

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 Tuesday 20 February 2024 at 12.30 pm.

Present:

Councillor David Smith (Chair)
Councillor Gill Mercer (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Fiona Baker
Councillor Jon-Paul Carr
Councillor André González De Savage
Councillor Dorothy Maxwell
Councillor Zoe McGhee
Councillor Russell Roberts
Miss Pauline Woodhouse

Substitute Members:

Councillor Wendy Randall

Also Present:

Stephen Mold, Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Nikki Watson, proposed candidate for appointment as Chief Fire Officer for Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service
Jonny Bugg, Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Vaughan Ashcroft, Interim Chief Finance Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Deborah Denton, Head of Communications, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Stuart McCartney, Governance and Accountability Manager, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Councillor Danielle Stone, West Northamptonshire Council
Sarah Hall, Deputy Director Law and Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer, West Northamptonshire Council
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager, West Northamptonshire Council
Paul Hanson, Head of Democratic and Elections, West Northamptonshire Council
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer, West Northamptonshire Council
Josh West, Labour Group Political Assistant, West Northamptonshire Council
Adam Taylor, East Midlands Executive Council member, Fire Brigades Union

There were also 20 members of the public in attendance.

221. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Strachan and Pritchard and from the Director Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer, West Northamptonshire Council. Councillor Randall substituted for Councillor Strachan.

222. Declarations of Interest

Councillor González De Savage advised that he had received correspondence from over 200 people relating to the proposed appointment of the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) since the confirmation hearing date had been announced. He retained an open mind about the decision he would reach.

The Chair noted that all Panel members had received similar correspondence and thanked members of the public for their interest in the work of the Panel. Another Panel member subsequently commented that some correspondence received had been confrontational and had made comments that were not appropriate.

223. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting. At the Chair's invitation the Deputy Director Law and Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer subsequently summarised that the Panel's focus when carrying out a confirmation hearing should be on the candidate's professional competence and personal independence. The confirmation hearing process was intended to complement the recruitment and selection process that had identified the proposed appointment, not to duplicate or repeat it.

224. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

225. Proposed appointment by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire of a Chief Fire Officer

The Chair welcomed Ms Nikki Watson to the meeting and Panel members present introduced themselves.

The Chair invited Panel members to raise any questions about the Panel's statutory responsibilities or the process to be followed for the confirmation hearing. Panel members raised the following points:

- It was questioned when the outcome of the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) investigation concerning Ms Watson would be known. When the PFCC had written to Panel members regarding the proposed appointment he had stated that the Panel would receive a further briefing on the matter. The Panel needed to be appropriately informed to carry out the confirmation hearing effectively.
- Under Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) recruitment and selection policy a firefighter who was subject to an outstanding performance or disciplinary issue was not eligible for promotion. The same should apply in this case.
- The Panel and the candidate had been put in a difficult position as a result of the need to hold the confirmation hearing at this point. It was questioned why the PFCC had not waited for the IOPC investigation to be concluded before notifying the Panel of the proposed appointment.

- The Panel could decide to veto the proposed appointment of a CFO if it concluded that there had been a failure of due diligence in the recruitment process.
- The Panel was required to hold a confirmation hearing within a set time of being notified of a proposed appointment by the PFCC. If it did not do so the PFCC could just proceed with the appointment.
- It was questioned whether there was scope to delay the confirmation hearing until the outcome of the IOPC investigation was known. Panel members were not comfortable proceeding in the current situation. Panel members and the candidate had received criticism from members of the public.
- Not all Panel members were of the same mind about the current situation. The Panel should proceed with its task.

The Deputy Director Law and Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer provided additional advice and information in response to points raised by Panel members as follows:

- The IOPC investigation was still live and so the outcome was not yet known. It was difficult to discuss the matter further in a public meeting.
- It was not possible to brief the Panel about the IOPC investigation ahead of the current meeting as the investigation was still continuing. Seeking to do so could influence the outcome of the confirmation hearing.
- It was anticipated that the PFCC would want to know the outcome of the IOPC investigation before going ahead with the appointment of Ms Watson.
- If the Panel was satisfied as a result of the confirmation hearing that Mr Watson was appointable as CFO it could consider recommending that the appointment be made, subject to all due diligence being completed satisfactorily.
- The Panel was statutorily required to hold a confirmation hearing within three weeks of being notified of a proposed appointment by the PFCC. Delaying the current meeting would risk this period elapsing.
- It was not apparent that there had been a systematic failure in the recruitment process used by the PFCC that would justify the Panel vetoing the proposed appointment. However, the Panel could still express concerns about the process if it saw the need to do so.

The Chair noted that the current situation was not ideal. Having been notified of the proposed appointment the Panel was required to hold a confirmation hearing. It was saddening that Panel members were receiving criticism for taking a role that was about serving the community. In the circumstances the Panel should proceed and carry out the confirmation hearing in an appropriate manner.

The Chair then invited the PFCC to introduce Ms Watson as his proposed appointment as CFO. The PFCC made the following points:

- This confirmation hearing was originally due to have taken place on 6 December 2023 but had needed to be postponed. He thanked the Panel for finding an early opportunity to proceed.
- He thanked Simon Tuhill for his service as the interim CFO since July 2023 and was confident that Ms Watson and Mr Tuhill would form a strong team in future.
- Ms Watson had been selected as his proposed appointment as CFO following a robust process supported by recruitment experts.

- Ms Watson had an exemplary record of 36 years' service in the emergency services and public safety. She had chaired a Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and was a qualified leader in a range of specialist areas. Ms Watson was an operationally credible appointment as CFO who would give new strategic direction to NFRS and bring new vision and confidence.
- Ms Watson was subject to a conduct investigation by the IOPC relating to her previous role. This did not involve a criminal element and had arisen after Ms Watson had been selected as the PFCC's proposed appointment. Ms Watson had been formally notified of this investigation late on 5 December 2023. This was why it had not been possible to proceed with the previous confirmation hearing.
- He had decided to request that a confirmation hearing be held pending the outcome of the IOPC investigation, which was now at an advanced stage. This was better than further delay and uncertainty. Ms Watson had advised that she was confident the matter under investigation was without substance. It would not be appropriate to discuss a live IOPC investigation further.
- The CFO position had been offered to Ms Watson subject to vetting. Ms Watson would not be appointed to the position until the IOPC investigation was concluded satisfactorily. He requested that if the Panel recommended that the appointment should be made this should be subject to the successful resolution of the outstanding matters.
- The Panel was encouraged to carry out the confirmation hearing in accordance with the requirement to focus on the professional competence and personal independence of the proposed appointment, as set out in the information presented to the Panel.

The Panel then asked Ms Watson a series of questions relating to her professional competence and personal independence.

Ms Watson was asked what attracted her to the role of CFO of NFRS. Ms Watson made the following points:

- Her interest in the CFO role reflected that she had been in public service for 36 years and wanted to continue to serve the community. She had worked as part of an executive leadership team for the past nine years, which had enabled her to gain skills and experience in leading people, driving performance improvement, transforming organisational culture and setting strategies to keep people safe.
- Her operational experience covered areas including firearms; public order; and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats. As a major critical incident commander she had worked with other emergency and public services. She had chaired multiple strategic co-ordinating groups and had been the chair of the Avon and Somerset LRF during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, she had considerable skills that were transferable to fire and rescue.
- Her interest in coming to Northamptonshire reflected that NFRS was an ambitious service that was already improving but had more to do, including in relation to its organisational culture. This was an area that interested her and in which she had skills and experience.
- Northamptonshire was a strategically important area within the country with a mix of urban and rural communities similar to areas in which she had previously served. She also had previous experience of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) governance model.

A Panel member noted that as CFO Ms Watson would be the gold commander for NFRS in major incidents, which could arise or develop unexpectedly. Ms Watson was asked if she was confident that her previous experience equipped her to carry out this role from a fire and rescue perspective. Ms Watson made the following points:

- Fire and rescue services and police forces used the same approach when responding to major incidents, which involved tactical and operational commanders as well as the strategic commander. In previous policing roles she was used to drawing on expert operational advice from a team.
- She would complete any fire and rescue accreditations that may assist her to carry out the role of the CFO.

Ms Watson was asked what she saw as the main challenges currently facing NFRS and what she would take from her previous professional experience to enable her to address these challenges effectively. Ms Watson made the following points:

- Her first task would be to get to know NFRS, build her profile and meet staff members. She looked forward to being able to build a relationship with 500 staff members in NFRS having last worked in an organisation with 6,000 staff members.
- The CFO relied on managers and staff members to deliver effective local services. Staff members needed to have confidence in procedures and that these would be operated in a fair way. Leadership development would be a key part of unlocking the overall talent within the organisation.
- All organisations faced pressures on resources. There was an onus on the CFO to use resources well, maintaining an effective balance between protection and prevention and prioritising according to risks. Future bids for resources needed to be strong and evidence based.
- Cultural change needed to take place alongside service transformation to enable an organisation to reflect the changing world and operate as effectively as possible.
- She would take from her previous experience the importance of making time to communicate and engage with staff members whilst also carrying out the 'day job' of the role. She would use data and insights to show when there was a need for change in order to take others on the journey.

In response to supplementary points by Panel members Ms Watson went on to make the following additional points:

- In referring to the need to change the organisational culture of NFRS she was not saying that fire and rescue was in a worse position than the police. All organisations had a culture. This could be affected for the worse if some staff members, even a minority, did not behave according to appropriate standards.
- There were three areas that should be considered when seeking to change the culture of an organisation: capability, opportunity and motivation. The first was about giving staff members the necessary training, skills and awareness. The second was about putting in place fair policies that were understood by all, applied consistently and included an opportunity for staff members to raise concerns. The third should include recognising and rewarding inclusivity in all processes.

A Panel member extended their respect to Ms Watson for dealing with the difficult situation connected with the circumstances of the confirmation hearing. Ms Watson was asked how she would seek to communicate with NFRS staff members if appointed as CFO, to introduce herself, engage staff members in the future direction for NFRS and inspire confidence in her leadership. Ms Watson made the following points:

- NFRS was a service that depended on its people, who accounted for 74 per cent of its total budget.
- Her approach to leading NFRS would involve listening and engaging. This would be a focus during her initial weeks in the role and would be a two-way process.
- As CFO she had ultimate decision-making responsibility but aimed to be informed by and to make use of expert knowledge and ideas from within NFRS.
- She expected to be held to account for how she carried out the role of CFO and to engage with staff members as part of this. In her previous policing role she had been part of a larger organisation than NFRS but had still sought to take this approach.

Ms Watson was asked as CFO how she would seek to ensure that NFRS continued to improve its effectiveness at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks and that it progressed towards providing outstanding rated services, including to rural communities. Ms Watson made the following points:

- NFRS should focus on delivering effective services, which would then be reflected in its rating from HMICFRS.
- Resources needed to be balanced between protection and prevention. NFRS was effective at prevention and this needed to continue.
- If appointed as CFO she would aim to maximise community input in the development of the next Community Risk Management Plan.
- She had experience of policing areas that included both urban and rural communities and the tensions this could involve in delivering services. As CFO she would listen to communities and use data to develop informed, effective services.

Ms Watson was asked how she would address the judgement by HMICFRS that NFRS required improvement in the People category and whether there were sufficient resources available to achieve change. Ms Watson emphasised that she had significant experience of working to change organisational culture as already mentioned and also made the following points:

- HMICFRS looked at organisational culture because a fire and rescue service needed to have the confidence and trust of the people it served. The way a service operated would affect the service it provided.
- A healthy culture helped to attract good staff members and to empower them to work well. Studies showed that a more diverse team also brought in different viewpoints that could support creativity.
- There were sufficient resources to achieve cultural change at NFRS. NFRS's main resource was its people. It did not take significant resources to set the right expectations.

Ms Watson was asked what she saw as the key factors in enabling NFRS to operate as effectively as possible in a demanding financial environment and how she would seek to address these in practice. Ms Watson made the following points:

- Data and insight should be used to understand risks and identify the best approach to maximising budgets.
- Collaborating with other organisations with similar aims could also assist in getting best value and results for the public. Flooding was an example of an issue where many agencies needed to work together effectively on prevention and response.
- As CFO she would use data and insight from the senior leadership team to inform decisions about the number of fire appliances and crews that NFRS needed. NFRS was on a positive trajectory for performance in areas such as responding to road traffic collisions and attending fires. This needed to be recognised and built on further.

Ms Watson was asked what approach she would take as CFO to NFRS's involvement in partnership working, both with other emergency services and in broader areas of activity, to support the delivery of national and local priorities.

Ms Watson made the following points:

- Her approach would be to identify opportunities to align priorities and objectives to help partners to work in the same direction.
- NFRS had a lot to offer with regard to collaboration. Firefighters were trusted by the public, which provided a strong basis for contributing to safeguarding communities and vulnerable people within them.
- Organisations involved in responding to civil contingencies and emergencies needed to plan, prepare and exercise together to support an effective response, rather than dealing with issues for the first time when they occurred for real. NFRS needed to be prepared to deal with growing issues such as flooding and wildfires.
- Any collaborations in which NFRS was involved should complement its primary role. NFRS could contribute to addressing an issue such as cuckooing by passing information to the relevant agency rather than by taking direct action.
- The leader of an organisation like NFRS relied on appropriate systems to inform them about its overall activity as they could not be directly involved in everything. As CFO she would be accountable for NFRS but wanted to work as part of a team when carrying out her role.

Ms Watson was asked to give an example of when she had led a strategic service transformation project, the challenges involved and how she had ensured the project was delivered successfully. Ms Watson responded that as Deputy Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset Police she had led organisational change at the force as part of a five year strategic plan. She had developed the initial vision for the plan and the strategic actions needed to achieve it. This had led to the identification of manageable deliverables in seven programmes. A lead officer had been assigned to each area and she had overseen overall delivery, as well as leading on one programme. The organisation needed to be engaged in service transformation for it to be successful. A plan could be excellent but still needed to be communicated to those concerned.

In response to supplementary points by Panel members Ms Watson went on to make the following additional points:

- She hoped that others would judge her capability based on what they saw and heard from her, not on some of what had been said in the media. She did not claim to be a technical expert in fire and rescue; as a Deputy Chief Constable she did not have knowledge about all aspects of policing. The role of a strategic leader was to set standards and manage performance against them, including recognising good performance.
- If appointed as CFO she intended to see out the contract that had been offered. The longer term future was not solely down to her. However, she did not anticipate retiring soon.

Ms Watson was asked how as CFO she would seek to work with the PFCC to reflect the distinct responsibilities of the two roles whilst also working well as a team and how she would challenge, and be challenged by, the PFCC constructively.

Ms Watson made the following points:

- She had first spoken with Mr Mold after applying for the CFO position and had first met him at the interview. If appointed as CFO she would need to build a working relationship with the PFCC.
- She was familiar with the PCC governance model and had previously worked under two different PCCs. She was clear about the respective responsibilities of the PFCC and the CFO.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic she had deputised for the national silver commander and had worked with the Home Office on proposed lockdown restrictions. This had involved providing constructive challenge on some initial proposals that would have been very difficult to police, resulting in the development of more feasible proposals.
- She was used to working with senior leaders to produce well-informed, robust cases for action and was ready to provide challenge back when necessary.

Ms Watson was asked how she would seek to work with fire and rescue staff representative bodies if appointed as CFO. Ms Watson made the following points:

- The CFO should engage with elected representatives of the workforce. Representative organisations shared the aim of keeping the public safe. She would want to have a strong, trusting relationship with them.
- She had not yet met with fire and rescue representative organisations but it would be one of her first priorities if appointed.

Ms Watson was asked what relationship she thought the CFO should have with the Panel, given the respective roles of the Panel and the PFCC. It was also highlighted that the CFO had not attended a Panel meeting for some time. Ms Watson made the following points:

- The Panel was responsible for scrutinising the PFCC. She had previous experience of panels receiving detailed briefings involving service chiefs.
- As CFO she would hope to have a good ongoing relationship with the Panel, which represented another source of intelligence for the CFO about local issues and risks.
- She did not have direct experience of other Police, Fire and Crime panels.

Ms Watson was asked what she most wanted to achieve during her tenure if appointed as CFO. Ms Watson responded that cultural change such as that reflected in the NFRS Serving with Pride programme was crucial to effective service delivery. She would feel that she had done a good job as CFO if NFRS implemented transformation whilst still providing effective services, building on work that had already been started and continuing this further.

The Chair asked Ms Watson if she had any questions for the Panel or if there were any further comments she wished to make. Ms Watson thanked Panel members for their time and hoped that she had demonstrated the professional competence and personal independence required for her appointment to be confirmed. She was eager to take up the role of CFO and believed that her experience and capabilities would only complement NFRS.

226. 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 1 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.

[The Panel adjourned for 10 minutes at this point].

227. Report and recommendation to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire on the proposed appointment of a Chief Fire 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. On a vote of 6 members in favour, 3 against and one abstention it was:

RESOLVED that: the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel recommends that the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire appoints Ms Nikki Watson as Chief Fire Officer for Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service, subject to all outstanding due diligence checks relating to the appointment and conclusion of the IOPC investigation being satisfactory.

The meeting closed at 3.30 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____