

**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE POLICE, FIRE AND CRIME PANEL**  
**REPORT TO THE POLICE, FIRE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER**  
**FOR NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**

**21 FEBRUARY 2024**

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| <b>Report Title</b>  | <b>Review of the proposed appointment by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire of a Chief Fire Officer.</b>   |
| <b>Report Author</b> | <b>James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager, West Northamptonshire Council</b><br><a href="mailto:James.edmunds@westnorthants.gov.uk">James.edmunds@westnorthants.gov.uk</a> |

**1. Purpose of Report**

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- 1.1. The report is intended to set out the results of the review by the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire’s proposed appointment of a Chief Fire Officer for Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service.

**2. Executive Summary**

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- 2.1 The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire is responsible for appointing the Chief Fire Officer for Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service. When the Commissioner proposes to make an appointment to this position the Police, Fire and Crime Panel must hold a confirmation hearing to review the proposed appointment in order to make a recommendation on it. This report sets out the result of a confirmation hearing held by the Panel on 20 February 2024 concerning the proposed appointment of Ms Nikki Watson as Chief Fire Officer.

**3. Recommendations**

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- 3.1 The Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel recommends:
- a) 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.
  - b) That the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner notifies the Panel of his decision whether to accept or reject its recommendation in accordance with the Fire and Rescue Authority (Police and Crime Commissioner) (Application of Local Policing Provisions, Inspection, Powers to Trade and Consequential Amendments) Order 2017 part 2 chapter 1 paragraph 9(3).

- 3.2 Reasons for Recommendation(s) – The recommendations are required to complete the Panel’s review of the proposed appointment by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner of a Chief Fire Officer, in accordance with the Panel’s statutory responsibilities.

#### **4. Report Background**

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- 4.1 The Policing and Crime Act 2017 makes provision for a Police and Crime Commissioner for an area to be the fire and rescue authority for that area. This position has applied in Northamptonshire from 1 January 2019. The responsibilities of a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) created under the 2017 Act include the functions of appointing, suspending or dismissing the Chief Fire Officer.
- 4.2 The Fire and Rescue Authority (Police and Crime Commissioner) (Application of Local Policing Provisions, Inspection, Powers to Trade and Consequential Amendments) Order 2017 part 2 chapter 1 specifies that a PFCC must notify the relevant Police, Fire and Crime Panel of the proposed appointment of a Chief Fire Officer. In such cases the PFCC must also notify the Police, Fire and Crime Panel of the following information:
- a) the name of the person whom the PFCC is proposing to appoint (“the candidate”);
  - b) the criteria used to assess the suitability of the candidate for the appointment;
  - c) why the candidate satisfies those criteria; and
  - d) the terms and conditions on which the candidate is to be appointed.
- 4.3 The Police, Fire and Crime Panel must review the proposed appointment at a confirmation hearing. A confirmation hearing is defined as: “A meeting of the Panel, held in public, at which the candidate is requested to appear for the purpose of answering questions relating to the appointment.”
- 4.4 The Police, Fire and Crime Panel must then make a report to the PFCC stating the outcome of the review. In the case of the proposed appointment of a Chief Fire Officer the Panel must make a recommendation as to whether or not the candidate should be appointed. Alternatively, the Panel may resolve to veto the proposed appointment, if at least two-thirds of the people who are members of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel at the time vote in favour of making that decision.
- 4.5 The PFCC may accept or reject the Police, Fire and Crime Panel's recommendation as to whether or not the candidate should be appointed. The PFCC must notify the Panel of their decision on the Panel’s recommendation. In the event that the Panel vetoes the PFCC’s proposed appointment the PFCC must not appoint that candidate. The PFCC must then propose a reserve candidate, whose appointment will be subject to review at a further confirmation hearing.
- 4.6 The Police, Fire and Crime Panel must publish its report to the PFCC, although it is for the Panel to decide the manner in which the report is published.

## 5. Review of the proposed appointment of a Chief Fire Officer

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- 5.1 The Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel met in public on 20 February 2024 to hold a confirmation hearing for the proposed appointment of Ms Nikki Watson as Chief Fire Officer for Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service.
- 5.2 The Panel was provided with information about the proposed appointment ahead of the confirmation hearing. This included the information referred to in paragraph 4.2 above.
- 5.3 At the confirmation hearing the Panel asked questions of Ms Watson, intended to enable Panel members to evaluate her suitability for the role. In accordance with relevant guidance these questions focussed on the areas of professional competence (: the candidate's ability to carry out the role) and personal independence (: the need for the candidate to act in a manner that is operationally independent of the PFCC). The questions covered the following areas:
- Ms Watson's interest in the role and perceptions of the main challenges facing Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service and how these could be addressed.
  - Approaches to communicating with Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service staff members in order to engage them in the future direction for the Service and inspire confidence in its leadership.
  - Approaches to improving the performance of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service and enabling it to operate as effectively as possible in a demanding financial environment.
  - Supporting cultural transformation in Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service that enables it to develop into a fully inclusive workplace that is representative of the communities it serves.
  - Developing partnership working with other emergency services and with partner organisations in broader areas of activity.
  - Experience of leading major service transformation projects.
  - Working effectively with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner whilst respecting the distinctions between their respective responsibilities.
  - Working constructively with staff representative organisations whilst delivering an appropriate level of service to the community.
  - The future working relationship between the Panel and the Chief Fire Officer.
- 5.4 The confirmation hearing was webcast live and the recording is available to view at the following link: [West Northamptonshire Council - YouTube](#).

## 6. Outcome of the Review

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- 6.1 In considering its recommendation on the proposed appointment the Panel recognised that it was required to focus on whether Ms Watson had the professional competence and personal independence to exercise the role as set out in the job description and person specification. The Commissioner was responsible for identifying the candidate for appointment. His choice of Ms Watson had resulted from a recruitment process that had attracted a good number of applicants. The Panel acknowledged that Ms Watson was currently subject to an investigation by the Independent Office of Police Conduct (IOPC) relating to her previous position, which she had been informed of after being selected as the candidate for appointment. The Commissioner had stated at the confirmation hearing that he would not appoint Ms Watson as Chief Fire Officer until this matter had been resolved and vetting had been completed successfully.
- 6.2 After questioning Ms Watson and taking account of the other information provided to the Panel, Panel members generally commented that Ms Watson met the requirements for the role and could bring to it a range of relevant skills and experience from her previous professional career. This included significant experience of strategic leadership in emergency services and of working collaboratively with partners in that sector and beyond. Panel members also highlighted Ms Watson's previous involvement in leading organisational change and her stated commitment to taking an informed and collaborative approach to service delivery and development.
- 6.3 Some Panel members challenged whether Ms Watson was sufficiently equipped to exercise the role of Chief Fire Officer, particularly when acting as a gold commander, given that she did not have previous operational fire and rescue experience and would therefore need to rely more on other members of the Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service senior leadership team. It was highlighted that Ms Watson had experience of gold command. Other Panel members went on to emphasise that a Chief Fire Officer was not required to have operational fire and rescue experience and other fire and rescue authorities had already appointed Chief Fire Officers who did not have a service background. A Chief Fire Officer was a strategic leader and all such leaders relied on their teams. At the same time, organisations could benefit from bringing in different types of people and fresh viewpoints. Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service needed to change and improve in response to the findings of its last HMICFRS inspection. This process was underway. It was felt that Ms Watson's experience and capabilities could contribute to taking it on further.
- 6.4 Panel members commented that the background to the proposed appointment had put Ms Watson in a difficult position at the confirmation hearing. Ms Watson had dealt with this in a positive way, which in itself showed resilience.
- 6.5 Panel members emphasised that any recommendation by the Panel supporting the proposed appointment had to be subject to the satisfactory resolution of the IOPC investigation.

6.6 At the conclusion of discussion the Panel resolved:

**To recommend 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.**

## **7. Background Papers**

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Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011

*Police and Crime Panels Guidance on Confirmation Hearings* Local Government Association and Centre for Public Scrutiny (August 2012)

Policing and Crime Act 2017

Fire and Rescue Authority (Police and Crime Commissioner) (Application of Local Policing Provisions, Inspection, Powers to Trade and Consequential Amendments) Order 2017

*Policing and fire governance: guidance for police and crime panels* Local Government Association and Centre for Public Scrutiny (July 2019)