

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

12 DECEMBER 2024

MINUTES

Present: **Councillors** James Roberts (Chair), Les Byrom, Andrew Makinson, Gill Wood, Lesley Rennie, and Barbara Murray.

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

6. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Jeanie Bell and Dave Hanratty.

7. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Jeanie Bell and Dave Hanratty.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest for this meeting.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on the 25th July 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. Membership and Structure of the Authority

Monitoring Officer Ria Groves presented the Membership and Structure of the Authority report.. Members were advised that Councillor Christopher Page had been appointed to the Authority by Sefton Council.

With regards to the structure of the Authority, it was proposed that Councillor Page would be appointed to the Community Safety and Protection Committee, in replacement of his predecessor.

It was also proposed Councillor Page be appointed on the Audit Committee with Councillor Finneran being transitioned from the Audit Committee to the Scrutiny Committee.

Additionally, it was recommended that Councillor Christopher Page be appointed as Chair of the Local Pension Board without any additional responsibility allowance.

Further to Councillor Linda Maloney's passing Ria Groves advised Members that a vacancy from St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council district remained. Members were advised that it was hopeful that an update on who would be replacing Cllr Maloney could be presented to Members at the next Community Safety and Protection Committee on 30th January 2025.

Additionally, Ria Groves proposed Councillor Jeanie Bell to be the representative to answer any questions on discharge of functions for Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority on behalf of St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council, a role previously provided by Councillor Maloney.

Members were reminded of a previous report regarding the recruitment of a second Independent Person to work alongside Mr Anthony Boyle, who had been serving as both a Co-opted Member and Independent Person.

Following the approval of the advert from the Authority for an Independent Person, and a successful recruitment process, Ria Groves proposed to seek Member approval to appoint Mr Gary Wormald.

Members were advised that due to Mr. Anthony Boyle's long-standing role within the Authority, it was proposed to relieve him of his independent person duties and that his role would be solely as a Co-opted Member of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee. It was explained that this adjustment would allow the Authority to appoint one Independent Person and that MFRA would continue to work with local authorities to create a pool of Independent Persons, if required.

Councillor Les Byrom determined that Councillor Edna Finneran is to assume the position of Chair of the Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Byrom additionally extended his gratitude to Mr. Anthony Boyle for his contributions to the Authority and welcomed his transition to being a sole Co-opted Member.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the changes to the membership including the appointment of Councillor Christopher Page to the Authority be noted;
- b) the appointment of Councillor Page to the Community and Protection Committee and Audit Committee and the appointment of Councillor Finneran to the Scrutiny Committee (moving from the Audit Committee be approved);
- c) the appointment of Councillor Page to Chair of the Local Pension Board be approved;
- d) the nomination for the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee be determined which was confirmed as Councillor Edna Finneran;
- e) the change in the nominated Councillor to Councillor Bell for the questions on the discharge of functions for St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council be approved; and

- f) the appointment of the Independent Person Gary Wormald and the termination of the combined role of Mr Anthony Boyle as Co-opted Member and Independent Person be approved and that Mr Anthony Boyle remain as the Co-opted Member of the Audit and Scrutiny Committees only, be approved.

5. Treasury Management Interim Report

The Director of Finance and Procurement Mike Rea presented the Treasury Management Interim Report to Members, providing an overview of the Authority's activity and performance to date.

Member's attention was drawn to page 21, paragraph 7 where it was reported that there had been no new borrowing arranged for the first half of the year. However, Members were advised that the Authority may need to borrow £8 million before the financial year ended, but this will be postponed, to assist in securing a better interest rate.

It was highlighted that the Authority's Financial investments stood at £54 million, with an associated income of £942,000 received in the first half of the year.

Members were advised that the Bank of England's (BoE) base rate had decreased from 5.25% to 5% on August 1st, 2024. While long-term Public Works Loan Board rates had seen minimal changes during the first half of the year, increasing by 0.06% from 5.06% at the start of the year to 5.12% on the 30th September 2024.

Members noted that the Authority's current investments stood at £54 million, which included £36 million from the firefighters' pension grants, noting that £37 million of investments were financed within Local Authorities. Members noted that there were no limits on amounts of investments with Central Government and Local Authorities, as these were considered to be of the highest credit quality.

Mike Rea confirmed that the Treasury Management activity for 2024/25 had been carried out in compliance with the relevant codes and statutes for the Authority, in addition with borrowing and Treasury Management limits that were approved by the Authority, as part of the budget setting process in February 2024.

Councillor Roberts discussed the decrease of the BoE interest rates, affecting the Authorities borrowing costs. Mike Rea confirmed that the BoE Chairperson had indicated potential interest rate cuts next year.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

6. Financial Review 2024/25 - July to September

Director of Finance and Procurement, Mike Rea, presented the Financial Review 2024-25 July to September report to Members. It was highlighted that

the approved budget remained robust and that the current forecast of expenditure was contained within the report.

Members were directed to paragraphs 7 to 17, pages 31 to 34 of the agenda where the Members were advised that the revenue position displayed a net budget requirement of £74.191 million, which remained consistent with the original budget.

It was noted that £800,000 in one-off savings had been identified, detailed on page 33, including £150,000 from the firefighter employee budget and £350,000 from non-firefighter employee budgets. Mike Rea explained that an additional £300,000 savings had been identified within the Local Government pension scheme due to MFRS Pensions fund being in surplus with Merseyside Pension Fund.

In regard to the Capital Programme, Members noted that it had been revised to include an additional £7.174 million, with a summary contained on page 35. Additions included £7.1 million for National Resilience assets to refresh the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team, alongside £86,000 for ICT hardware and additional security measures at the Training Department Academy, as agreed within the Revenue and Capital Out turn report.

Members noted the £2.2 million rephasing of capital schemes, which was noted as consistent of ICT hardware and Networks, Operational Equipment and Vehicle replacement schemes.

It was explained that the £7.174 million increase was funded from specific resources (Home Office grant, revenue, and reserves). Members were informed that the level of required capital borrowing had reduced by £1.1million due to the increase in capital receipts from the sales of the old Training and Development Academy (TDA) and Croxteth Fire Station. It was highlighted that the 5-year Capital Programme borrowing requirement was £37.1million.

Member's attention was drawn to the table on page 47, which outlined the reserve movements within the quarter. It was noted that there was a drawdown from reserves of £95,000.

Concerning movement reserves, there was an allocation of £71,000 designated for the enhancement of security measures at the TDA. Additionally, £13,000 had been allocated for development work related to the Community Fire Risk Management Information System (CFRMIS). Furthermore, Members noted the £11,000 allocation for ICT consultancy and research pertaining to ICT outsourcing and in-sourcing.

It was highlighted that £974,000 was identified during the 2024/25 budget setting process as an additional contribution to the Capital Programme investment reserve to fund the Capital Programme inflationary pressures. Additionally, £1.809 million was identified in the 2023/24 outturn process to alleviate capital cost pressures and reduce planned borrowing, freeing up revenue for debt servicing costs. Mike Rea advised Members that £2.783 million would be used to fund capital expenditure and reduce borrowing within the year.

It was reported that the Authority would continue to obtain Treasury Management services from Liverpool City Council.

Members noted that on 1st August 2024, the BoE reduced the interest rate by 0.25% to 5%, which was explained as the first cut in interest rates after rates had been held at a 16-year high of 5.25% for twelve months. It was noted that the BoE has since cut the interest rate further to 4.75%.

Members considered the Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation, which rose by 2.2% over the year leading to August 2024, unchanged from July. Noting that whilst the CPI was slightly above the BoE's target, inflationary pressures were affecting the economy, with expectations of a decline below the target in late 2024/25.

Mike Rea explained that the Authority planned to borrow £8 million long-term in 2024/25 if required, with no new long-term borrowing arranged in the first half of 2024/25.

As of 30th September 2024, the Authority's investments totalled £54 million, which included a £36 million firefighters pension grant. It was acknowledged that the Authority's total outstanding debt was £33.7 million, and Mike Rea advised that the current market conditions continued to be unfavourable for any debt rescheduling.

Councillor Makinson queried the rephasing of the Breathing Apparatus (BA) equipment and wanted to seek assurances that postponing this process did not pose any risk to firefighters.

The Chief Fire Officer assured Members that the BA equipment would be replacing those nearing the end of their lifespan and confirmed that there was sufficient life left on the existing BA equipment.

The Chief Fire Officer stated that updating equipment and rephasing aimed to meet operational needs and preparation for technological advancements.

Councillor Byrom expressed his gratitude for the report, noting its retrospective nature. Councillor Byrom noted that the government were offering Fire and Rescue Services £5 Band D precept flexibility which would add an additional 6% to the funding raised through the precept.

Councillor Byrom addressed the topic of pay settlements, highlighting the necessity of achieving a fair agreement for staff, while also underscoring the importance of maintaining financial stability for the organisation.

The Chief Fire Officer reiterated the significance of the £5 council tax flexibility, highlighting it as a positive outcome of active lobbying this year. The financial pressures related to pay in light of the September Consumer Price Index (CPI) figures were also discussed. Member's attention was drawn to the upcoming Budget Strategy day, where budget planning processes and financial

considerations for a predicated two-year comprehensive spending review would be discussed.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the proposed revenue and capital budget alignments be approved;
- b) the use of the forecast £0.800million savings to fund capital expenditure and reduce the level of borrowing be approved;
- c) the use of the £2.783million Capital Investment Reserve to fund capital expenditure and reduce the level of borrowing 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. Statement of Assurance 2023-34

Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan presented the Statement of Assurance report to Members noting it provided a reflective view of the 2023-24 period and that it was to be published on the Authority's website as required. Members were informed of the Authority's aim to enhance public accessibility to the Statement of Assurance documents by providing links to facilitate easier navigation.

Members were drawn to the statements, found on pages 67 to 91, which detailed the Authority's outstanding performance and the commendations from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) for MFRA's excellence in prevention, incident response, and resource use. It was noted that the Authorities' leadership message, core values, and activities across all functional areas, were contained within the document, assuring the public and government of effective management of the Authority.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the information contained within this report be noted;
- b) the Authority's draft Statement of Assurance 2023-24 be approved; and
- c) the Statement of Assurance 2023-24, be signed by the Chair of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority and the Chief Fire Officer.

8. Corporate Risk Register 2024-25 April to September Update

Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan presented the Corporate Risk Register report for 2024-25 April to September to Members, which provided an overview of the current status of risks to the Authority.

The Chief Fire Officer highlighted the anticipated changes within the governance of Fire Rescue Services, noting a possible transition to the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) in the future.

It was noted that MFRA had established strong robust measures to tackle emerging risks and that this would include a thorough review of cyber risks and threats. However, it was noted that the refresh of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2024-2027 would address significant risks like fuel transfers, contaminants, wildfires, and floods.

Councillor Byrom discussed changes around governmental arrangements within Local Authorities, and highlighted the importance to focus on MFRA priorities, stakeholder engagement, and methodologies.

RESOLVED that the updated Corporate Risk Register for 2024/25 which incorporates the current status of those risks to September 2024 be approved.

9. Service Delivery Plan 2024-25 July - September Update

Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan presented the Service Delivery Plan update report for quarter two 2024-25 July to September, to Members which included an overview of the Authority's performance to date, including work completed post Grenfell and advancements based on HMICFRS recommendations.

Member's attention was drawn to the performance metrics presented on page 149, which highlighted various indicators relating to received calls and dwelling fires. Noting there was a significant reduction in fire incidents.

The Chief Fire Officer highlighted that the Authority was currently focused on the increasing number of false alarms, which remained a significant challenge to the Authority.

With regards to sickness absence (from operational functions), Members were advised of a slight increase above the 4% target that the Authority had previously set.

The Chief Fire Officer praised the Authority's commitment to improvement, highlighting a steady decrease in accidental dwelling fires.

Four accidental fire fatalities were reported, with the Chief Fire Officer noting that the figures were not directly compared to those from the previous year.

Councillor Byrom discussed the importance of inspectorate assessments for measuring the Authority's performance.

Councillor Byrom praised the recent visit to Fire Control, where Members observed demonstrations of new technologies, which included the Enhanced Mobilisation alert system proposal, which aimed at reducing call-out times and improving response times. The importance of the Authorities' technological advancements in enhancing public safety, was highlighted.

The Chief Fire Officer discussed Enhanced Mobilisation, explaining that improved communication in call handling could reduce response times by up to 30 seconds, it was noted that these changes would be reflected within MFRA's CRMP. Members noted that the proposal had also been thoroughly consulted with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

Councillor Makinson enquired about the attendance standards, noting the impressive 96.4% response within 10 minutes, it was suggested that further scrutiny take place around those occasions where response times fell below that average.

Whilst assuring Members that the Performance Management Group regularly reviewed incidents, the Chief Fire Officer welcomed further scrutiny of response standards

The Chief Fire Officer discussed how specific aspects of each emergency call could influence the results of response. Members were assured that the Authority acts promptly to collect information from callers; however, it was noted that there could be occasional delays in identifying incidents.

Members were informed about the latest developments regarding the Authorities' proposed mobilisation strategy within the Water Rescue team: one crew was now responsible for assembling water kits, while another team would be deployed on-site, thereby enhancing response times.

The Chief Fire Officer encouraged a deeper examination of incidents that fell short of standards to identify elements such as geographical factors and call types, which would aid in analysis and improvement for the Authorities framework.

RESOLVED that Members;

- a) the attached Service Delivery Plan reports (Appendices A-J) for publication on the website be approved; and
- b) response standards be referred to the Scrutiny Committee.

10. Pay Policy 2024

Chief Fire Officer, Phil Garrigan presented the updated Pay Policy 2024 report to Members.

Members were advised that local government pay awards for 2024 had been agreed and implemented throughout all of MFRA's grey, green, and red book colleagues pay schemes.

The Chief Fire Officer outlined the benefits of addressing employment challenges at the ministerial level, an initiative supported by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

Councillor Murray commended MFRA's approach to apprenticeship roles and expressed her support for national minimum wage for apprentices at MFRA. However, clarification was requested on the term "non-established temporary apprenticeship roles" mentioned within the report.

The Chief Fire Officer explained the term as the first step into employment, with apprentices having the opportunities for development and to grow within the Service with the opportunity to secure the job at the end of the term of apprenticeship.

Councillor Wood also discussed apprenticeships, in light of recent changes from the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education. She queried if there had been any talks about shorter, focused apprenticeship roles within the Fire Service, similar to those within the construction sector.

It was noted that the changes wouldn't hold any significant risk for Fire and Rescue Services, but there would be upcoming changes from Skills England within the next 18 months to two years, which may require revisions to apprenticeship schemes to reflect and enhance opportunities for those transitioning from education to the workforce.

Councillor Wood enquired if the changes to the apprenticeship programs were beneficial to the Authority. The Chief Fire Officer highlighted that shorter programs could help Fire and Rescue services, but that it was crucial to determine the necessary skills amongst candidates. While easing standards might aid recruitment, it was noted that it could compromise quality and competency within the role. It was confirmed that the Authorities efforts to maintain standards was ongoing.

Councillor Rennie praised the recent visit to Fire Control and Vesty Workshops, commended the excellent use of apprenticeship recruitment there, and the Authority's initiatives for young people. Councillor Rennie inquired about staff retention strategies across apprenticeship programmes.

The Authority's proactive recruitment of apprentices across various departments within the Service was highlighted, which assisted in helping to create equitable opportunities for individuals, with the aim to encouraging apprentices to pursue lasting careers within MFRA.

Additionally, the King's Trust initiative was brought to Member's attention, which aimed to create future positions in various fields and showcased the Authority's commitment to building strong connections with young people.

RESOLVED that

- a) publication of the Authority's Pay Policy be approved; and
- b) that pay awards for 2024 have now been agreed and implemented covering all of our Grey, Green, and Red Book colleagues be noted.

11. Worker Protection Act 2023 - Prevention of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

The Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan presented the Worker Protection Act 2023, and the prevention of Sexual Harassment within the Workplace report to Members.

Members noted that the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 took effect on 26th October 2024. The legislation created a duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of its employees. The impact of such a duty has also been reflected in an increase in a compensation award of up to 25% if a tribunal determined that an employer had not taken reasonable measures to prevent harassment.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that MFRA's current Bullying and Harassment Policy highlighted the Authorities current provisions against bullying and harassment, however there was a consideration to rename this policy to contain "Anti" to adopt a more transparent preventive approach.

Councillor Murray raised concerns about the Whistleblowing policy, and ensuring the processes in place don't deter victims from reporting.

The Chief Fire Officer discussed defining the Whistleblowing policy and encouraging reporting of all concerns to foster a proactive environment, helping the Authority to address issues sensitively.

Members were advised of the Authority's refreshed "Safe Call" approach, which implemented a more anonymous and confidential reporting system, allowing action to be taken based on information without requiring the disclosure of the informant's identity. The Chief Fire Officer emphasised the necessity of distinguishing between whistleblowing and raising a concern, thereby fostering confidence amongst staff.

Councillor Murray raised concerns around the clarity provided within the report regarding response timeframes for complaints.

The Chief Fire Officer assured Members that while the Authority aims to address issues promptly, some may require thorough investigation. However, Members were reassured that the Authority consistently informs individuals on any delays and in any event all complaints are acknowledged within 48 hours.

Councillor Byrom highlighted the reputational risks associated with the Authority's approach to handling complaints, pointing out that while the Authority received a limited number of complaints, they were all taken seriously.

Councillor Wood questioned the timeline for the implementation of the mandatory E-Learning packages for staff. Members were informed that the packages would be ready for distribution to staff following the meeting should Members approve the updated policy.

RESOLVED that

- a) the new duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority employees in the course of their employment be noted;
- b) the workstreams established to ensure the Authority meets its legal duty under the act and be noted;
- c) the refreshed PODPOL 09 Bullying & Harassment Policy, subject to any significant changes that emerge from ongoing consultation with representative bodies being reported back as necessary be approved; and
- d) the Bullying and Harassment Policy be renamed to the “Anti Bullying and Harassment Policy.”

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 20 March 2025