

Report to Governance Committee

27 September 2022

Review of the Fire and Rescue Service Scrutiny Committee

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral divisions: Not applicable

Summary

The Council's Fire and Rescue Service Scrutiny Committee was established in June 2020 after a broad review of governance arrangements for the Fire and Rescue Service at the Council following external inspection. It was agreed to review the arrangements after two years. This report covers that review for consideration by the Committee.

Recommendation:

That the Committee considers the report and determines whether to support the continuation of the arrangements for scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 In December 2019, the Governance Committee agreed to the recommendation of the Scrutiny Review Member Panel to establish a new committee dedicated to the scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service. Prior to this, scrutiny of the Service was carried out by the then Environment, Communities and Fire Select Committee. The review was driven by a need to improve the transparency of the Council's governance of its Fire and Rescue functions following an inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS).
- 1.2 Whilst the Panel was mindful of the costs associated with operating a new committee, it agreed to recommend a separate Fire & Rescue Service Scrutiny Committee (FRSSC) to be reviewed after two years. Members felt this would provide a greater focus for the service, address concerns raised in the inspection report and ease the workload of the Environment, Communities and Fire Select Committee. The Panel recommended a smaller membership for the FRSSC, given its focus on one service, but recognised that it must be politically proportionate. It also recommended that the committee did not require a business planning group as the whole committee could carry out work programme planning.

- 1.3 The FRSSC has held 11 meetings since June 2020. These commenced virtually (due to the pandemic) and have since used hybrid technology with officers and members being able to attend virtually where in line with meeting requirements. The Committee has covered key service issues, including the Fire and Rescue Service improvement journey, focusing on the causes of concern identified in the inspection. This has enabled it to obtain assurance on progress and to identify issues of concern or for further scrutiny. The Committee has also been committed to continuous performance management, through scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service Performance and Assurance Framework, which it has reviewed in conjunction with the new corporate Performance and Resources Report. Other topics scrutinised include preview of the Statement of Assurance and input into the Community Risk Management Plan.
- 1.4 The Committee has had two task and finish Groups (TFGs), on the Joint Fire Control Centre and the recruitment/retention of retained firefighters. Both held information sessions for members to listen to witnesses and gather information prior to formal scrutiny. FRSSC also worked with the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee on a joint TFG regarding the planned Horsham Fire and Training Centre. The Committee has complemented its work with visits to the Joint Fire Control Centre and the Horsham training and fire centre.
- 1.5 Members of the Committee have been able to develop more in-depth knowledge given the focus purely on the Fire and Rescue Service. The work programme planning process is working well without the need for a separate business planning group. Work programme planning is undertaken in public at committee meetings, with all members able to participate.
- 1.6 All meetings of the Committee have been webcast, with average viewing figures set out below (including comparative data for other scrutiny committees). The figures for 2022/23 are as of August 2022.

Comparative data	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
FRSSC: average live views per meeting	42.75 (4 meetings)	40.75 (5 meetings)	23 (1 meeting)
FRSSC: total average views (live and archive)	197.5	129	75
All other (4) scrutiny cttees): average live views per meeting	62 (24 meetings)	39.5 (23 meetings)	22.5 (8 meetings)
All other (4) scrutiny cttees): total average views (live and archive views) per meeting	219.25	156	60

- 1.7 Some potential negative impacts of establishing a new FRSSC committee were highlighted by the Member Panel in 2019. These have been assessed as part of the two-year review of the Committee, as set out in the table below.

No other county council fire authority has a separate fire scrutiny committee	There is now a FRSSC at Gloucestershire County Council, and the White Paper on Fire Reform sets out this model as a preferred option for all fire authorities with a single person executive model.
Could lead to a demand for more	This has not occurred.

scrutiny committees to be established	
Risk that the number of meetings may grow, increasing the burden on diaries and time	<p>Robust work programme planning has ensured the management of business within the Committee's four scheduled meetings per year (fewer than other scrutiny committees), with one TFG during the two years. All Committee meetings have lasted less than half a day.</p> <p>Virtual pre-meetings have been held for the Chairman and Vice Chairman, as usual for all Council committee meetings. No business planning group has been required.</p> <p>The Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee now has a more manageable work programme, with meetings that no longer last all day and less demand for additional meetings.</p>

- 1.8 In early 2022, HMICFRS reinspected the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service and its report confirmed that the new governance arrangements ensure that the service's decision-making can now be challenged in a more robust and informed way, following the establishment of the FRSSC.
- 1.9 In July 2022, the Cabinet agreed its response to the Government Fire Reform White Paper consultation. This was a wide-ranging White Paper but included a section on governance, with various options for a single executive with responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service including the designation of the Council Leader with the function delegated to a named cabinet member. Each option included the expectation that there should be a dedicated scrutiny panel. As the Council operates a model in line with one of these options, the Cabinet agreed a response that supports the continuation of the current approach.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 Consultation carried out as part of the two-year review of the FRSSC did not support any change to the current arrangements, which are in line with the options set out in the recent Government White Paper. The Committee is working well and within the resources identified. It is therefore proposed that the current arrangements for scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service should continue unchanged.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 The other main option considered was the removal of the FRSSC, with responsibility for scrutiny of the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service transferred to the Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee. This option was not supported in the consultation carried out with members and officers (see paragraph 4).
- 3.2 Consultation also assessed any areas for improvement for the FRSSC, but no fundamental changes to the way it works or is constituted were identified.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 Scrutiny Committee members, members of the Cabinet and Fire and Rescue Service officers were consulted as part of the review. Consultation focused on what has worked well/less well, areas for improvement and whether the Committee should continue as a stand-alone committee (and if not, what alternatives would be preferred). Feedback is summarised below.

FRSSC members (including previous members and substitute members)	<p>Support the continuation of arrangements and that the Committee has worked well and carried out strong and effective scrutiny. A dedicated committee enables effective member engagement and contribution to the improvement plan.</p> <p>Particular highlights - visiting different aspects of the service and having a good working relationship between the Committee, Cabinet Member and officers.</p> <p>Areas highlighted for the future: to ensure new members of the Committee receive a thorough induction, the ability to compare with other fire authorities and the need for questioning to be strategic.</p>
West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service officers (Chief Fire Officer, Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Assistant Chief Fire Officer)	<p>Support for the continuation of a dedicated FRSSC. It has worked well and supports them in their role by a robust approach to scrutiny of the executive. The Performance and Assurance framework has been a useful tool, and a separate committee is in line with the proposals in the White Paper for Fire Reform.</p> <p>The only issue highlighted for the future was for the Committee's discussions to remain strategic, and for questioning not to be too operational.</p>
Cabinet	<p>Cabinet was able to feed into the review at its meeting on 20 July 2022, as part of its discussion of the response to the White Paper. Current arrangements were fully supported.</p>

- 4.2 The only other County Council with a dedicated scrutiny committee for the Fire and Rescue Service is Gloucestershire County Council. The FRSSC Chairman and lead support officer have met their opposites at Gloucestershire to share learning. The committee at Gloucestershire County Council is established on similar terms (size, number of meetings), has a similar work programme (with a review of performance at each meeting) and carries out work programme planning in the same way. Feedback from its chairman and lead support officer suggests it is working well, and there are no plans for any changes except consideration of increasing the membership to ensure resilience for attendance

(an issue West Sussex has not experienced). Opportunities to continue to liaise in order to share best practice will be explored.

5 Finance

5.1 The main estimated costs of the FRSSC are staff support costs (within Democratic Services) and the Committee Chairman's Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA), as set out below:

- Chairman's SRA: £9,719
- Estimated staffing costs (including on-costs): £41,280
- **Total: £50,999**

5.2 Other costs not included are Fire and Rescue Service officer time, committee member travel expenses and the printing and postage of agenda papers.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
A lack of effective scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service	The continuation of a separate committee will enable robust and focused scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

7.1 There are no social value, crime and disorder, equality duty, human rights, public health, Climate Change or legal implications arising from this report. The proposal in this report will ensure the Council's governance arrangements are in line with national policy, as set out in recent Government White Paper.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None