

# **MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

## **POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

**24 JULY 2025**

### **MINUTES**

**Present:** **Councillors** James Roberts (Chair), Jeanie Bell, Les Byrom, Grahame McManus, Lynn O'Keefe, Heather Westhead, Andrew Makinson, and Lesley Rennie.

|                      |                                     |             |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Also Present:</b> | Chief Fire Officer                  | Nick Searle |
|                      | Director of Finance and Procurement | Mike Rea    |
|                      | Monitoring Officer                  | Ria Groves  |

**1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor 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 20th March 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

**4. Corporate Risk Register 2024-25 Oct to March update**

Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle introduced the report, providing Members with an overview of the current risks contained within the Corporate Risk Register and highlighted key updates for the reporting period from October 2024 to March 2025.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that it was good practice to undertake regular reviews of both internal and external risks, to support the effective delivery of services by the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA).

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that any risks had continued to be raised and owned by relevant Members of the SLT (Strategic Leadership Team). Updates of the relevant risks are included within the Risk Register and a review of the severity and likelihood of each risk undertaken as part of the update.

As part of ongoing improvements to the Authority's risk management process, Members noted that Officers had now commenced work on the revised format

for the Corporate Risk Register. This included the development of a new framework for capturing and reporting risk from a departmental level up to a strategic level. It was also highlighted that workshops had been held with departments across the organisation to understand and obtain the risk information to support this necessary information to support this new approach.

Councillor Bell enquired as to the reference to potentially stopping the performance of specific activities should budget or financial risks mean there's insufficient support to maintain services as referred to on page 23, Risk 1.5. Councillor Bell queried which specific activities this related to.

The Chair invited Deb Appleton, Director of Strategy and Performance, to respond and she clarified that there was no definitive list of activities the Service would automatically cease delivering. The reference in the Risk Register was theoretical and should the Authority find itself in a financial situation in which activities may need to cease in order to balance the budget, each activity and the service it provides to the community would be reviewed including the implications of no longer providing those services prior to any decision being made.

Councillor Bell also queried reference to the section 13 and 16 arrangements in respect of resilience arrangements as contained on page 61 of the report.

Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle explained that this was a statutory duty under Sections 13 and 16 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, and related to cross-border support for operational response. It was noted that these arrangements were regularly monitored by the Operational Planning department to ensure they remain effective and resilient.

**RESOLVED** that the Corporate Risk Register update for 2024/25 which incorporates the status of those risks to March 2025 be approved.

## **5. Service Delivery Plan 2024 - 25 End of Year Update**

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle introduced the report, advising Members of the performance of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service against the objectives and target outcomes as set out in the Service Delivery Plan 2024/25 for the period of January to March 25.

The Chief Fire Officer drew Members attention to the CRMP 2024–27 updates, HMI action points, and progress detailed on pages 89–112 of the report.

Members noted that pages 114 highlighted the high volume of calls received by Fire Control, with 90% answered within the 10-second benchmark.

It was highlighted that page 118 noted responses to accidental dwelling fires involving seven fatalities. Members were reassured these were thoroughly investigated, with findings used to inform prevention targeting and response strategies going forward.

Members attention was drawn to page 124, with sickness levels noted that while low compared nationally, remained above the Authority's internal 4% target. It was advised that SLT was reviewing sickness levels through a dedicated piece of work to improve monitoring and management practices.

In relation to sickness data, Councillor McManus requested clarification to better understand the breakdown of categories, if they combined all absences or if was possible to separate out those on long-term or injury-related leave from those off sick due to other reasons.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that sickness data was thoroughly broken down within the Health, Safety, and Welfare reports. It was highlighted that absence types were categorised and monitored in detail by the Health and Safety Department and the Occupational Health team. Members were assured that the information was scrutinised closely.

Councillor Bell observed an increase in incidents during the bonfire period as notable on page 115, She queried whether this increase was influencing how the Service was preparing for the upcoming bonfire period. Whilst acknowledging the excellent work already done in collaboration with Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs), local authorities, and Merseyside Police, she queried whether any changes or new approaches were being considered this year in response to the trends.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that planning for the bonfire period on behalf of the Service was led by the Prevention Department, as part of the multi-agency response Operation Banger and work closely alongside Merseyside Police.

Members were advised that planning for this year's activity had already begun, recognising the level of preparation required. Members were advised that the approach was reviewed annually based on lessons learned from the previous year and that targeted discussions were already underway with local authorities and Merseyside Police to address these challenges and adapt the strategy accordingly for this year.

Councillor Bell expressed appreciation for the excellent work detailed in the Prevention Functional Plan Action Tracker, particularly on page 147, highlighting the efforts of the Street Intervention Teams and Anti-Social Behaviour. She noted the positive progress on actions, including training in substance misuse awareness and the provision of bleed control kits. Councillor Bell then asked whether the Service has considered carrying Naloxone, given the possibility of being first on scene to incidents involving drug overdoses.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that there is ongoing dialogue in respect of medical response and while it was his personal opinion that the more equipment made available to staff the better in respect of this specific matter he would need to take away for future considerations.

Councillor Byrom also acknowledged that the complexity of the issue including previous pilots undertaken for medical response however, he agreed it was well worth looking at.

Councillor Bell noted the importance of the Improvement and Ideas Hub as referenced on page 177, of the agenda and enquired when this application would to be launched within the Service.

The Director of Strategy and Performance, Deb Appleton was again invited to provide Members with an update. The Director of Strategy and Performance advised Members that the Improvement and Ideas Hub was part of a wider rollout of SharePoint-based systems across the Service and she advised she would report back to Members with a specific timeframe as to the launch of this specific application.

Councillor Bell suggested for future reports it would be helpful if those key deliverables within the Service Delivery Plan marked with a status identified as Red, are detailed within the report with any relevant assurances as to the context of the deliverable any significant risks and progression of work.

Councillor Bell also suggested including reference to the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) standards set by the Fire Standards Board within the report.

Councillor McManus referred to page 178 regarding the development of new kit and capabilities and queried the decision-making process when agreeing to extend the trial of the use of body worn cameras as opposed to the implementation of them within the Service.

The Chief Fire Officer explained that the trial of body-worn cameras was being extended to better understand how and where they could be most effectively used across the organisation. Members were advised that initial challenges included the hesitancy of staff to wear the devices, resulting in limited data. However, Members were reassured that with improved engagement and clearer guidelines on usage, the extension aimed to gather sufficient evidence to assess the value and cost-effectiveness of wider rollout before making a final decision.

RESOLVED that the attached Service Delivery Plan reports (Appendices A – K) for publication on the website be approved.

## **6. High Potential Programme**

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle introduced the report highlighting the Authority's progress and the positive outcomes of the pilot. Members were advised that the review of the pilot showed that of the 160 participants, one-third were highly active, one-third partially engaged, and one-third did not participate. It was highlighted that 42 individuals involved whom participated in the programme had since secured promotions.

Following the pilot, Members noted that a comprehensive review was conducted by the Organisational Development and Change Adviser, who joined the service in September 2024. Members were advised that key findings from this evaluation were presented to the People Board in December 2024 and as a

result, several changes to the programme had been agreed by Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), detailed in paragraphs 8 to 13 of the report. The Chief Fire Officer noted that a new policy (High Potential Programme Policy) had also been developed and was on page 313 of the report.

Councillor Bell praised the programme as fantastic work and highlighted the participation of 148 staff, including 48% women and 9% BAME and requested that future reports include these figures as a percentage of the total workforce to better assess representation and identify areas for improvement.

Councillor Byrom expressed support for developing internal talent, He emphasised the importance of recognising and investing in staff who bring elevated levels of education and potential. He praised the programme for preparing future leaders and highlighted recent appointments in Merseyside as evidence of its success, calling it a worthwhile investment in people.

The Chief Fire Officer highlighted the positive impact of recent recruitment, noting that new talent was reflecting an increase in diversity within management also. It was noted that recent Group and Station Manager processes had shown encouraging signs of greater diversity, with the goal of a fully diverse senior leadership team in the future.

The Chair, Councillor Roberts referred to paragraph 5 and noted that 160 individuals were identified as part of the High Potential Programme. It was queried that despite these individuals being selected for their motivation or potential, only around a third were fully participating, with another third showing limited engagement and Councillor Roberts requested further clarity on engagement.

The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that the High Potential Programme may not have been effectively launched initially and that participants were often nominated by managers without consulting the individuals, which may have affected engagement. He noted that moving forward, the process would be more deliberate, with clearer expectations and justification for inclusion. It was highlighted that participants going forward must take personal responsibility for engaging and making the most of it.

The Chair observed that about a third of the 160 participants (approx 50 to 60 individuals) were very active in the programme. He highlighted the 42 participants that were promoted and queried how many of those promotions came specifically from the highly engaged cohort. The Chief Fire Officer advised that the figures could be provided to Councillor Roberts, through a request to the relevant department.

Councillor Byrom welcomed the opportunity for staff following the programme and discussed the positive internal promotions of development across the service.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that recruitment and consequently promotions would slow in the next few years due to recent high levels driven by retirements. The Chief Fire Officer further emphasised the High Potential Programme would

also focus on lateral progression, helping staff develop and improve in their current roles rather than just moving upward.

The Chair welcomed the programme, praising its role in identifying and supporting talented individuals. However, he drew attention to paragraph 23 about the nomination criteria not being transparent. He stressed the importance of having clear, objective, and widely published criteria for entry to the programme. He requested further information about the criteria and how accessible it was to all staff.

*Councillor Heather Westhead joined the meeting at 13:32pm.*

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed the criteria for the programme and how it was communicated to staff would be provided to be shared with Members as reassurance. Members were advised that there would also be further information available on the portal for staff.

**RESOLVED** that;

- a) the positive work undertaken to date as part of the development of the High Potential Programme, be noted;
- b) the outcomes of the detailed review that has been completed with a variety of stake holders and reported back into People Board and SLT, be noted;
- c) the attached HPP policy, be approved; and
- d) further review will be undertaken in 18 months' time to consider the most appropriate ongoing approach for supporting employees with high potential at the Leading Yourself and Leading Others leadership level be noted.

## **7. 2024/25 Revenue & Capital Outturn Report**

Director of Finance and Procurement, Mike Rea introduced the report noting that Members had received quarterly updates on the Authority's financial performance, with the last report covering up to December 2024.

Members were advised that the report provided the Authority's year-end financial position update for 2024-25, including revenue, capital, and reserve budget adjustments.

It was noted that movement in Quarter 4 was summarised in paragraph 10 on page 338 and two drawdowns from reserves were made: one for retrospective holiday payments of £150,000, relating to the 2023/24 period, which exhausted the reserve. The second drawdown, from the Energy Reserve, amounted to

£172,000 and was used in the capital programme to fund the planned LED lighting upgrade at Service Headquarters and the Joint Control Centre.

With regards to inflation a further £157,000 was drawn from the inflation provision to meet increased non-operational staff costs, including pay, pensions, administrative expenses, and ICT provider charges. Additionally, Members were advised that salary costs capitalised in relation to smoke alarm installation reduced the salary budget and increased the capital budget by £84,000. It was highlighted that other adjustments within the quarter were largely self-balancing.

Members attention was drawn to the table on page 339, which confirmed that the Authority's final budget aligned with the original approved figure of £74.191 million. The revenue outturn position, summarised at the top of page 340, displayed a year-end underspend of £3.936 million, including £333,000 of reserve requested by budget managers for projects commenced in 2024/25 but not completed until 2025/26. It was highlighted that this left an available 2024/25 underspend of £3.6 million.

Members noted that the Authority's strategy remained focused on using in-year savings to strengthen reserves, which could serve to mitigate future financial risks, support infrastructure investment, or manage cost pressures. It was proposed that the £3.6 million underspend be allocated: £200,000 to increase the General Revenue Reserve, £2 million to create a new Carbon Net Zero Reserve, and £1.4 million to increase the Capital Investment Reserve. Members were assured that after accounting for the reserve requests, the overall revenue outturn was in line with budget.

Attention was drawn to paragraphs 14 to 24 which highlighted the capital position for 2024/25. Mike Rea noted that during Quarter 4, the capital programme budget increased by £3.456 million.

Members noted that the capital outturn, which was summarised in the table at the top of page 344 actual capital spend for the year was £14.294 million below budget. Of this, it was discussed that £13.899 million had been rephased into future years, with £395,000 identified as a saving on various 2024/25 schemes.

Mike Rea drew Members attention to paragraphs 21 to 29 which outlined the available reserves and movements in Quarter 4, along with proposed year-end adjustments. Members were advised that before reserve adjustments, reserves decreased by £322,000 in the final quarter to £9.833 million. Mike Rea highlighted that £333,000 of year-end reserves had been requested to fund spend now expected in 2025/26 or beyond.

Mike Rea advised that paragraph 25 confirmed the proposed use of the £3.6 million revenue underspend, and that after these adjustments, the committed reserves had increased by £1.395 million in the year, from £12.174 million to £13.569 million.

Councillor Byrom noted that underspending was common because the Authority received no capital funding directly and must save part of its council tax and grants to fund capital projects and future developments. He noted that some

funds were set aside for pay rises and major projects like the new Training and Development Academy, which helped absorb unexpected costs. Members were advised that the current report was an early financial review, with more detailed budget adjustments expected around December as the government settlement becomes clearer. Meanwhile, Councillor Byrom expressed his support for lobbying for a multi-year funding settlement to provide greater financial flexibility.

Councillor Roberts advised that while underspending could be helpful in future years, it was good to see that less than a quarter came from staffing costs and more than a quarter from treasury management, indicating smart investments and financial stability. He also welcomed the new Carbon Net Zero Reserve, understanding it would fund photovoltaic panels at stations, while generating additional income and reducing carbon emissions.

Councillor Byrom reinforced the value of investing in energy efficiency, noting that recent LED lighting upgrades had more than halved electricity costs while also reducing maintenance expenses. He emphasised that this success should guide further investments in areas like photovoltaic panels and insulation using reduced operating costs to fund future capital improvements.

Councillor Bell expressed pride and gratitude for the Authority's continued investment in EDI, staff training, community support, and the push toward Net Zero. She noted the importance of this work, especially in a challenging political climate, and praised the service for staying focused on doing what is right for the community.

Mike Rea provided further detail on the £2 million Carbon Net Zero Reserve. Members were advised that Initial feasibility work was underway with the Northwest Net Zero Hub, a regional programme supporting public sector energy projects. It was highlighted that of the total investment, £1.7 million would go toward installing solar panels and £300,000 toward decarbonisation measures such as removing old gas boilers. Mike Rea noted that any remaining funds would support the installation of electric vehicle charging points, he noted the investment was expected to pay back within six to seven years.

However, currently, solar panels were already in place at the Training and Development Academy, St Helens, Old Swan, and Service Headquarters with plans to expand coverage at SHQ. It was highlighted to Members that electric charging points would also be rolled out across all stations in line with the transition to hybrid vehicles in the future.

RESOLVED that;

- a) that actual revenue spend compared to the approved budget delivered a net underspend of £3.936m before the creation of year-end reserves, as outlined in Appendix A1, be noted.
- b) this underspend be used to;



- i. create the required year-end reserves of £0.333m to fund projects that have slipped from 2024/25 into 2025/26, be approved and
  - ii. increase the General Revenue Reserve by £0.200m, be approved and
  - iii. the creation of a new reserve for carbon net zero of £2.000m to contribute towards the costs associated with investing in carbon zero renewables and initiatives, to reduce carbon emissions and reduce energy costs, be approved and
  - iv. the increase in capital investment reserve by £1.403m, in order to offset capital cost inflationary pressures and reduce planned borrowing to free up revenue budget associated with debt servicing costs, be approved
- c) the re-phasing of planned capital spend from 2024/25 into future years of £13.899m, (£11.900m relates to National Resilience Asset Refresh), as outlined in Appendix B, be approved; and
- d) committed reserves of £13.569m and a general reserve of £3.900m as outlined in Appendix A4, be approved.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2025