

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

17 OCTOBER 2024

AUTHORITY

PUBLIC MINUTES

Present: Councillors Les Byrom (Chair), Edna Finneran, Jeanie Bell, Sam Gorst, Jan Grace, Dave Hanratty, Brian Kenny, Ed Lamb, Andrew Makinson, Linda Maloney, Lynn O’Keeffe, Lesley Rennie, James Roberts and Lynne Thompson.

Also Present: Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan
Monitoring Officer Ria Groves
Director of Finance and Procurement Mike Rea

25. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Doreen Knight, Barbara Murray, Gill Wood, Lynn Thompson and the Police and Crime Commissioner for Merseyside Emily Spurrell.

26. Chairs Announcement

The Chair of the Authority recorded the sad passing of Councillor Linda Maloney who had been a Member of the Authority for a long time and who during that time had held various positions including that of Vice-Chair. Councillor Byrom commented on Councillor Maloney’s love for Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service, her ward, and her community. It was noted that she was passionate about her job and the people she represented as a dedicated public servant. The Members were advised of the details for her funeral and the Authority held a minute’s silence in remembrance of Councillor Maloney.

It was also reported that the Chief Fire Officer, Phil Garrigan, has been successful in the election process for the new Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council and as such would be leaving the Authority in the coming year. The Members wished him every success in this new role and thanked him for all he had done during his years at the Authority. It was noted that a recruitment process would take place for the next Chief Fire Officer and the Monitoring Officer would provide guidance throughout that process.

27. Declarations of Interest

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

28. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on the 26th June 2024 be approved as an accurate record.

29. Ten-Year Performance Report

The Chief Fire Officer, Phil Garrigan presented the report which provided a ten-year review of the Authority's performance.

The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged the importance of this data and recognised the hard work of the Strategy and Performance team, as this kind of information aided the Authority in directing its resources effectively.

The report provided a high-level overview of the incidents attended by the Service over the last decade noting that there had been an increase in incidents. This was in part attributed to the Service's collaboration with other blue light services on special service calls. With regards to an increase in false alarms, it was noted that the Authority continued to encourage 'good intent' calls and had made a policy decision to always attend domestic properties in those instances.

It was reported that the number of accidental dwelling fires blighting communities was at an all-time low as a result of the preventative work the Service had undertaken. In particular, the Service had aimed to engage with Merseyside's most vulnerable and impoverished residents and provide safety advice through Home Fire Safety Checks.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that there had been a fire fatality over the period, and although that in itself was a tragedy, there had been a significant reduction in fire fatalities in Merseyside.

There had also been a significant reduction in the number of fires in non-domestic properties, wherein the Service's advice and support had proven effective. Overall, it was explained that the Authority was performing well in preventing and reducing fires and other emergencies in the community and that was evident by a drop in the number of deliberate fires.

Members were advised that the data outlined that there were more incidents during the day than in the night. This intelligence had impacted how the Authority allocated resources and also formed part of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) planning process.

With regards to response times, it was noted that for the third year the Service's call handling time had reduced with quicker mobilisation and an improved response time, bucking the trend nationally.

The report provided a comparison with other metropolitan Fire and Rescue Services in the country which outlined that Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service were performing exceptionally well, particularly in response to accidental fires, nondomestic property fires and staff absence.

The Vice Chair, Councillor Kenny, welcomed the report and asked for further information relating to the increase in domestic false alarms. The Chief explained that these were largely accidental and related to things like setting the alarm off when cooking. If the alarm was linked to a call received by Control, then resources would be mobilised as individuals with alarm systems tended to be particularly vulnerable and crews could provide advice on cooking safety and utilise the opportunity to do a Home Fire Safety Check if it was not an actual fire.

With regards to accidental secondary fires and special service data, Councillor Bell asked for further detail about whether the Service sought to increase preventative measures in those areas. It was explained a change in how these incidents were reported had in part led to an increase in reporting and that preventative work did take place (as Councillor Bell suggested) to try and reduce the number of deliberate fires.

Members were advised that response to special service calls was not performance managed because the Authority had a duty to work with other blue light agencies to collaborate.

Councillor Hanratty thanked officers for the comprehensive report, identifying automatic fire alarms as an area of concern. The Chief Fire Officer assured the Members that the Authority was liaising with alarm receiving companies to ensure that they were working to avoid unnecessary deployments where possible.

Councillor Hanratty also raised concerns over road traffic collisions, referencing a recent tragedy in Wales wherein there had been four fatalities. The Members had received a demonstration of the Authority's virtual reality (VR) headsets as part of a review of its preventative work and Councillor Hanratty wanted to understand the influence that MFRA had on this issue nationally. With regards to road traffic collisions, it was reported that the Authority focused on young drivers aged 16-25 and utilised VR to highlight the dangers of careless driving. Nationally, the Chief Fire Officer assured Members that encouraging behavioural change in terms of driving safety, would be part of his new role at the NFCC.

Councillor Makinson noted that the report showed an increase in incidents involving hazardous materials as well as instances of flooding. He noted that there had been significant work undertaken around lithium battery fires, and he asked if there were plans for similar efforts in relation to flooding. Members were assured that flooding featured in the CRMP and that there was also a role for the Service to play in terms of educating the public. Nationally, environmental change was a significant risk for the sector and the Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle was working with other Fire and Rescue Services on wildfire and flooding.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted; and

b) publication of the reports on the website be approved.

30. CRMP 2024-27 Post-Consultation Report

The Chief Fire Officer presented the report, explaining that the Authority was required to produce a CRMP to outline how the Authority planned to resource areas of foreseeable and emergent risk.

It was highlighted that the CRMP being considered by Members continued to reinvest into the front line of the Service with an increase in the number of appliances as well as increasing the Service's specialist capabilities. The CRMP sought to address areas of vulnerability and deprivation to ensure that resources were deployed effectively and also took into consideration factors like time of day and location.

It was explained that there had been significant consultation on the proposal and the sections in red identified the changes that had been made based on feedback. Members were reminded that the CRMP was part of a suite of documents including the Medium-Term Financial Plan and People Plan that laid out the Authority's future plans.

The Chief Fire Officer provided a breakdown of the themes within the CRMP and noted there had been exceptional feedback from Merseyside's community groups and that the final proposal was the result of collaboration between all key stakeholders.

The Chair thanked the officers involved as well as the representative bodies and the Members for their involvement in the final CRMP. He explained that since the last meeting, further work had been undertaken with union representatives to provide the version being considered today.

Councillor Kenny noted that the CRMP sought to increase the number of appliances from 32 to 34 and to continue to make improvements which would benefit the people of Merseyside. He noted that the Trade Unions were in support of the CRMP and thanked the public for taking part in the consultation. It was noted that there would be a review in 12 months which would allow for any necessary tweaks to be considered and he commended the improved response to life risk incidents outlined in the CRMP.

Councillor Hanratty recorded his thanks to all those involved and commented on the hard work of the officers noting that the report would reassure Members and staff that the Authority was moving in the right direction. He reminded Members that during austerity, funding for the Service had been cut significantly and asked that a meeting be held after the budget update on the 30th October to consider any potential financial risks for the Authority. The need for a multiyear settlement was emphasised and the importance of reacting to emerging legislation was also noted in terms of the future of the Service. Members were reassured that the Authority was lobbying for an extended settlement and would continue to invest in the front line for the benefit of Merseyside.

A representative from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) was invited to comment on the CRMP and he explained that as previously reported, there had been extensive collaboration with the Union and as such the FBU were in support of the proposed CRMP. It was reported that there had been significant positive engagement on this piece of work and the Unions praised the positive dialogue that had taken place.

With regards to flooding, Members were advised that the Unions were lobbying central Government for funding to ensure that Fire and Rescue Services had the resources they needed.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the actions within this CRMP have been subject to extensive public consultation (the outcomes of this consultation have been attached as appendices to this report) be noted;
- b) whether the responses to consultation have been adequately considered by Officers and are reflected within the CRMP 2024-2027 (Appendix 1), where appropriate be considered;
- c) the CRMP for 2024-27 and its implementation be approved – which will result in:
 - i) further increases in fire engine availability (32-24) building on the 2021-24 Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP)
 - ii) quicker response times
 - iii) an improved response to life risk incidents
 - iv) quicker mobilisation
 - v) improvements in the way we mobilise our specialist capabilities removing any delay in our response
 - vi) more targeted Prevention and Protection activities; and
- d) the CRMP 2024-27 be approved for publication on the website on 17th October.

31. Project Completion Report on the New Aintree Fire Station, Training and Development Academy / National Resilience Centre of Excellence at Long Lane, Aintree.

A video of the new Training and Development Academy/National Resilience Centre of Excellence (TDA) was played, and the Chair invited any Members who had not yet been, to visit the site.

The Chief Fire Officer presented the report and noted that the investment into the TDA would help to keep firefighters safer in Merseyside and beyond.

Members were advised that the project had spanned four years, noting that the previous TDA site had been well-loved but was no longer fit for purpose for a modern-day Fire and Rescue Service. As a result, the new 12-acre site which

was equidistant from Aintree and Croxteth, was identified. The site hosted incredible training facilities with 2.5 acres of land remaining fallow to support any future emerging risks that could form part of firefighter training. The site allowed for firefighters to safely train for a myriad of challenging situations, and it was noted that there had been significant interest both nationally and internationally for other Fire and Rescue Services to train there.

It was noted that Minister of State, the Rt Hon Dame Dianna Johnson DBE, had recently highlighted the National Resilience Centre of Excellence in Merseyside as a significant resource for firefighters.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted; and
- b) the release of £275k from the Capital Investment Reserve to allow for final closure of the project be approved.

32. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report 2023/24

Councillor Grace, Lead Member for People, introduced the report commenting that Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service were 'streets ahead' in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion. She noted that the Authority was not being complacent in its actions and that the Service was a welcoming place for anyone who wanted to excel.

The report showed the Authority's performance against its equality, diversity and inclusion objectives for 2021-24 and demonstrated its commitment to meeting its equality duties. Members attention was drawn to the People Plan and the Cultural Action Plan which included further information on the work being undertaken by the Authority.

The Chief advised that external visitors to the TDA had recently commented on how welcoming the Service was and the Chief attributed this to the efforts made to create an environment where people felt like they belonged.

Members attention was drawn to page 352 of the agenda which provided an executive summary of the total work force noting that MFRA had more female firefighters (81) than the national average. It was explained that 22 of those individuals were in Crew or Watch Manager roles and it was hoped would progress to more senior positions during their career.

Sexual orientation was also broken down in the report with 55% of staff feeling comfortable in expressing their orientation without judgement.

The number of ethnic minority staff in the Service had also increased to 66 which was a positive move in ensuring that the Service reflected the communities of Merseyside.

With regards to pay gaps, it was noted that the gender pay gap had dropped from 9.1% to 8.4% (which was lower than others in the sector) and the ethnicity pay gap now stood at 6.1%.

The report also provided a breakdown of data relating to the discipline and grievance procedure.

Councillor Bell welcomed the report, in particular the in-depth analysis provided in relation to gender statistics. Councillor Bell asked if there were any concerns for underreporting, particularly in the figures relating to grievances from female employees. She asked if the Authority had an outcomes-based approach to reporting, particularly when it came to the 'Safe Call' line.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that trust and confidence in the process was instilled when staff could see their concerns were being taken seriously and dealt with effectively. The Authority was currently working towards implementing 'just culture' arrangements, wherein relatively low-level incidents could be dealt with informally. Members were assured that if people's behaviour was abhorrent, then that would be dealt with formally through the established discipline and grievance procedures and it was felt that the staff understood how seriously their concerns were taken. With regards to the 'Safe Call' reporting line it was felt that this had not been as effective as the Authority would have hoped and that was being worked on with the Director of People and Organisational Development, Nick Mernock.

Nick Mernock explained that HMI had voiced a desire for an independent reporting line for Authorities but that its utilisation at MFRA had been minimal. Members were advised that this had been fed back to the company and Nick Mernock was due to meet with the Managing Director in a few weeks with a view to help improve the system and make it more effective. It was felt that a 'talking heads' promo to explain its purpose to staff would help to address people's misconceptions. In circumstances where people did not feel comfortable reporting an issue, it was hoped that 'just culture' arrangements would help staff to resolve low level problems quickly and effectively.

Councillor Makinson welcomed the fantastic progress that the Authority had made over the last few years to have a Fire and Rescue Service that was reflective of the people it serves. It was noted that the number of ethnic minority staff was in line with the demographic of the county and that great progress has been made in regard to recruiting more female firefighters. It was queried whether the Authority had considered its representation of ethnic minority women. The Chief Fire Officer explained that there was the potential to provide intersectional information and it could be considered for future reports.

With regards to the data captured in the report, Councillor Gorst asked if the Authority had any transgender staff and Members were advised that if there was a sensitive way to reflect that data then it would be considered.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted;

- b) the ED&I Annual Report for publication on the Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) website to demonstrate MFRA’s commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and how MFRA has met its Public Sector Equality Duty by approved; and

the Equality Analysis – Workforce and Employment Data, 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 Report for publication on the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) website in order to demonstrate MFRA’s commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and how it has met its Public Sector Equality Duty be approved

33. Occupational Health Contract

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, 27 February 2025

Signed..... Date.....