

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
COMMUNITY SAFETY AND PROTECTION COMMITTEE

5 SEPTEMBER 2024

MINUTES

Present: Cllr Brian Kenny (Chair) Councillors Janet Grace, Edna Finneran, Lamb, Knight, O'Keeffe, Lesley Rennie and Les Byrom CBE

Also Present: Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle
Director of Finance and Procurement Mike Rea
Monitoring Officer Ria Groves

8. Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase Two Report

The Chair updated Members on the recent Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase Two report, which was published on the 4th September 2024.

It was noted that although a detailed report would be brought back to Authority in the future, the Committee's thoughts would remain with the families and loved ones of the 72 people who had lost their lives during the tragic events of 14th June 2017.

Regarding the safety and well-being of the communities in Merseyside, and in light of the front-line responders of the service, the Authority expressed their support for the publication of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase Two report.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Paul Tweed and Lynne Thompson.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made in relation to any item on the agenda.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on 4th April 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. Menopause Support

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle presented the revised Menopause Policy to Members and highlighted the positive work undertaken by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) into supporting employees through the menopause.

Members were advised that a staff consultation exercise was undertaken in 2022 involving engagement with staff networks, the Menopause Lounge, and an internal staff survey. It was clarified that a crucial aspect of the initiative entailed the organisation of workshops and seminars conducted by MFRA's Occupational Health team, which was noted as successfully completed.

It was noted that the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) agreed that from 1st April 2022, all employees would be able to reclaim the costs of their Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) prescriptions as part of an interim range of measures, including promotion of existing guidance and the Menopause Lounge, which were designed to improve the range of support offered to menopausal staff.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle highlighted the Menopause Policy, which was approved by the Community Safety Protection Committee on 6th April 2023, focused on raising awareness. It was explained that Officers utilised the guidance from the Women and Equalities Committee to develop a wider package of proposals, to support menopausal women.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle drew attention to the development of the informative guidance and e-learning packages which would reach a broader audience, noting that two learning packages were near completion. After the initial policy's approval, it was advised that self-guided risk assessments had been created to help women discuss and structure conversations with managers, colleagues, family, and doctors.

Members were advised that a trial period for female-only gym hours was currently being implemented three times a week at Service Headquarters. Members noted that on July 27th, 2024, a leading menopause consultant would conduct menopause champions training and that Liverpool would host the NFCC Menopause Conference on September 11 in the city centre.

Following the request to review the original Menopause Policy's language for inclusivity, Members noted that the policy had been revised to include comprehensive support details for staff. After consultations within MFRA's Gender Network and a review of national guidelines, it was noted that the language had been updated per ACAS recommendations.

Councillor Grace wanted to place on record her thanks and appreciation for the extensive research undertaken to update the policy, and the time spent in discussions with partners and stakeholders, including ACAS.

Councillor Byrom enquired if Members could attend the NFCC Menopause conference, noting that costs shouldn't be an issue. Councillor Byrom praised the assistance offered by MFRA to individuals impacted by menopause, he also welcomed and encouraged suggestions from Members for further improving the policy.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the support offered to menopausal women and other people who have a menstrual cycle including specific guidance documents, the Menopause Lounge support network, and the ability for staff to reclaim Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) prescription costs be noted; and
- b) the updated Menopause Policy which includes additional supportive measures developed following consultation with staff be approved.

5. Service Delivery Plan 2024-25 Q1 Update

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle presented the Service Delivery Plan Quarter 1 Update report for 2024-25, which outlined the scrutiny of the Authority's performance to date against its targets and objectives.

Members were informed that the Key Performance Indicator TC05, which related to special service calls, no longer had a set target, and would be used for quality assurance purposes only. It was noted that this decision reflected the nature of the incidents attended and would ensure that the service did not hinder public calls, nor were the Authority able to influence performance in areas such as assisting partner agencies.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle explained that FC13, Total False Alarms Attended (discounting False Alarm Good Intent and FC24 Total Number of False Alarm Good Intent attended including Non-Alarm-Receiving Centre Domestic Incidents), would also no longer have a set target but would still be recorded for quality assurance. It was noted that no target was set for these figures to encourage reporting. It was emphasised that the Authority prioritised responding to calls, with attendance decisions made upon receiving them.

Attention was drawn to page 30 of the agenda/report wherein indicator (TC02) displayed 1,293 fires attended which MFRA responded to from April to June 2024, highlighting a decrease of 733 fewer incidents from last year. Members were advised that adverse spring weather may have contributed to this reduction, and that the Authority would reassess next year.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle noted on page 32 that while a red indicator was present, the overall trend was usually green due to seasonal changes. He explained that the red status related to injuries occurring from deliberate dwelling fires. In response, it was confirmed that the MFRA's Prevention team was investigating this issue to develop preventive measures and understand the causes.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle stated that in May 2024, the TR08 attendance standard for fire appliances responding to life-risk incidents, which was established at 90%, was successfully achieved within a 10-minute response timeframe, which resulted in a remarkable 100% attendance rate.

Councillor Byrom highlighted the importance of statistical reports for insight into the Authority's targets and objectives. It was noted that if Members wished to

escalate any broader issues, they could do so to the Authority or Scrutiny Committee for further review.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle highlighted the importance of monthly analysis of all relevant data and metrics to stay informed. The Authority's internal processes were explained as crucial for performance reviews and identifying improvement areas, it was noted that Strategy and Performance regularly review those metrics.

Councillor Lamb expressed his appreciation for the clarity of the report and the effective colour scheme, indicating progress. He highlighted the prevention section on page 63, expressing concern that the prevalence of orange might worry the public about unmet targets, noting that it may relate to specific stages throughout the year.

In response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that the orange status indicated potential delays in meeting the functional plan's schedule due to external factors like partner collaboration and pending actions from the National Fire Chiefs Council. It was also noted that the statistics were for the first quarter, and that the Authority expected to complete the remaining actions within the next nine months.

Councillor Doreen Knight highlighted page 38 and queried the increase in sickness absence levels. Head of Professional and Organisational Development, Mike Pilkington explained that various measures had been implemented following thorough examination led by a Task and Finish group of the Scrutiny Committee, and full Authority. It was noted that since the pandemic, sickness levels had increased as employees had been waiting for medical appointments, with access to NHS services becoming increasingly challenging therefore extending long term sickness absence. Members were assured that measures, including strong occupational health programmes and improved fitness support, were being implemented.

Ria Groves advised that the recommendation for the Authority to engage with the LGA, had been actioned.

RESOLVED that the attached Service Delivery Plan reports (Appendices 1-9) for publication on the website be approved.

6. Financial Review 2024/25 - April - June

The Director of Finance and Procurement, Mike Rea, introduced the Financial Review 2024/25 April – June report. Mike Rea explained the Revenue & Capital budgets, Reserves, and the Treasury Management updates, which covered the period up to the 30th June 2024.

Members attention was drawn to the revenue position contained on pages 139 to 141 paragraph 7, which outlined the Authorities budgetary movements within the first quarter, including the use of reserves for Home Fire Safety, a drawdown from the inflation provision for rising subscription fees and adjustments to reflect the availability of external funds to deliver specific projects, along with other

internal budget virements. It was explained that all the adjustments were self-balancing and did not impact the approved net budget requirement, which remained at £74.191m.

Paragraphs 9 through 15 outlined the robustness of the key revenue budget assumptions and the forecast spend for the financial year. The 2024/25 pay award assumption was set at 3% for all staff. It was advised that the finalised firefighter pay award was settled at 4%, which would require an increase in the current year of £340,000, and an increase of £450,000 for 2025/26 onwards.

Members were advised that the pay award for Local Government staff was still yet to be settled, noting that the employer had proposed £1,290 or 2.5%, whichever was greater. Mike Rea highlighted that this would exceed the current budget by approximately £40,000 per annum. It was acknowledged that there were no other significant growth pressures beyond those already included in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

Attention was drawn to the table on page 141, which summarised the anticipated year-end revenue position, the overall forecast was also explained as consistent with the approved budget.

The Capital movement within the first quarter was outlined on pages 141 to 142. It was noted that paragraph 17 explained the changes to the capital programme in the first quarter. It was advised that the rephasing of capital schemes at the end of 2023/24 had resulted in a net increase in the current planned spend of £8.6 million.

It was noted that the Capital Programme had been increased by £2.5 million to support the planned asset refresh on behalf of Home Office's for National Resilience. It was explained that this included £1.4million on the Enhanced Logistics Support programme and £1.1 million on the Marauding Terrorist Attack (MTA) Programme. Mike Rea directed Members to the table on page 142 which summarised the capital programme movements in the first quarter.

The reserve movements in the first quarter were detailed on page 143. It was noted that there had been minimal movement in reserves during this period, with a minor drawdown of £12,000 from the Community Risk Management Reserve. Members were advised that the general reserve had remained unchanged at £3.7 million.

The Treasury Management performance was detailed on pages 143 to 146, with Members noting the performance of Treasury Management was consistent with the approved Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25.

It was noted that at the end of June the Authority held £27.3million of investments. Members were advised that all the Authorities investments were consistent with the approved Investment Strategy and within the approved strategy limits. It was observed that no new loans were acquired, and that borrowing remained at £33.7 million.

Councillor Grace expressed her gratitude to Mike Rea for the insights provided in the report, she enquired about the reserves allocated for pay awards and questioned their robustness.

Mike Rea explained the Authority's year-end actions, emphasising the significant allocation to inflation reserves to mitigate potential inflationary pressures, especially if pay increases exceed 3% or if non-pay expenses require extra funding. It was noted that the plan included seeking Member approval to use the inflation reserve if needed. It was highlighted that if growth could be maintained within the current budget, the Authority would do so this year and propose an additional increase of half a million pounds for next year's employee budget.

Councillor Byrom discussed firefighter pay increases and the development that had occurred in recent years, along with salary adjustments for other staff members. It was noted that Members had lobbied at the Local Government Association (LGA), emphasising that it was more equitable for all employees to receive the same level of pay rise.

Councillor Byrom expressed his uncertainty about the outcome of the negotiation, stating that the NJC (National Joint Council) handled negotiations for the three staff groups. He noted that the proposed 5% increase aligned with current inflation, but that it would require significant budget cuts for the Authority. He explained that in that eventuality the Authority would seek to lobby central government for financial support.

Mike Rea advised Members that the budget had incorporated an allocation for a 3% increase for all non-uniform staff. Noting that the uniformed category was set at 4%, while Green Book exceeded 5%, consequently, noting that an additional 2% would need to be sourced. Mike Rea advised Members of the plan to engage with ministers during the upcoming months regarding the overall budget-setting process, noting that if the pay increases were approved at this rate or higher, they would be included in lobbying efforts.

Councillor Byrom observed that within the LGA, there was a network comprising of Treasurers and Finance Officers from various regions across the country. He asked if this joint initiative was still in progress, Mike Rea confirmed that the work was continuing and that a meeting had been arranged for October 2024 to discuss the issue.

Councillor Rennie drew Member's attention to page 145, expressing her satisfaction with Wirral Council's investments, she requested clarification on the criteria that a council must meet before being considered.

Mike Rea stated that the investments in local councils were crucial for the overall total Investment Strategy and Treasury Management, within the Authority, ensuring that they met a robust criteria. It was noted that there remained a strong assurance that, despite potential section 114 notices, insolvency was unlikely due to consistent central government support.

Councillor Finneran asked for clarity as to why other local authorities in Merseyside were not included in the report. Mike Rea clarified that it was a

matter of timing; specifically, occurring when the Authority had been actively seeking to lend money and other Authorities were simultaneously looking to borrow funds.

Mike Rea stated that the Investment Strategies were managed by Liverpool City Council (LCC), where the most secure and profitable returns would be identified. It was added that Local authorities represent one of the most stable investment options as it aligned with the Authorities cash flow, the duration of the investment, and the anticipated need for funds to cover future staff salaries or pension obligations.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the contents of the report be noted,
- b) the proposed revenue and capital budget alignments be approved,
- c) the use of the Inflation Reserve where required to cover pay awards above the 3% MTFP assumption be approved; and
- d) the Director of Finance and Procurement be instructed to continue to work with budget managers to maximise savings in 2024/25 and use any savings to reduce the level of capital borrowing.

7. The sale of Croxteth Fire Station & The TDA Site on Storrington Avenue

This minute contains exempt information by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 30 January 2025

Signed:_____

Date:_____