

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

23 JULY 2024

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Edna Finneran, Gorst, Janet Grace,
Dave Hanratty, Knight, Lamb, Makinson, Linda Maloney,
Barbara Murray and Gillian Wood

Also Present:	Chief Fire Officer	Phil Garrigan
	Head of Finance	James Campbell
	Monitoring Officer	Ria Groves

21. Appointment of Chair

Prior to the start of the meeting, Members were informed of the requirement to appoint a Member to Chair the meeting, following the receipt of apologies from the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Paul Tweed.

Councillor Linda Maloney nominated Councillor Dave Hanratty to chair the meeting. This nomination was seconded by Councillor Barbara Murray.

RESOLVED that Councillor Hanratty act as Chair of this meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

22. Apologies

Apologies received from Councillors Paul Tweed, Jeanie Bell, Gill Wood, and Co-opted Member Mr Anthony Boyle.

23. Declarations of Interest

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

24. Minutes of the Last Meeting

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

25. Review of Organisational Culture

The Chief Fire Officer, Phil Garrigan presented a 'Review of Organisational Culture' to Members.

The Chief Fire Officer emphasised the importance of Fire Rescue Services (FRS) nationally in recognising the cultural dynamics of Minority and Ethnic communities.

The Chief Fire Officer highlighted the tragic loss of Jaden Francois Espirit, a Firefighter of the London Fire Brigade, who took his own life in August 2020. This event underscored the need to reconsider cultural issues within the London Fire Brigade.

Members were advised that subsequently, an Independent Culture review of the London Fire Brigade was conducted, by Nazir Afsal in November 2022. It was noted that from speaking to 2000 staff within London Fire Brigade, 33 recommendations were formulated. It was explained that these recommendations were shared with other FRS' for consideration and potential adoption, with efforts to implement underway at Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) since 2022.

The Chief Fire Officer reported on various other cultural reviews into staff conduct across Fire and Rescue Services in South Wales, Dorset & Wiltshire, and Tyne and Wear.

Members were also briefed on the results of the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) review which took place in February 2024, which highlighted sexual harassment as an issue. The review found that 30% of female conference attendees had experienced harassment, prompting a renewed focus on addressing such behaviour across the sector.

Councillor Sam Gorst entered the meeting at 13:10pm.

It was noted that His Majesty Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) undertook a review on the culture within Fire and Rescue Services on March 20, 2023, detailing feedback of racist, homophobic, and misogynistic behaviour, bullying, and a reluctance to report inappropriate conduct in the sector.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that there were a set of recommendations from HMICFRS, the review of London Fire Brigade and other cultural reviews to consider, but that there were risks associated with trying to implement a multitude of recommendations which may not directly reflect the culture at MFRS. Instead, the Authority had focused on a specific set of recommendations that it felt were pertinent to its own culture. These included recommendations relating to reporting concerns, conducting background checks, handling misconduct, leadership/management, training and development, capturing diversity data and enhancing diversity.

The Chief Fire Officer outlined 20 suggestions which applied to all FRS', with 15 that required actions from the Government and other organisations. The inspectorate had identified 10 further recommendations focusing on discipline and grievance issues.

The Chief Fire Officer emphasised that part of the Authority's review included the introduction of the Authority's Cultural Action Plan which would produce better outcomes for the communities it served.

In terms of interacting with the community, Members were advised of the successful data analysis compiled from Home Fire Safety Checks, (HFSC) which demonstrated firefighters' comfort in addressing sensitive issues while considering factors like ethnicity and religion.

With regards to the cost of implementing recommendations, the Chief Fire Officer recognised that there were financial constraints on infrastructure investment across FRS, due to a lack of capital funding from central government. It was noted that this was not an issue for the Authority wherein the MFRS estate catered for both male and female firefighters.

With regards to legislation Members were advised of the Authority's adoption and integration of the Core Code of Ethics in 2022. The Chief Fire Officer provided Members with an overview of each of the values in the code and how they related to organisational culture. It was noted that the July 2023 revisions to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 also outlined new criteria for staff vetting to ensure suitability for all roles.

The Chief Fire Officer noted the importance of management, in terms of setting the organisational culture, with a specific emphasis on leadership and diversity as outlined in the Authority's Cultural Action Plan and People Plan.

Members were advised that staff networks had been expanded on to focus on the viewpoints of Minority Ethnic communities, with an aim of ensuring that every voice was heard. Members were advised that 33 staff members had volunteered to form the Positive Action Team which encouraged people to come and engage with the Authority. Neurodiversity Staff Network was also highlighted as a method of better meeting the needs of staff and encouraging a conversation.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that of the 33 National Recommendations from the Independent Culture Review of the London Fire Brigade,¹⁶ were relevant to the Authority. Members were advised that 13 of those had already been implemented by MFRS, while the remaining three were now part of the Authority's People Plan for 2024-27.

Furthermore, in relation to the HMICFRS recommendations, it was noted that there were 35 national recommendations in total, all of which were relevant to the Authority. Members were advised that 19 of these recommendations had been implemented, with the remaining 16 being incorporated into the 3-Year Cultural Action Plan.

The Chief Fire Officer further discussed the Authority's progress, which included the implementation of a Cultural Dashboard as well as providing cultural leadership training for line and middle managers. Members were advised that the Authority would continue to incorporate the Core Code of Ethics into its training for supervisory of managers.

It was noted that the Authority was a key partner in terms of fighting misogyny and violence against women, and as such was seeking a White Ribbon Accreditation as part of its progress towards implementing recommendations.

Additionally, an external review of the Authority's progress against the recommendations which included the Cultural Action Plan and staff networks was also planned. It was noted that as part of the three-year ED&I learning strategy, the Authority wanted to analyse the workforce equality data and strengthen its relationships with diverse communities.

The Chief Fire Officer noted positive feedback had been received from an external stakeholder who had praised the exceptional facilities, culture, and services from the Authority at the newly opened Training and Development Academy. The Chief Fire Officer suggested that this showed that the staff were engaged with the Authorities values and invested in developing a positive organisational culture.

With regards to staff, the Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that the Authority surveyed its employees to ensure their opinions were considered. It was highlighted that staff survey engagement levels had been positive. Furthermore, the Authority had also displayed the best performance in the last 12 months, with a drop in fatalities and a reduction in primary and accidental fires.

The Chief Fire Officer discussed the Authority's effective succession planning processes across the organisation and Members were that since the last HMICFRS inspection, the Authority had established staff development pathways and internal initiatives to enhance ED&I, alongside the creation of a new Head of Culture of Inclusion position.

The Chief Fire Officer reiterated that "the standards we walk past are the standards that we set" and he emphasised the importance of engaging with the community.

The Chair highlighted the extensive work and engagement efforts conducted by the Authority with regards to culture. The Chair expressed his gratitude to the Chief Fire Officer and staff for their dedication despite national criticism of emergency services.

As part of the discussion, the Chief Fire Officer addressed behaviours that may not meet the Authority's standards, emphasising the service's commitment to ensuring all staff understood the impact of their actions and the importance of the Authority promptly addressing those concerns. Members were assured that any complaints raised would be handled efficiently by the Authority.

Councillor Finneran shared that during the recent MFRA Staff Engagement Day, an employee expressed a desire for promotion but had reservations about their suitability. They explained that their supportive manager had encouraged them to

apply, boosting their confidence. Councillor Finneran praised the Authority for its effective leaders who listen and motivate staff.

The Chief Fire Officer highlighted new developmental roles, to help support staff to 'step into management positions, particularly female employees. It was explained that this approach allowed staff to explore opportunities before advancement, and there had been positive feedback from this initiative.

Councillor Grace praised the Authority's commitment to cultural transformation and ongoing initiatives, emphasising the importance of recognising neurodiversity and recognising that education was key in terms of developing a positive culture. The Chief Fire Officer noted the salience of continuous education and engagement from staff.

Councillor Makinson raised concerns about workplace harassment faced by staff in public-facing roles, emphasising the importance of support from coworkers and the Authority. Councillor Makinson queried the efforts to address these issues noting that firefighters may experience harassment from the public, and Councillor Makinson stressed the need to address the fear that stops individuals from seeking support and sharing their experiences.

With regards to harassment, the Chief Fire Officer advised that the Authority's would seek support from other blue light services and that it would be dealt with in a robust and tactful manner. The Chief Fire Officer praised the Authority's health and wellbeing initiatives in terms of supporting the staff as outlined in the feedback from staff surveys. The Occupational Health team showed a commitment to supporting those in challenging situations and exemplifying the importance of compassion.

The Chair enquired about the overall number of complaints received by the Authority relating to external harassment. The Chief Fire Officer noted this would form part of the metrics contained within the Cultural Action Plan, which would include compliments, complaints, and resolution procedures.

With regard to female firefighters, Councillor Makinson queried efforts to measure the amount of harassment being experienced. It was explained that the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) carried out a review in response to feedback from the conference based on the results from its surveys. The Chief Fire Officer emphasised the capability to monitor harassment metrics through the Cultural Dashboard and he noted that the forthcoming staff survey scheduled for November 2024 considered topics related to conduct.

Councillor Makinson discussed the benefit of using surveys to retrieve information regarding harassment from the public. The Chief Fire Officer noted that although this issue would not specifically form part of the next Staff Survey it could be included in future pulse surveys with staff.

Councillor Ed Lamb left the meeting at 14:14pm.

Councillor Makinson emphasised the importance of recognising staff within the LGBTQ+ community who may face harassment and racism, noting that a

comprehensive understanding of these issues would aid in identifying the necessary support for staff.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that the Authority had a Violence at Work Policy which addressed workplace violence, noting it often manifested as verbal abuse. Members were advised that the Authority had expressed satisfaction with the support provided from the public, hence the low levels of incidents being reported. However, it was noted that incidents tended to increase around the bonfire period.

Councillor Maloney enquired around the progress for retaining and recruiting female firefighters noting this had been an issue in previous years. The Chief Fire Officer highlighted efforts to recruit female firefighters and acknowledged there had been changes in national fitness standards that had previously caused concern for female applicants.

Councillor Maloney mentioned that on a recent station visit to Low-Level Activity Risk (LLAR) sites she had noticed there were not many female firefighters present, and she enquired if this was common for that shift pattern or whether it was a recurring issue.

With regards to duty patterns, the positive feedback from HMICFRS was highlighted by the Chief Fire Officer, noting the importance of utilising family-friendly approaches. This adoption was incorporated within the new Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP).

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the Authority had sought interest in a flexible working fire engine, but that there had not been enough to run an appliance. It was suggested that the multitude of duty system benefited the firefighters who could seek to find a working pattern that suited their lifestyle at that time in their career.

Councillor Knight noted the importance of staff feeling valued and how impactful training was in terms of young people entering the service. The Chief Fire Officer emphasised that ongoing training, especially for young individuals, was essential to reflect lifelong learning and development. He highlighted the colours training of a way of engaging staff and as a platform to continue their development.

The Chair commended all Members for their exceptional efforts in representing the Authority whilst maintaining fantastic leadership.

The Chair emphasised the importance of addressing cultural issues to improve services, highlighting that ED&I were core values of the Authority. The Chair highlighted noteworthy progress made to date, with 11 actions implemented and 17 in progress to address complaints and grievances.

The Chair requested that an update on the 'Review of Organisational Culture' be presented to the Authority within a 12-month period, to include metrics relating to complaints, and grievances about harassment.

RESOLVED that the report be noted, and the accompanying presentation be scrutinised.

26. Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2023-2025

Monitoring Officer, Ria Groves, presented the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan covering years 2023-2025. The report contained topics approved by Members, noting that it was a 2-year work plan due to the number of topics to be reviewed.

Members were advised that the current Plan was included within the report, with the highlighted blue sections already scrutinised, and the Monitoring Officer outlined the remaining sections left to scrutinise for the year.

Members were encouraged to suggest any additions, as it was explained and it was noted that a request from Authority Committee, on 26th June 2024 relating to smoke alarms had been selected as a topic for a Learning Lunch later in the year.

RESOLVED that Members reviewed the proposed Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2023-2025.

Close

Date of next meeting Tuesday, 25 February 2025