

Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel

Minutes of a meeting of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel held at Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton NN1 1DE on Thursday 30 November 2023 at 3.30 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 Present:

Stephen Mold, Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
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, proposed candidate for the appointment as Interim Chief Finance Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Stuart McCartney, Governance and Accountability Manager, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
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

192. **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.

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

None received.

194. **Declarations of Interest**

None declared.

195. **Chair's Announcements**

There were none.

196. **Proposed appointment by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire of an interim Chief Finance Officer**

The Chair welcomed Mr Vaughan Ashcroft to the meeting and Panel members present introduced themselves.

The Chair then invited the PFCC to introduce Mr Vaughan Ashcroft as his preferred candidate for the role as interim Chief Finance Officer of the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC). The PFCC made the following points:

- Mr Ashcroft had the requisite skills and experience to undertake the statutory role.
- The PFCC was keen to retain Mr Ashcroft's valuable institutional knowledge.
- Acting as a strategic Finance Professional, Mr Ashcroft had considerable experience in the policing and fire financial arrangements.
- He had 5 years' experience as senior management, currently in the role as Chief Finance Officer for the Chief Constable.
- Mr Ashcroft had a record of providing high level financial and strategic support with extensive knowledge of the business and would provide the continuity of services to deliver the budget and precept processes for both the police and fire partners.
- Mr Ashcroft was an exceptionally strong candidate and would complement and enhance the OPFCC.
- To avoid a conflict of interest, Mr Ashcroft would step back from his substantive post as the Northamptonshire Police S151 Officer.
- It was an interim post to allow the newly appointed PFCC to make a substantive appointment. Preparatory recruitment processes would be undertaken to expedite the proceedings post-election.

The Panel then asked Mr Ashcroft a series of questions relating to his professional competence and personal independence.

Mr Ashcroft was asked what attracted him to this opportunity to carry out the role of Chief Finance Officer on an interim basis.

Mr Ashcroft advised that his professional experience was in policing and finance. As the Chief Finance Officer for the Chief Constable, he had experienced working with the OPFCC and felt that he could add value to their work. The role would offer him a challenge and an opportunity to make a difference.

Mr Ashcroft was asked what he saw as the main challenges involved in financial management and planning in policing and fire and rescue and how he would seek to address these.

Mr Ashcroft made the following points:

- Since the COVID-19 pandemic there had been a more volatile financial world. Mr Ashcroft would seek to address the risks through strategic planning and budget development work to account for all of the variances in political and economic changes both locally and nationally.

- He wanted to continue to carry out scenario planning, based on different assumptions, considering inflation and the economic position.
- The capital programme would continue to be progressed, addressing climate change issues.
- It was important to ensure that services were fit to meet future challenges by continuing to innovate and invest appropriately, not adding to demands on the precept.

Mr Ashcroft was asked how he would describe his approach to leadership and management and how he would aim to apply this in the role of interim Chief Finance Officer.

Mr Ashcroft made the following points:

- He was experienced in managing staff: in his current role he dealt with around 40 people.
- His leadership style was to lead by example; he listened to people; and empowered staff to carry out their jobs and to develop within their jobs. These were values which would transfer to the OPFCC.
- He recognised the importance of knowing how both the individuals in the team and their wider colleagues worked and embraced that diversity.
- He emphasised the importance of working together cohesively to instil trust and confidence in people. Transparency was also key.

Mr Ashcroft was asked to give an example of when he had moved into a new role or organisation at a strategic level and quickly needed to understand it so as to inform him in carrying out his role, the approach he had taken and how effective this had been.

Mr Ashcroft explained his experience of joining a force where the finance function was struggling and made the following points:

- He had familiarised himself with the team, ensured he was approachable, and that the team had an understanding of his role.
- He had met with key stakeholders, explored wider issues and identified factors contributing to challenges.
- In this was he had built a picture of the position, identified challenges and prioritised actions based on the threat, risk and financial issues. Ensuring correct governance procedures and policies were in place had been a key priority to address.

Mr Ashcroft was asked what approach he would take to maintain productive relationships with partners, particularly when dealing with challenging matters, in order to achieve good outcomes.

Mr Ashcroft referred to the challenges of exiting from Multi-Force Shared Services (MFSS), the provision of back-office services in collaboration with various forces in the East Midlands. This had involved navigating Northamptonshire through the various issues of exiting whilst building a new department, and a new finance system; informing, and engaging with all stakeholders and partners; providing an exit plan and providing progress updates therefore ensuring transparency; adopting a mutual understanding of the problems arising and collectively resolving issues.

Mr Ashcroft was asked how, as interim Chief Finance Officer, he would, aim to ensure that the operation of the OPFCC reflected good practice in relation to financial governance and planning.

Mr Ashcroft advised that the OPFCC, Fire and Rescue Service and Northamptonshire Police had a joint governance framework. It had been reviewed between the 3 organisations and would ensure the statutory responsibilities were aligned and that a consistent approach was applied. Mr Ashcroft added that he would work with the PFCC and colleagues to ensure the OPFCC complied, would challenge deviations and address any issues arising.

Mr Ashcroft was asked to give an example of when he had been required to challenge someone at a senior level about a course of action that they were proposing and how he went about doing this effectively.

Mr Ashcroft advised that the joint governance framework applied to all staff, officers and colleagues at all levels. Senior officers who had not followed correct governance would be provided with a valid reason for refusal of the action they sought. They would be advised to follow correct procurement procedures, ensuring best value for money, or asked to provide a business case identifying benefits, risks and route to market ensuring that the spend fit with the strategies of the organisation, Police Fire and Crime Plan or met with the priorities of the Force or Fire and Rescue Service.

Mr Ashcroft was asked what relationship he would seek to have with the Panel if he was appointed and how the Panel could contribute to supporting his role.

Mr Ashcroft made the following points:

- He would appreciate feedback from the Panel on the reports that he produced to ensure they were tailored to meet the Panel's requirements.
- The engagement sessions held with the Panel, were beneficial and would continue, with the precept session being held in January 2024.
- He anticipated an honest and transparent working relationship and would seek to address any questions raised by the Panel.

The Chair invited Mr Ashcroft to raise any questions that he wished to ask the Panel or further comments that he wished to make.

Mr Ashcroft thanked the Panel for its time.

197. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

198. **Exclusion of Press and Public**

The Chair requested the Panel to agree that the remainder of the meeting be held in private session.

RESOLVED that: under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that if the public and press were present it would be likely that exempt information under Part I Paragraph 1 of Schedule 12A to the act of the descriptions would be disclosed to them.

The remainder of the meeting took place in private session.

199. **Report and recommendation to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire on the proposed appointment of an interim Chief Finance Officer**

The Panel considered its report and recommendation on the proposed appointment.

At the conclusion of discussion the Chair invited the Panel to reach a resolution on the proposed appointment and it was unanimously:

RESOLVED that: the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel recommends that the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire appoints Mr Vaughan Ashcroft as interim Chief Finance Officer.

The meeting closed at 4.15 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____