

**MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**25 APRIL 2024**

**MINUTES**

**Present:**                   **Councillors** Paul Tweed (Chair), Linda Maloney, Gill Wood, Dave Hanratty, Doreen Knight, Pat Moloney, Lesley Rennie, Ed Lamb and Mr Anthony Boyle (Co-opted Member)

**Also Present:**           Assistant Chief Fire Officer                   Dave Mottram  
Monitoring Officer                               Ria Groves  
Head of Finance and Procurement       James Campbell

**14. Apologies**

Apologies of absence were received Councillor Terry Byron.

**15. Declarations of Interest**

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

**16. Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the last meeting held on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

**17. Scrutiny Task and Finish Group**

Monitoring Officer, Ria Groves, fed back to the Committee on the progress of the recent Scrutiny Task and Finish Group on Staff Sickness absence. It was discussed that there were a high proportion of Musculoskeletal (MSK) injuries which related to long-term sicknesses. Members queried the reasons for the high numbers, and it was discussed that it was in part due to increased waiting times within the NHS. Members were informed that the Authority supports staff with the cost of the referral, so that they can be seen quicker.

Ria Groves advised Members that the cost of long-term sickness over the last two years was included within the report. However, it was advised that at the Task and Finish Group Members were assured how the Authority's budget incorporated the cost.

Members discussed collaborating with other organisations to identify trends on a national level, in particular relating to MSK injuries and the impact on staff employed as Firefighters. Members were informed about the Authority's promotion of Health and

Wellbeing, including the Annual Health Awareness Programme and the Health and Wellbeing Network.

Councillor Hanratty highlighted mental health and MSK injuries as key areas of focus.. Members also discussed the impact of the physical impact of a Firefighter's role and the age profile of firefighters, noting the retirement age had changed.

It was suggested for a recommendation to be added for the request for data to be gathered nationally to assess the impact of MSK injuries on staff over the age of 50. Members agreed to raise these concerns with the Local Government Association (LGA) and ask them to collate data to identify any trends. Councillor Rennie also emphasised the need for the Authority to ensure firefighters have the best retirement possible.

Councillor Wood emphasised how critical it is to put preventative and fitness measures in place for MSK concerns in the early years of a firefighter's career.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Dave Mottram, reassured Members that the Authority is investing heavily in training to assist with the prevention of injuries, including mental health support and fitness programmes. It was advised that trend analysis is conducted to scrutinise every injury and that firefighters have an hour dedicated to fitness every day. The importance of maintaining fitness throughout firefighter's careers was emphasised along with the steps taken by the Authority to safeguard its staff.

Councillor Maloney raised the issue of how to determine if the LGA would assist in reviewing this issue nationally.

It was proposed to write a letter to the LGA and to copy into the letter the Chair and Vice Chairs.

Councillor Moloney expressed appreciation for the focus on the health of firefighters and the attitude towards this scrutiny work.

Councillor Moloney advised of Members of the recent visit to Old Swan Fire Station and how impressed Members were with the measures taken to avoid cross-contamination, which would benefit and ensure the health of firefighters was maintained into retirement age.

The level of knowledge displayed by the firefighters on station was commended, and their serious approach to contaminants was praised.

**RESOLVED** that:

- a) the conclusion of the Task and Finish Group into the review of staff sickness absences as detailed in this report be noted.
- b) the recommendation to promote the health benefits of walking, cycling, and expanding health promotions to also include diabetes be noted.

- c) the recommendation to collaborate nationally on any trends or best practices in managing staff sickness absences (including feedback to the NFCC) be noted.
- d) the recommendation for Officers to continue to review the mental health and wellbeing support provided to staff will be noted
- e) the Monitoring Officer be instructed to include the outcomes in the scrutiny annual review;
- f) a letter be written to the LGA to raise concerns relating to MSK injuries sustained by firefighters and to ask for national data to be collated to scrutinise for trends in particular by age demographics, and
- g) Staff Absence information be included in the Annual Health and Safety Report.

## **18. Staff Survey 2022 Actions Update**

Community Engagement Advisor, Michelle Kirk, gave a presentation which outlined an overview and recap of the last staff survey conducted in 2022. It was explained that staff engagement surveys have been conducted since 2014 and were developed every two years, even during incidents such as COVID-19. Members were advised that all previous surveys are used as a benchmark to identify areas for improvement.

Michelle Kirk explained the summary of findings from the 2022 survey. It was highlighted that staff surveys have been conducted on behalf of the Authority by a company named People Insight, who also work with other Fire and Rescue Services.

Members were made aware that overall, the survey had a positive response, although there was a 2% drop in the Authority's engagement levels compared to the previous survey.

Members were advised that the Authority had a strong employee engagement score, strong performance against benchmarks and staff reported that they felt acknowledged and valued with positive appraisals.

It was noted that areas for improvement included response rates to the survey among operational staff, work-life balance, better collaboration between departments, and understanding the impact of national disputes.

Michelle Kirk summarised the actions taken to date.

With regards to responses about work life balance Members were advised that Hybrid Working had been introduced and the Flexi-Time system had been amended. It was hoped that this improvement would benefit the staff. Members were also advised that during the last HMI inspection staff had spoken positively about work life balance, showing an improvement since the survey was undertaken.

It was explained that the Draft People Plan was accompanied by the creation of a Cultural Action Plan and the associated cultural dashboard to aid organisational

learning. Following feedback from 2023, it was noted that a revised approach was produced for the appointment process for 2024. Members were advised that the Recognition and Reward policies had been revised, based off staff feedback.

It was explained that a new Learning Management System (LMS) was implemented based on staff feedback.

Michelle Kirk informed Members that x2 grade 12 Managerial roles were being trialed. This was a result of feedback in the survey relating to development opportunities for non-operational staff.

It was explained that career development will be a focus in the next staff survey in November and December 2024.

Councillor Wood queried how staff access the survey, and it was explained that it was accessible through mobile phones and laptops.

The committee discussed confidentiality as some staff had been concerned about their anonymity. It was explained that the survey had been conducted by an external organisation and responses had remained anonymous throughout the process.

Deb Appleton, Director of Strategy and Performance, advised Members that the survey was conducted throughout November and December to maintain a 2-year gap between surveys. Members were advised that reminders were sent to staff, and the survey was open for 5–6 weeks.

Councillor Hanratty praised the Authority on their hard work and progress, he also acknowledged that there were reasons for the low response rate.

The importance of Station Visits and Staff Engagement days were noted, and Councillor Hanratty suggested some improvements that could be made regarding engaging with Firefighters.

Deb Appleton advised Members that the upcoming Pulse Survey would be about Authority Members and their engagement with staff.

The use of Pulse Surveys and more frequent feedback was suggested by Councillor Lamb to overcome the limitations of conducting surveys every 2 years.

**RESOLVED** that the content of the report (and the presentation that was given) as part of a broader discussion about the 2022 staff survey results and actions be noted.

## **19. Employee Work/Life Balance**

*Councillor Hanratty left the meeting at 14:00*

Director of People and Organisational Development, Nick Mernock, presented the Employee Work/Life Balance report that contained an overview of the first 12 months

of the introduction of Hybrid Working, it was explained that the implementation of the trial started 18 months ago.

Members were advised that Nick and the Chief Fire Officer, Phil Garrigan, ran consultation meetings which were attended by 90 members of staff, including both uniformed and non-uniformed staff. The staff discussed home working and there was a mix of views regarding the frequency of working in the office.

It was noted that the idea of a compressed working week was discussed among some staff members, but there were reservations about the ability to complete busy workloads in four days.

It was explained that the revision of the flexitime system and extending working hours had increased flexibility.

Nick Mernock discussed concerns about hybrid working being limited for certain duties and job roles, ensuring part-time staff receive the same opportunities, and keeping agile working as an option. Nick Mernock informed Members of the positive comments from the review, which included staff wanting to come into the office as well as feedback around reducing travel costs, releasing more productive work time, and reducing worries over childcare.

Nick Mernock explained to Members that there may be opportunity for staff to be able to work from a local Fire Station. Members were advised that there was still an expectation for staff to adhere to core hours.

It was noted that two surveys were circulated to staff, which included surveys to managers and another to employees who undertake Hybrid Working. It was explained that the feedback received was overall positive, and the trial would run for another 12 months. However, some issues raised by staff included the need for clearer rules, diverting phones during hybrid working, and that there were still some outstanding applications that had since been resolved.

Members were advised a reduction of 1% in short-term sickness had been identified. It was noted that the trial had contributed to improved recruitment and retention.

Councillor Moloney queried flexi carryover from month to month, in which Members were advised it was three days. It was noted that managers monitored the number of hours staff were working, from a Health and Safety perspective.

Councillor Moloney also questioned if the introduction of Hybrid Working had reduced the amount of overtime being taken, in which Nick Mernock advised that overtime wasn't a significant issue within the Service.

Councillor Rennie queried if any complaints were received over the cost of heating people's homes and Nick Mernock advised that no complaints were received. It was noted that implementing an allowance for fuel would be costly for the Authority and all office space remains available to staff.

Councillor Wood thanked Officers for the presentation and noted the importance of the trust between staff and the Authority, when working from home.

With regards to home working, Councillor Knight asked how many staff said they don't want to work from home. Although a definitive figure could not be provided at the time Members discussed how interacting with other colleagues was beneficial for building relationships.

Financial implications were discussed, including the cost of replacement for equipment when working from home including the equipment's life span. Nick Mernock explained that budgeting for these expenses was covered by the department's refresher program, and it was noted that the lifespan of laptops is monitored.

Nick Mernock advised that after the trial there would be scope to make the policy permanent.

**RESOLVED** that:

- a) the presentation be noted; and
- b) all suitable feedback and appropriate scrutiny of the Hybrid Working Policy be provided.

## **20. Scrutiny Forward Work Plan**

Monitoring Officer, Ria Groves, provided an overview of the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan. Members were advised that the plan was flexible.

The Chair noted that the plan was working well to scrutinise any areas of concern.

Councillor Maloney suggested scrutinising the Smoke Alarms fitted to homes across Merseyside, as it was reported that they were not lasting the expected 10-year life span.

**RESOLVED** that the proposed Scrutiny Forward Work Plan for 2023-2025 be reviewed.