

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
COMMUNITY SAFETY AND PROTECTION COMMITTEE

1 SEPTEMBER 2020

MINUTES

Present: Cllr Brian Kenny (Chair) Councillors Doreen Knight, Emily Spurrell, Paul Tweed, Janet Grace, Linda Maloney, Bruce Berry, Edna Finneran and Lynne Thompson

Also Present:

Apologies of absence were received from:

6. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

At the start of the meeting, the Chair of the Committee thanked everyone for attending and welcomed any members of the press or public who were observing the proceedings.

The Chair then introduced the meeting and provided all present with an overview of how this remote meeting would work and some housekeeping.

The Chair confirmed that all Members present could hear and be heard; and could see and be seen.

1. Preliminary matters

Members considered the identification of declarations of interest, any urgent additional items, and any business that may require the exclusion of the press and public.

Resolved that:

- a) no declarations of interest were made by individual Members in relation to any item of business on the Agenda
- b) no additional items of business to be considered as matters of urgency were determined by the Chair; and
- c) no items of business required the exclusion of the press and public during consideration thereof because of the possibility of the disclosure of exempt information.

However, it was noted that Appendices C and D to Agenda Item 5 – “Heswall Refurbishment Project 2020”, contained EXEMPT information. Members were therefore advised that if any discussion was required around the content of those Appendices, press and public would need to be excluded, and the public link would be disconnected.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Community Safety & Protection Committee, held on 6th February 2020, were approved as a correct record and for signature by the Chair.

3. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report 2019-20

Members considered Report CFO/041/20 of the Chief Fire Officer, concerning the draft Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) Annual Report, which contains an update on the progress made against the ED&I Action Plan 2017-20; and our ED&I objectives for 2017-2020.

Members were provided with an overview of the report, which demonstrates MFRA’s compliance with the Equality Act 2010 General Duty, and an update on the key outcomes delivered in the year, with regards to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

It was highlighted to Members that the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) (S.149) states that in the exercise of their functions, all public authorities must have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Members were also informed that in order for public authorities to demonstrate they are meeting the PSED, there are a number of specific duties which public bodies, including MF&RA, are required to carry out:

- a) Publish information to show their compliance with the Equality Duty, at least annually.
- b) Set and publish equality objectives, at least every 4 years.

Members attention was drawn to the ED&I Annual Report, attached at Appendix A.

They were advised that in supporting the discharge of that duty, the Diversity Networks have continued to be developed, which have now become an integral part of our work. Members were informed that the Diversity Networks are championed by a senior officer of the Service; and that the Networks are encouraged to comment on our policies and the way we conduct our business, which is directly fed back into the decisions that are made through the reporting process.

It was also highlighted to Members that during the last 12 month period, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (E,D&I) Training, has been developed, which has allowed the Authority to continue to ensure that our staff are aware of the duties placed on us; and ensure that we are meeting that statutory responsibility.

Members were informed that work has also continued around positive action in recruitment. They were informed that recruitment is continuing, particularly from a firefighter perspective, with around 60 individuals being recruited this year. It was stated to Members that the importance and significance of recruiting through positive action, is clear and apparent.

Another area highlighted to Members, was around further developing our work around knowing our communities. They were advised that this enables us to ensure that the activities we undertake as a FRS, on behalf of the Authority, are focused on tackling the inequalities that exist, particularly across Merseyside. Members were also informed that those inequalities are being addressed, with some of the activities around home safety, really focusing in on the most socially deprived areas of Merseyside.

Reference was also made to Community Impact Funds, which provide firefighters with some additional funding to direct towards their community safety plans, enabling them to engage their communities locally based on the risk within.

Members were advised that the Equality Objectives remain unchanged for the forthcoming year, which are as follows:

- **Equality Objective 1:** - Create a strong cohesive organisation that is positive to rising to the future challenges we face.
- **Equality Objective 2:** - Ensure that people from diverse communities receive equitable services that meet their needs.
- **Equality Objective 3:** - Reducing fires and other incidents amongst the vulnerable protected groups.
- **Equality Objective 4:** - To ensure that staff are better equipped to deliver their roles whilst showing due regard to the need to:
 - Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act.
 - Advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't.
- **Equality Objective 5:** - To continue to aspire to achieving excellence, or equivalent in a Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework.

With regards to Objective 1, it was highlighted to Members that in relation to the recruitment of female firefighters, the percentage of female firefighters in MFRA is now 10.9%, which is an increase from 9% in 2019. Members were advised that the average for the other comparable Metropolitan FRS's, is 7.3%, whilst the average across all FRS's in England is 6.8%.

It was highlighted to Members that MFRA are also performing well in relation to ethnicity. They were informed that for our operational and support staff, the percentage of BAME employees is 5.9%, which is above the Merseyside BAME population, which is 5.5%.

Members were informed that the chart on page 27, extracted from the Inspection Report, shows where MFRA sit in relation to the percentage point difference between service's BAME residential population and its BAME firefighters. It was highlighted that MFRA are second only to the Isle of Scilly, which is somewhat of a misnomer.

It was highlighted to Members that again, this is a real positive with regards to our positive action, which has resulted in those outcomes.

Members attention was also drawn to the positives around flexible working arrangements put in place. They were informed that MFRA have robust policies in place, to ensure that we are meeting the demands placed on individuals, dependent on their circumstances.

It was highlighted to Members that there have been a total of 15 flexible working requests during the period, all of which have been accepted by the Flexible Working Panel. Out of those 15 requests, Members were advised that 10 were made by females, and 5 by males.

Information was highlighted to Members around the Gender Pay Gap. They were informed that the mean gender pay gap nationally for 2019 was 15.3%, whilst for MFRA, it was 11.4%, which is lower than it had been previously, at 11.7%.

It was also highlighted that the median gender pay gap for MFRA is 5.16%, against an average UK median of 8.9% during 2019.

In relation to Equality Objective 2, and Home Fire Safety approaches, Members were reminded of decisions made previously around addressing inequalities around age and around deprivation.

With regards to Equality Objective 3, Members were informed that we are continuing to target vulnerability factors, with examples provided within the report around our work with dementia teams and smoking cessation groups.

In relation to Equality Objective 4, Members were informed that staff are currently in the process of receiving E,D&I Refresher Training and training around unconscious bias, as referenced within the Inspectorate Report.

Members were also informed that in respect of Equality Objective 5, MFRA continue to strive to be the best FRS in relation to E,D&I.

A question was raised by Members in relation to flexible working and whether further changes may be required as a result of Covid-19.

Members were advised that flexible working has always been in place, but what is currently being developed, which will be brought back to Members shortly, is an Agile Working Policy, which is somewhat different to family friendly/ flexible working arrangements. Members were informed that lessons have been learnt from Covid-19, during which a number of staff worked from home; and officers have been looking at how more agile working could be facilitated in the future. It was stressed to Members that agile working is not necessarily home working, and it is important to ensure that effectiveness and efficiency is maintained, whilst recognising that as an organisation, we can probably operate in a more agile way.

A further question was raised by Members in relation to the Gender Pay Gap around women progressing into senior roles; and what the process is for promotion.

Members were advised that MFRA have been recruiting in large numbers recently, resulting in more female firefighters coming into the Service. However, it was explained that the newest recruits are on development rates of pay, which are set Nationally; whilst longstanding firefighters on competent rates of pay, are predominantly male. Members were assured that this will change over time, as female firefighters progress from being in development to being competent. Members were informed that this development is linked to the Apprenticeship Standard, which is a 24-month Apprenticeship.

However, Members were advised that once a firefighter has completed the Apprenticeship Standard and are deemed competent in the firefighter role, progression from that point, is not predicated on any length of time. It was highlighted to Members that some firefighters may feel that they need to have served a specific amount of time before they are ready to progress, whilst others are more comfortable to push forward and see how they perform. It was felt that males are often more self-assured to push themselves, whilst female firefighters generally, seem to prefer to be absolutely sure that they are ready before they seek to progress; and it was acknowledged that there is some work to be done around this, organisationally. Members were assured that the organisation has recruited a large number of female firefighters recently, and officers have every confidence that they are capable of senior roles within the organisation.

Members were also informed that some of the restrictions associated with the Gateway development process, have recently been removed, which mean that individuals can enter the Gateway when they feel ready to do so, rather than opening up the Gateway at a specific point on an annual basis. This means that individuals can enter when they feel ready, or when the organisation feels that they are ready to progress.

Members were also advised that a lot of work is being undertaken around accelerated progression, not just for females, but for anyone across the organisation that has the right skills and attributes to progress rapidly through the service.

It was re-iterated to Members that there is no requirement to serve a specific length of time before an individual can progress. It was also highlighted that firefighters within MFRS, gain far more exposure to incidents than firefighters in

other parts of the Country, which enables them to gain the necessary competencies at firefighter level quite easily, with progression from there being around gaining managerial competency.

Members were reassured that as an organisation, there is a significant amount of development and support in place for individuals who wish to progress.

It was also stated that should Members have any suggestions around how this could be progressed further, Officers would be more than happy to take on board those suggestions and build them into the relevant processes.

Members were also advised that they would be more than welcome to observe what is currently in place; and make any suggestions for further improvement.

A further question was raised by Members regarding HFSC ethnicity and equality data; and whether we have information around when individuals have refused a HFSC and if there are any patterns emerging.

Members were advised that previously, the Authority had a number of Bi-Lingual Advocates, to better represent the communities of Merseyside. As a result, a whole raft of barriers and obstacles were overcome to enable MFRS to gain access to those harder to reach communities.

Members were assured that officers would go back and review the current data, to see if there are any communities, with a new or emergent reluctance to allow our employees into their homes. Members were advised that this is caveated against a backdrop of Covid-19, as all communities are somewhat reticent to let us across the threshold at present, albeit it is anticipated that this will dissipate over time. However, it was confirmed that officers will re-visit this, to see if there is additional work required within a specific community; and if the opportunity avails itself, officers will look into having representation in some way, from any such community, to assist with gaining access.

The Authority's Equality & Diversity Champion advised Members of an LGA event they had attended recently; and advised that they would prepare a presentation for Members around the relevant learning points.

Members were also informed that the Asian Fire Service has been asked to undertake a peer review of MFRS specifically in relation to the work being undertaken in relation to equality and diversity, they have been asked to look at what we are doing, how we are doing it; and what can be improved on.

Members Resolved that:

The report attached, be approved for publication on the Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) website in order to demonstrate Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority's (MFRA) commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and in order to meet its Public Sector Equality Duties.

4. SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN 2020-21 APRIL TO JUNE REPORT

Members considered Report CFO/044/20 of the Chief Fire Officer, concerning the scrutiny of performance against the objectives and the performance targets/outcomes as set out in the Service Delivery Plan 2019/20 for the period April to June 2020.

Members were advised that through the Functional Planning process, the Service Delivery Plan and Station Plans, the key performance indicators that affect the public in relation to the work that we undertake, are identified.

Some of the key headlines in relation to performance, were highlighted to Members.

Members were informed that broadly, performance is strong. They were advised that in terms of the indicators relating to attendance at fires, those indicators are predominantly green across the board, indicating that performance is ahead of schedule and better than it has been previously.

It was highlighted to Members that unfortunately, there have been 4 fatal fire deaths, which occurred within a very short space of time, during the lockdown period. Members were advised that questions were asked Nationally, as to whether there is a correlation between the number of fires being experienced Nationally and the number of fires experienced within Merseyside, however a correlation between the number of fires and the Covid -19 lockdown period, was not found Nationally. Members were informed however, that one of the fire deaths in particular, related directly to an individual burning refuse, which spread from the garden to the property itself. They were advised that in the opinion of officers, that individual would not have been burning refuse ordinarily, therefore there was a direct link to Covid-19 and the circumstances of lockdown. It was highlighted to Members that we have had 4 fire deaths over that period; and when compared with 4 fires deaths for the previous year and the year before that, those incidents occurred over a very short period of time. However fortunately, that trend has now diminished.

It was confirmed to Members that although the number of fire deaths has increased, fires in the broader sense, have remained under target; and therefore, performance has been better than previous years.

Another area highlighted to Members, was around the total number of Special Service calls attended. Members were advised that this indicator is for quality assurance purposes, for the Authority to review and remain cognisant of. Members were advised that the number of calls relating to Special Services that have been responded to, has increased; and it was noted that attendance at Special Services can look and feel like we are supporting other Services. For example, NWAS would have required MFRS to attend more significant incidents over the period, which has resulted in an increase in the number of Special Services calls attended.

A further area highlighted to Members, was around sickness absence. Members were advised that in the context of Covid-19, it would be expected that sickness

absence would have increased significantly. However, the opposite has occurred at present, with sickness levels currently being 3.11%, in comparison to the target of 4%. Members were advised that this is particularly good when compared to last years' figure of 3.63%, which was prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. They were also advised that when Covid related sickness absence is removed from the statistics, the sickness absence level would be as low as 2.54%.

It was highlighted to Members, that this is due to staff making themselves available throughout the pandemic. They were advised that some staff have been able to work from home, however those who deliver risk critical training have maintained the training centre; and those staff on the frontline in Prevention, Protection and Operational Response roles, have continued to operate throughout the pandemic. Therefore, sickness levels being so low is testament to the commitment of those individuals, to the people of Merseyside.

A question was asked by Members around how our statistics compare with other FRS', for example, did other Services see the same increases in deliberate dwelling fires during the pandemic. Members commented that it would be a useful comparison, to see if the same issue is reflected across all FRS', or if it is an issue specific to Merseyside.

Members were informed that benchmarking data with other FRS' is available, however extracting the information from the Governmental Incident Recording system, is not as effective as we would like it to be, hence why reporting is focused on our data. However, Members were advised that officers would keep trying to provide the benchmarking data.

Members were also informed that as a result of the lead responsibilities that MFRA have, the Chief Fire Officer is well sighted on what is occurring at a National level, the impacts of the pandemic on the number of calls received, and how we compare with others. Members were advised that in relation to the number of accidental dwelling fires resulting in fire deaths, MFRA are somewhat of an outlier, along with a couple of other FRS'. They were informed that initially, officers thought that there may have been a trend, with a number of FRS' seeing an increase in the number of fire deaths over the lockdown period, however that did not bear true. As such, Members were advised that the issue is just being considered from a Merseyside perspective.

With regards to deliberate fires, Members were advised that again, MFRA have more than most FRS', however we do a massive amount of work to reduce the number; and we have seen significant progress in that respect.

However, Members were also advised that in light of Covid-19, in areas where inequalities exist, they experience more fires, more deaths relating to Covid-19 and so on. Therefore, Members were advised that the focus for MFRA in the broader sense, is how we can tackle the inequalities that exist, some of which are health inequalities. As such, it was highlighted that MFRA need to look across Merseyside at how we work with partners to ensure that by helping to achieve their priorities, we are also tackling ours, albeit more upstream. A further question was raised by Members, around the communication of advice around fire safety, given the increase in certain types of incidents.

Members were advised that the Corporate Communications Team have done a fantastic job over the period, around identifying emergent issues and communicating really effectively with the community. For example, in the early stages when refuse was not being collected and people were burning extensively in their gardens, there was a whole raft of false alarm – good intent calls received; and a good amount of communication was issued around that issue. They were also advised that during the hot weather, there was an increase in fires relating to the use of BBQ's, where people were going out into open spaces and using BBQ's, but not disposing of them adequately. Members were advised that lots of communications and safety messages were also issued around that problem.

Members were advised that more recently, there has been a great deal of communication issued around the vulnerability and isolation of individuals who were shielding, and ensuring that they are still receiving the care and support required; and also, that they have working smoke alarms.

Members were assured that a whole raft of information has been issued via Corporate Communications, via social media, but also via the press and media.

Members Resolved that:

The attached reports, be approved for publication on the Authority's Website.

5. Heswall Refurbishment Project

Members considered Report CFO/047/20 of the Chief Fire Officer, concerning the planned refurbishment and development of Heswall Fire & Rescue station.

Members were provided with an overview of the report, which confirmed that the costs associated with the refurbishment, are contained within; and are in line with our Estate Asset Management Plans previously considered by the Authority.

It was also noted that Heswall operates on the Low Level Activity and Risk (LLAR) duty system.

Members Resolved that:

- (a) The outcome of the formal re-tendering process, be noted.
- (b) The continuation of the planned refurbishment of the Fire Station, be approved.
- (c) The scope of works, be noted as excluding the following items of from the proposed refurbishment on the basis of affordability:
 - i. New mist / sprinkler system.
 - ii. New external canopy.
 - iii. New external storage building.

(d) The award of the contract to Novus Property Solutions for the sum of £300,761.62, be approved.

Close

Date of next meeting Tuesday, 2 February 2021

Signed: _____

Date: _____