

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 15 June 2023 at 1.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor David Smith (Chair)
Councillor Gill Mercer (Vice-Chair)
Councillor André González De Savage
Councillor Fiona Baker
Councillor Dorothy Maxwell
Councillor Winston Strachan
Mrs Anita Shields
Miss Pauline Woodhouse

Also Present:

James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Diana Davies, Democratic Services Officer
Stephen Mold, Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Deborah Denton, Joint Head of Communications, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Helen King, Chief Finance Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Nicci Marzec, Director for Early Intervention, Head of Paid Service and Monitoring Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Stuart McCartney, Governance and Accountability Manager, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Jon-Paul Carr
Councillor Russell Roberts
Councillor Ken Pritchard

145. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Carr, Pritchard and Roberts.

146. Appointment of the Panel Chair for 2023/24

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager invited nominations for the Chair of the Panel for 2023/24. Councillor Smith was proposed and seconded by Councillors Mercer and Maxwell respectively. There were no further nominations.

RESOLVED that: Councillor David Smith be appointed as Chair of the Panel for 2023/24.

147. Appointment of the Panel Deputy Chair for 2023/24

The Chair invited nominations for the Deputy Chair of the Panel for 2023/24. Councillor Mercer was proposed and seconded by Mrs Shields and Councillor Maxwell respectively. There were no further nominations.

Councillor González De Savage expressed thanks to Councillor Mercer for her work as Chair of the Panel for many years and with the National Association of Police, Fire and Crime Panels. Her appointment as Deputy Chair would provide continuity. Councillor Mercer thanked González De Savage for his support as the previous Deputy Chair.

RESOLVED that: Councillor Mercer be appointed as Deputy Chair of the Panel for 2023/24.

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

None received.

149. **Declarations of Interest**

None declared.

150. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair thanked members for their support in appointing him to the position and welcomed Councillor Baker to the Panel.

The Chair asked the Panel to agree to change the start time for future meetings to 12.30pm, which would assist him to manage other commitments.

Some Panel members not from West Northamptonshire Council expressed concern regarding their ability to access the meeting room. The Democratic Services Assistant Manager advised that this could be followed up to identify the most straightforward way to enable Panel members to get access to the meeting rooms at The Guildhall in future.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel agreed that the start time for future Panel meetings be changed to 12.30pm.
- b) The Panel requested that arrangements be made to make it easier for Panel members not from West Northamptonshire Council to access The Guildhall for Panel meetings.

151. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the Police, Fire & Crime Panel meeting held on 20 April 2023 be approved.

152. **Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's Annual Report and Fire and Rescue Statement for 2022/23**

The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) presented the Annual Report and Fire and Rescue Statement for 2022/23, highlighting the following points:

- This was the first combined report covering both the PFCC's policing and Fire and Rescue functions, which reflected the importance of collaboration between the two service areas.
- The Annual Report highlighted the breadth of the PFCC's responsibilities, the range of work being done in Northamptonshire and the improvements this had produced.
- Northamptonshire Police now had its highest ever number of police officers and neighbourhood and response team officers were spending almost 66 per cent of their time in the community.
- Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) had been supported to recruit more fire officers and to update equipment. HMICFRS had recognised improving performance but there was no complacency about the need to make further progress.
- Since 2020 the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) had secured over £3m in external funding to support community safety, with a particular focus on violence against women and girls. The OPFCC also continued to take an innovative approach to early intervention. He was confident that investment in crime prevention was worthwhile, which was reinforced by recent favourable comparisons between crime rates in Northamptonshire and other force areas.
- The work of the Local Criminal Justice Board contributed to addressing challenges facing the criminal justice system whilst also helping Northamptonshire Police to be one of the best-performing forces in the country on positive outcome rates.
- The OPFCC Customer Service team was nationally recognised and was able to respond effectively to annual increases in the number of complaints, including excessive demand created by some vexatious complainants, and to provide information that assisted the PFCC to hold to account the two service chiefs.
- He would continue to make a case to the government that the funding provided to Northamptonshire did not fairly reflect local challenges and growth. In the meantime, he was proud of what had been done in the past year and would continue to work towards the aim of making Northamptonshire safer.

The Panel considered the Annual Report and questioned the PFCC about the position it presented with regard to progress towards meeting objectives set out in the Police, Fire and Crime Plan and the assurance of compliance with the Fire and Rescue National Framework it gave.

A Panel member challenged the PFCC whether more could be done in the county to support road safety. The PFCC drew attention to the amount of existing activity, highlighting the creation of the Northamptonshire Safer Roads Alliance; his involvement in a forthcoming road safety summit with East Midlands counterparts to share best practice; and the use of the levy from speed awareness courses to fund road safety schemes and cameras in the community.

Panel members referred to the level of concern in the community about increasing violence against women and girls and raised the following points:

- The PFCC was questioned as to whether he was confident that sufficient resources were being put into work on this issue and whether everyone who might benefit from support services was engaging with them.
- Around 24 per cent of the total referrals to the Voice adult service in 2022/23 concerned domestic abuse, which suggested that work on this issue in Northamptonshire was not having sufficient impact. Further information was sought about how many cases involved repeat or prolific offenders.
- Reassurance was sought about how victims of domestic abuse were supported in cases where the perpetrator was a police or fire officer, particularly in the context of national issues with the organisational culture in both service areas.
- Spiking was an example of a new threat that needed to be addressed effectively and further information was sought about how the PFCC planned to do this in Northamptonshire.

The PFCC made the following points:

- He was passionate about addressing the issue of violence against women and girls. The priority he put on it had driven a range of activity by the OPFCC and the force such as initiatives focussed on improving safety in the night-time economy and Operation Kayak to disrupt predatory behaviour. The introduction of a second Safer Nights Out (SNO) Van in summer 2023 in North Northamptonshire was another example.
- He was willing to listen to any feedback that could help to improve local services further.
- He had a related concern about the effect of delays in the criminal justice system. Delays resulting from a backlog of cases could cause victims and witnesses to withdraw if they lost confidence in the system or felt unable to move on with their life. He continued to lobby national government on this issue as well as committing extra resources for the support that Voice provided to witnesses.
- Reducing repeat offending was a priority for Northamptonshire Police whilst police forces in general now responded far more proactively to domestic abuse incidents than had been the case in the relatively recent past.
- He considered that Northamptonshire was still at a point where an increasing trend in domestic abuse reports was a positive sign that victims felt able to come forward.
- He had previously not been satisfied with the independent support provided to victims of domestic abuse in cases where the perpetrator was a police or fire officer and had sought assurances that referrals were going to Voice.
- The Panel should be reassured by local work on organisational culture and standards in policing being carried out as part of Operation Admiral. The force had put in place a team with enough resources to identify issues and support action to address them. He took confidence that incidents reported by police officers indicated that they would call out unacceptable behaviour when it occurred.
- A data wash of force staff members, survey work on perceptions of public safety, and a further HMICFRS inspection in late 2023 would all help to inform future action.
- Both the force and NFRS were on a journey in relation to organisational culture; the force was further forward as it had started earlier.

The Director for Early Intervention provided additional information as follows:

- The support that Voice was able to provide to victims of crime did rely on them engaging with the service.
- In addition to Voice, the Early Intervention team was able to respond quickly to cases of domestic abuse where there were children in the home and to provide direct support as well as help families to get access to other services that could improve their overall situation.

A Panel member noted that the Annual Report stated that 40.3 per cent of detainees held in custody centres in Northamptonshire in 2022/23 had a mental health condition. This illustrated the importance of the Right Care Right Person model and further information was sought about plans to implement the model in Northamptonshire. The PFCC made the following points:

- Right Care Right Person should be implemented in summer 2023 and so would feature more in the next Annual Report.
- Mental health support was ultimately not a core function of the police and the Metropolitan Police had recently announced plans to change how it responded to mental health incidents.
- Right Care Right Person was intended to represent a considered response to challenging issues. However, support for mental health was an area that required a partnership approach.

A Panel member emphasised that the recent fatal stabbing of two young people in Northampton reinforced the importance of effective early intervention activity and questioned whether the PFCC was taking action to understand and address any reluctance amongst members of the public to contact services or other possible barriers to engagement. The PFCC made the following points:

- The OPFCC and partners continued to look at how well different organisations worked together on early intervention and how they shared intelligence about risks.
- Services needed to be informed about cultural differences in the communities they served. As an example, Northamptonshire had a growing East European population and recruits from this group who had joined the force would help it to understand attitudes and perceptions that could influence engagement. Ultimately, the force needed to be able to serve the whole of the community.

The Chair advised that the Panel had received a question from a member of the public concerning the PFCC's position on the illegal or anti-social use of e-scooters and bicycles, given the dangers to pedestrians that could result. The Chair had agreed to raise this at the meeting. The PFCC made the following points in response:

- He acknowledged that e-scooters had been involved in incidents that had caused deaths or life-changing injuries.
- The government needed to take action to clarify the law relating to the use of e-scooters to help to avoid misconceptions amongst members of the public. However, he also expected Northamptonshire Police to enforce the law as it currently stood. If members of the public saw examples of this not being done they should report them via the PFCC's complaints process.

- E-scooters and e-bicycles could make a positive contribution to greener travel but this needed the right infrastructure such as separate cycle paths.

Panel members commented further about the need to address the risks arising from unsafe or irresponsible use of e-scooters by young people. The PFCC noted that young people were encouraged to do bike safety training and to wear a helmet when cycling and questioned why this should not also apply to using an e-scooter. There was a place for e-scooters but their use should be based on appropriate regulation.

A Panel member challenged the PFCC about the cost-effectiveness of his decision not to proceed with the project to develop a new fleet workshop for the force and NFRS at Earls Barton, highlighting the following points:

- The building intended for this facility had been purchased for £3.3m and had stood empty for several years.
- It had been reported that the PFCC had spent £660,00 on VAT, £187,500 on stamp duty and £525,000 on design work for the planned new facility and that the building was now being advertised for sale at £3.5m. This would represent a loss of around £1m in public money.

The PFCC made the following points:

- The building in Earls Barton had been purchased as part of the business case to develop a combined fleet workshop at a cost of £10m. He had decided not to proceed with the original business case after the projected cost increased to £17m due to inflation. He was still committed to delivering a combined fleet workshop but this needed to be done at an affordable cost.
- VAT could be reclaimed and the design work undertaken so far would still produce a benefit. The small loss from stamp duty was not comparable to the cost of proceeding with the original project.
- He had taken a pragmatic decision on this matter about how best to use public money.

A Panel member noted that data included in the Annual Report on NFRS performance against its Community Outcome Measures showed that staff sickness had increased in 2022/23 compared to the previous year. The PFCC was questioned about his level of concern at this trend, whether the causes of it were sufficiently understood and whether increases in the number of primary and secondary fires in Northamptonshire in 2022/23 were connected with lower staff availability. The PFCC made the following points:

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant ongoing impact on the NFRS workforce. However, overall staff sickness numbers were still relatively modest and headline data could be affected by a small number of cases. He believed that the staff sickness rate had peaked and was now reducing.
- The overall position on staff sickness was continually monitored through the Fire Accountability Board and he was confident that there was a good understanding of it.
- He was confident that the increased number of fires in Northamptonshire in 2022/23 was not related to staff sickness.

A Panel member noted that the retail crime investigator pilot scheme that had operated in North Northamptonshire in 2022/23 had increased the number of shoplifters charged with criminal offences but questioned the impact of cases where there was not a charge. The PFCC responded that the pilot scheme provided additional capacity that could be used to build better cases against perpetrators. When an individual was suspected of multiple offences the force might not be in a position to proceed with a charge on all of them, but securing a conviction was still beneficial.

A Panel member highlighted the risk represented by the comment in the Fire and Rescue Statement that 2022/23 internal audit work on the Northamptonshire Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority had not yet been concluded. The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response as follows:

- Sufficient progress had been made to enable the internal auditor to reach a conclusion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control environment. The internal auditor would not do this lightly.
- The internal auditor had issued a 'good' rating, which showed significant progress from the previous 'satisfactory' rating.

The PFCC made the following additional points in response to other questions raised during the course of discussion:

- The OPFCC was seeking clarification from the Home Office regarding how the 'immediate justice' scheme due to be piloted in Northamptonshire would operate and he could update the Panel in future. He was determined that funding to be provided to Northamptonshire would be used to best effect.
- A new fleet workshop in the county was likely to be in a relatively central location.
- A range of work was already done to raise awareness of the risks and impact of fire. At the same time, the number of fires occurring in the county at any time could be affected by various factors, including hot weather or cases where an individual was responsible for multiple fires. This was another area in which prevention, education and community engagement played an important role.

The Panel considered its conclusions on the Annual Report and Fire and Rescue Statement and members were reminded of guidance about good practice. Panel members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Annual Report demonstrated a significant amount of good work was being done.
- High performance by Northamptonshire Police should be recognised but there was no room for complacency. There seemed to be good oversight and understanding of the force's performance, the issues it faced and the trajectory it was on.
- NFRS was also working to develop and improve.
- Increased recruitment to both services would help them to reflect the communities they served in the county.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel recognises areas of performance in which Northamptonshire Police is the leading force in the country.

- b) The Panel is satisfied that the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner has a good understanding of the trajectory of Northamptonshire Police's performance and issues affecting this.
- c) The Panel recognises the commitment of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service to improving its performance and operation where necessary.
- d) The Panel recognises progress with recruitment to Northamptonshire Police and Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service that will help to make both services more reflective of the communities they serve.
- e) The Panel commends the Annual Report 2022/23 and the range of good work done by all concerned that it reflects.

153. **Police, Fire and Crime Panel Work Programme 2023/24 and operating arrangements**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager presented the report, highlighting the following points:

- The Panel's work programme should be considered at the first regular meeting of the new municipal year. In addition to the mandatory tasks, the Panel should identify the topics that the Panel wished to scrutinise and the method for carrying out those tasks. That could include information gathering, briefing sessions and identifying additional training requirements.
- The Panel was invited to consider the proposed outline work programme, which had incorporated previous working methods and tasks identified by the previous Panel, and the Panel's statutory functions.

The Panel considered the report and members made the following points:

- Councillor Mercer offered, and received support, to remain as the Panel's representative on the National Association of Police, Fire and Crime Panels. She would provide the Panel with feedback from the meetings.
- Continuing the membership of the East Midlands Police and Crime Panels Network, the Panel would benefit from access to training.
- Training should be provided for new members of the Panel and the substitutes.
- The Panel sought to meet and receive an informal briefing from the Chief Constable and the Chief Fire Officer, and suggested it be held on site at a central location and for time to be allowed for the Panel to ask questions on behalf of the public. Provision of headline slides, in advance, would enable the Panel to prepare questions.
- A meeting should be arranged to bring the early intervention work to a conclusion.
- Training on effective scrutiny, questioning skills and understanding information would help to support the effectiveness of the Panel as a scrutiny body

In response to points raised during discussion the Democratic Services Assistant Manager provided additional information as follows:

- New Panel members received a welcome pack in the form of an in-house Brief Guide to Police, Fire and Crime Panel and links to information on best practice and the roles of Police, Fire and Crime panels.
- It was proposed that arrangements for recruitment of independent co-opted Panel members should be considered by the last Panel meeting in 2023/24 to allow time for the process to be completed for the start of 2024/25.

During the course of discussion Councillor Mercer advised that correspondence, from the National Association of Police, Fire and Crime Panels, would be circulated to the Panel Members regarding the consultation undertaken in 2023 regarding the Governments proposed changes to the Policing Protocol.

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager advised that the scheduled meeting date of 18 April 2024 would conflict with the pre-election period for the May 2024 election of the PFCC and would need to be rescheduled to an appropriate date.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel agreed that its work programme for 2023/24 should include the following matters:
 - A Police, Fire and Crime Plan delivery update presented to each regular meeting of the Panel
 - Police and Fire and Rescue Authority budget updates presented to each regular meeting of the Panel
 - The Joint Independent Audit Committee (JIAC) Annual Report 2022/23 presented to the Panel meeting on 7 September 2023
 - A report from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on action plans developed to address areas for improvement in service delivery by Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service as identified in the HMICFRS 2021/22 inspection
 - A report from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on the outcomes of the IPSOS Mori public consultation exercise on community safety in Northamptonshire carried out in 2022/23
 - A report from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on the new version of the Commissioner's full Estates Strategy
 - A report from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on the local impact of implementing the Serious Violence Duty under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022
 - A report from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on the local impact of delays in the Criminal Justice System
 - Briefing sessions with the Chief Constable and with the Chief Fire Officer on their organisations' operating environment, priorities and challenges
 - A workshop session on the development of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed precepts for 2024/25 in January 2024
 - The final report resulting from task and finish work on early intervention commenced in 2022/23.
- b) The Panel requested that a briefing session with the Chief Constable and, particularly, the Chief Fire Officer be organised as soon as possible on the following basis:
 - the session to be held in-person for preference but with the option to attend remotely if this is necessary for some Panel members

- the session to be held at an appropriate service venue
 - some introductory information to be provided to Panel members ahead of the session
 - the session to allow sufficient time for Panel members to ask questions.
- c) The Panel agreed to continue its membership of the East Midlands Police and Crime Panels Network for 2023/24.
- d) The Panel agreed to continue its membership of the National Association of Police, Fire and Crime Panels for 2023/24.
- e) The Panel requested that representatives who attend network meetings provide feedback for circulation to all Panel members.
- f) The Panel agreed that training be organised for members on effective scrutiny by Police, Fire and Crime Panels.
- g) The Panel agreed that the Panel meeting scheduled for 18 April 2024 be moved to an earlier date to take account of the pre-election period for the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner election.

154. **Appointments to the Police, Fire and Crime Panel Complaints Sub Committee for 2023/24**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager outlined the statutory functions of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel Complaints Sub-Committee, and the appointment members.

The Panel considered the report and members indicated their interest in serving on the Sub-Committee.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel agreed the appointment of the following members to serve on the Complaints Sub Committee for 2023/24:
- Councillors Maxwell and Pritchard from the Conservative councillor members of the Panel
 - Councillor Strachan from the Labour councillor members of the Panel
 - Mrs Shields and Miss Woodhouse from the independent co-opted members of the Panel.
- b) The Panel agreed that councillor members of the Panel be contacted following the current meeting in order to confirm the remaining members and substitutes of the Complaints Sub Committee for 2023/24.

155. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 3.40 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____