MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 JULY 2026

MINUTES

Present: **Councillors** Heather Westhead (Chair), Sam Gorst, Matt Kent, Tony Murphy, Jerry Williams, Kieran Murphy and Chris Page.

Also Present:		
	Deputy Chief Fire Officer	Dave Mottram
	Monitoring Officer	Ria Groves
	Head of Finance	James Campbell

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Aimee Wright, Lena McCormick, and Co-opted Member Mr Anthony Boyle.

2. Declarations of Interest

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

3. Minutes of the Last Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on 9th April 2026 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. Management of Contaminants

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Dave Mottram introduced the report and advised that a presentation would accompany the item. Group Manager for Health and Safety and Operational Assurance, Danila Breathnacht, delivered the presentation to Members on the Authority's management of contaminants.

It was highlighted that the Authority had adopted a proactive, evidence-based approach to reducing firefighters' exposure to contaminants and continued to review arrangements in line with national guidance, scientific research, and operational learning.

Members were informed that the Authority had been at the forefront of contaminant management since 2015 and had continued to strengthen its approach following national reports and guidance. Measures introduced included enhanced decontamination procedures, personal issue Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), station zoning, clean cab arrangements, improved laundering processes, additional respiratory protection and increased staff training and awareness.

It was highlighted that a significant cultural change had taken place across the Service, with greater emphasis placed on cleanliness and decontamination following incidents. Danila noted that arrangements were regularly reviewed against national best practice and that contaminant specific Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) assessments had been developed and shared regionally. Members noted that all significant developments were considered internally through the Health and Safety Committee to ensure decisions were informed by operational experience, staff representation, scientific evidence, and organisational risk.

Members were reminded of the Authority's reality testing through the Operational Assurance Framework which included station visits, observing working practices, workplace and appliance inspections, and direct engagement with crews about contaminant management. Such testing provided assurance that the contaminant management procedures were understood and consistently applied in practice.

It was noted that organisational learning from incidents, debriefs and national guidance was also incorporated into regular operational learning briefings. This provided staff with timely updates on emerging themes, health and safety learning, contaminant management and national developments.

This had helped create a positive learning culture where improvements continued to evolve as operational experience and scientific evidence developed.

Councillor Tony Murphy thanked Danila for the presentation and asked whether the Fire and Rescue Service would automatically assume the worst when attending major fires, particularly where hazards such as asbestos or other contaminants may be present. He also queried how firefighters were protected from contamination and whether public advice to keep windows and doors closed during major incidents related to harmful contaminants as well as smoke.

Danila explained that the Authority adopted a worst-case-scenario approach until risks were fully assessed and the highest appropriate level of protection would always be used. It was advised that established procedures were in place to manage known hazards such as asbestos and that recent research had improved understanding of contaminants within smoke, leading to enhanced decontamination practices. It was confirmed that firefighters were provided with specialist protective equipment and noted that the Service continued to monitor emerging research on contamination risks. Danila added that public safety advice was intended to protect residents from smoke and associated contaminants and acknowledged that there may be opportunities for further public education on this issue.

Councillor Chris Page welcomed the report and commented on the significant cultural change that had taken place within the Fire and Rescue Service over recent decades, particularly in relation to health, safety, and wellbeing. He noted that attitudes towards smoke exposure had changed considerably and that the Service now promoted a learning culture that supported continuous improvement. Councillor Page sought reassurance that incident reviews were

conducted in a supportive, non-blame environment, enabling staff at all levels to contribute openly and share learning.

Danila confirmed that fostering a positive learning culture was a key part of the Service's approach to operational assurance. It was explained that staff were encouraged to share all feedback both examples of good practice and lessons learned from incidents so that knowledge could be disseminated across watches, stations, and departments. Members were advised that incidents involving more than two appliances or a Station Manager were routinely reviewed, with debriefs undertaken by crews and subsequently analysed by Officers to identify learning opportunities, notable practice, and emerging trends. It was highlighted that findings were fed back to the officers delivering the training through quarterly meetings and, where appropriate, communicated to staff through operational learning briefs. Danila emphasised that the process was focused on continuous improvement rather than blame, with the overarching aim of improving safety for both Merseyside communities and Service personnel.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Dave Mottram reconfirmed that there had been a significant cultural shift within the Service. He explained that operational assurance observations and inspections were undertaken in a supportive capacity and focused on learning and improvement rather than criticism. Members were advised that this reflected the Service's One Team Vision and commitment to keeping staff and communities safe was emphasised to Members.

Councillor Chris Page reminded Members that station visits provided an opportunity to see contamination control measures in practice and the chance to speak directly with firefighters about their experiences. He noted that these visits offered reassurance that the procedures discussed were embedded across the Service and thanked staff for their ongoing commitment to maintaining high standards.

RESOLVED that:

a) arrangements in place for the management of contaminants within MFRS, as detailed within the report and accompanying presentation be noted; and

b) the approach adopted had been scrutinised.

5. Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2026/27

Monitoring Officer Ria Groves presented the proposed Scrutiny Forward Work Plan for 2026/27, noting that Members had attended a scrutiny workshop on 8th July 2026 to discuss potential topics. It was highlighted that the proposed plan included the annual review of Health, Safety and Welfare, a review of the effectiveness and engagement of the Home Fire Safety Check programme, and an update on the Culture and People Plan including the current Plan and proposals for the next People Plan.

Councillor Westhead referred to Policy and Resources Committee held on the 23rd July 2026, where staff stress was highlighted as a topic worthy of further review and discussion. It was suggested that this could be incorporated into the Committee's future work programme as part of the Culture/People Plan update.

Monitoring Officer Ria Groves advised that an update on staff wellbeing, including support for employees experiencing stress and those progressing through capability processes, could be incorporated into the proposed update on the Culture and People Plan. She noted that the relevant Director would be presenting that item and could provide a specific focus on these matters if Members were content to address them as part of that report.

Councillor Chris Page referred to the proposed review of the effectiveness of Home Fire Safety Checks and asked when Members would have an opportunity to help shape the scope of the scrutiny topic, noting that such reviews can be wide-ranging and would benefit from a clearly defined focus.

Monitoring Officer Ria Groves advised that, when the item was presented to the Committee, Members would receive a presentation setting out the proposed scope of the review. A more focused area for scrutiny could also be identified in advance of the meeting. If following the presentation, Members wished to explore additional matters, further options could be considered, including a task and finish approach or a subsequent update report on the effectiveness of the Service's strategy.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Dave Mottram advised that, following feedback from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the Prevention team had been tasked with reviewing the current Home Fire Safety Check strategy as part of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) process. He acknowledged that this was a significant piece of work and anticipated that the Committee would receive an update on the initial findings and proposed direction of travel when the item was brought forward. This would provide Members with an opportunity to scrutinise the approach and help shape future developments. He added that background information on the review could be provided in advance to assist Members in preparing for the scrutiny discussion.

RESOLVED that:

a) the proposed Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2026/27 be reviewed; and

b) the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan in Appendix A be submitted to the Authority (or another Committee as appropriate) for approval be recommended.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 15 October 2026