 2023. This work had been put into abeyance recently whilst the Panel focussed on matters relating to the appointment of an interim Chief Fire Officer and the context for the work had also changed. The Panel should determine how it now wished to proceed on this matter.
- The Panel was asked to confirm the new date for its final scheduled meeting in 2023/24, which had needed to be moved to avoid conflicting with the pre-election

period for the PFCC election. The proposed date for the meeting was 14 March 2024.

The Panel considered the report. It was questioned whether 14 March 2024 was a practical meeting date given that there was due to be a North Northamptonshire Council Executive meeting that morning. Panel members considered potential alternatives, including meeting on a different day of the week. It was felt that 14 March 2024 could represent the best option if the Panel meeting could start later than usual.

Councillor McGhee, as the Chair of the Early Intervention Working Group, encouraged that the scrutiny work should be completed, provided that the OPFCC was able to support it with necessary information. The interim Chief Executive advised that the OPFCC would assist.

Councillor Mercer made the following additional points during the course of discussion.

- Some panels produced an annual report on their work and also received an end of year report on how Police and Crime grant funding claimed from the Home Office by the host authority had been used.
- It could be necessary to start the recruitment of new independent co-opted members earlier than on previous occasions, to take account of the PFCC election.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel agrees that the final regular Panel meeting in 2023/24 be held on 14 March 2024 at 2.15 pm.
- b) The Panel agrees that a plan to progress and complete task and finish scrutiny work on early intervention activity with young people at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity in Northamptonshire be presented to the Panel meeting on 6 February 2024.

190. **Complaints and Conduct Matters Update**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager presented the report advising that two complaints had been received during the period from September to November 2023 and had been considered by the Complaints Sub Committee. There were no other outstanding complaints or conduct matters.

The Panel considered the report. In response to a question it was confirmed that the Complaints Sub Committee meeting held on 8 September 2023 had taken a reasonable amount of time to consider the two complaints.

RESOLVED that: the Panel notes the Complaints and Conduct Matters Update.

191. **Urgent Business**

There was none.

The meeting closed at 3.30 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____