

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

23 OCTOBER 2025

AUTHORITY

MINUTES

Present: **Councillors** Les Byrom (Chair) James Roberts, Janet Grace, Jeanette Banks, Jeanie Bell, Edna Finneran, Sam Gorst, Dave Hanratty, Doreen Knight, Grahame McManus, Andrew Makinson, Kieran Murphy, Lynn O'Keeffe, Chris Page, Mike Sullivan, Lynne Thompson, Heather Westhead and Police and Crime Commissioner, Emily Spurrell

Also Present:	Chief Fire Officer	Nick Searle
	Assistant Chief Fire Officer	Ged Sheridan
	Director of Finance and Procurement	Mike Rea
	Monitoring Officer	Ria Groves

18. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Lesley Rennie.

19. Declarations of Interest

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

20. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on 12th June 2025 be approved as an accurate record.

21. Awarding of Contract for the Procurement of Firefighting and Technical Rescue Helmets

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle, introduced the report informing Members of the outcome of the regional procurement exercise for firefighting and technical rescue helmets.

Members were made aware that the current helmets used by Fire and Rescue Services in the North-West for firefighting operations were procured regionally approximately ten years ago and the production of this model was scheduled to cease next year. The Chief Fire Officer added that the Authority also deployed a separate technical rescue for a limited number of operational staff in technical rescue functions such as the Search and Rescue Team (SRT), Combined Platform Ladder (CPL) operators and the Incident Investigation Team (IIT) crews.

It was confirmed that a direct award under the YPO framework was viable and compliant and the approach secured preferential pricing and long-term value for money. Members were reassured that the specification required helmets suitable for structural firefighting and technical rescue operations and was compliant with relevant standards. The Chief Fire Officer added that the supplier's proposal was evaluated against these requirements and met the operational, safety and financial criteria.

Members' attention was drawn to the total anticipated expenditure over the five-year contract being approximately £2.000m, however, the projected Authority expenditure over the life of the contract was approximately £540k. The Chief Fire Officer explained that current stock would be utilised until it had run out and natural migration would occur to switch to the new helmets, rather than replacing them all at the same time.

Councillor Kieran Murphy asked that with the cost being spent over a period of time, whether inflation in price had been considered. Head of Procurement, Hywyn Pritchard, explained that the costs would be governed by the fixed prices under the framework but would be subject to any CPI increases, over the term of five years.

Police and Crime Commissioner, Emily Spurrell, queried the challenges in uniform for women and wondered whether this had been factored in and if it would be better for female colleagues. The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the uniform was subject to an Equality Impact Assessment and was continuously under review. It was explained that the new helmets reduced weight considerably.

Councillor Dave Hanratty enquired that when the report mentioned the 'region' whether this was the Merseyside region or the North-West region. The Chief Fire Officer clarified that this was the North-West region. It was asked by Councillor Dave Hanratty whether this would have an impact on the cost being shared and it was confirmed that this was correct and Merseyside's expenditure of the £2.000m would be approximately £540k.

Councillor Sam Gorst entered the meeting at 13:11.

It was queried by Councillor Dave Hanratty how the Authority identified obsolete equipment and the lifespan of helmets. The Chief Fire Officer explained that firefighters had guidance around this and would check regularly if there was any damage to them. He reassured Members that if there was any damage, they would always be inspected and if necessary, replaced. Members were made aware that these pieces of equipment would be disposed of if they were not fit for firefighting situations or donated to charity, but it would depend on the circumstance.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted; and

- b) the award of the contract for firefighting and technical rescue helmets for the region to Bristol Uniforms Limited (a part of MSA Great Britain Holdings Limited), at a total cost of up to £2.000m be approved.

22. Approval of Expenditure for PPE Laundry

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle, explained to Members that the existing laundry contract between Elis UK Ltd and the Authority began on 24th September 2022 and was extended until 23rd September 2026. He advised that there had been a significant increase in the number of items sent for cleaning, which was due to positive health and safety culture, reducing firefighters to exposure of contaminants.

The Chief Fire Officer added that contract costs had risen by approximately 20% over the last two years and it was anticipated that the demand for the service would remain high and laundry costs could increase further prior to the contract ending in September 2026. Members noted that at the end of the current contract period, the Authority would re-tender to secure the most economically advantageous arrangement available.

It was confirmed that expenditure under the contract was forecast to exceed £300k over its lifetime and the current spend to date was £278k. Members noted that the estimated expenditure up to 23rd September 2026 was between £347k and £382k. The Chief Fire Officer stated that whilst expenditure was projected to surpass the original approval threshold, efficiency measures identified were expected to deliver savings across the current Medium Term Financial Plan. Members were advised that the Authority would use internal Service couriers to collect and deliver laundry from all locations to create a single collection and drop off location, with an annual saving of £50k. The Chief added that current structural firefighting kit had a maximum wash life of 40 cycles, however, the Authority was considering the introduction of a full technical rescue ensemble which could reduce the cost by a further £20k which would create an annual saving of up to £70k. Additional expenditure would be funded from the current budgets.

Councillor James Roberts praised how the Authority was taking tackling contaminants so seriously to protect the health of firefighters and staff. He drew Members' attention to paragraph 20 on page 41 of the agenda which explained the wash life of structural firefighting kit having a maximum wash life of 40 cycles and technical rescue PPE having no wash life limitation which would reduce washing frequency. Councillor James Roberts queried whether the priority of tackling contaminants was still taking place if the kits were being washed less frequently.

The Chief Fire Officer stated that the contaminants were predominately on the structural firefighting kit as these were used in big fires such as house fires where maximum protection was necessary. Members noted that technical rescue jackets were worn more frequently for other types of incidents such as road traffic collisions, the kit being utilised appropriately would allow the use of the structural firefighting kit to be reduced and therefore the 40 washing cycles would be spread out over a longer period of time.

Councillor Dave Hanratty asked for reassurance that there would be no cross contamination for the couriers who were picking up contaminated kits. The Chief Fire Officer noted that cross contamination was taken very seriously and when kit was utilised at an operational incident, this kit was double bagged, labelled and placed in a set area in the station where the contamination was contained.

It was queried by Councillor Jeanette Banks whether the training and research into the new equipment would continue to be used for future use, and this was confirmed as correct. Councillor Les Byrom asked for clarity around ensuring the correct kit was being worn. The Chief Fire Officer stated that staff were very well trained and strict around the level of PPE worn at an operational incident. It was acknowledged that all firefighters would know what kit to wear anyway, however, the Officer In Charge would step in if necessary to inform the team which kit was required to be worn.

Councillor Grahame McManus drew Members' attention to paragraph 8 on page 40 where it read that the re-tendering process would begin at the end of the current contract period. He wondered if the re-tender started prior to the end of the contract or at the end of the contract. The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the re-tender would begin prior the end of the current contract.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted; and
- b) the additional expenditure with Elis UK Ltd in line with the current contract framework be approved.

23. ND2 Procurement: Telescopic Handler

The report was introduced by Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle, who noted that Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority was the lead authority for National Resilience (NR) and all procurement for the multi-million-pound refresh of NR kit and equipment.

Members were made aware that New Dimensions 2 (ND2) was a national capability uplift programme that supported the UK NR. The Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Capability had a fleet of Multi-Purpose Vehicles (MPVs) that operated to fulfil a number of outcomes. These included the loading and unloading of USAR vehicles and modules in Merseyside, the transportation of equipment at an incident ground and the moving of rubble at USAR incidents.

It was confirmed that the current MPVs had been discontinued and subsequently it had become difficult to maintain the current fleet of vehicles. The Chief Fire Officer also acknowledged that the current fleet had been deemed as unsustainable and that a Telescopic Handler provided greater capability. The procurement of four Telescopic Handlers formed part of a wider project for ND2.

The Chief Fire Officer made Members aware that the funding for Telescopic Handlers would be provided by MHCLG as part of the ND2 USAR project and the procurement of these was £423,000.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted; and
- b) the award of the contract to P. Tuckwell Ltd T/A Tuckwell's for four telescopic handlers, at a total cost of £432,000 be approved.

24. Apprenticeship End Point Assessments

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle, introduced the report and reminded Members that the Authority moved from the previous National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) approach for the development of new firefighters and implemented the Operational Firefighter Apprenticeship in 2019, which was a two-year programme. Members noted that under the apprentice programme, the Authority was able to reclaim significant costs associated with the training and development programme from the apprenticeship levy. It was explained that the final stage of the apprenticeship for a firefighter was the End-Point Assessment (EPA) and costs would only be incurred once an EPA was requested.

Members were advised that an independent End-Point Assessment Organisation (EPAO) was required as part of the apprenticeship.

The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that the route to market was through YPO's Apprenticeships and Associated Framework that allowed direct award to providers. Members were advised that the direct contract award to SFJA would enable a continuation of the ongoing successful partnership that the Authority had. It was explained that the current SFJA cost per EPA was £1980 and the contract value had been estimated based on a maximum of 40 EPAs per year which would equate to £396k for five years. The Chief Fire Officer drew Members' attention to the table on page 50 which showed the predicted EPA's and costs over the years. He explained that the table suggested that the number of EPAs would reduce to around 10 per year from 2029 lowering the predicted cost to £265k. He reassured Members that the Authority would only book enough EPAs for firefighters who reached that element of the apprenticeship.

The Chair commented that this had been a very successful system of functionally managing and enabling new recruits to progress through a structured process.

Councillor Dave Hanratty praised the use of the apprenticeship levy and did not think organisations utilised it enough. He asked how people had come through the apprenticeship scheme and the King's Trust and Beacon Courses. Councillor Dave Hanratty commented on succession planning taking two years to implement and stated that the Authority might not know when firefighters would retire, however, if the Authority could work out the number of

apprenticeships needed to backfill any vacancies, this approach could be seamless.

Councillor Les Byrom suggested that the Authority have a learning lunch on the modern apprenticeship scheme.

The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that quarterly meetings were held to monitor staffing levels and ensured resources were appropriately allocated . It was noted that, historically, firefighters typically retired after 30 years of service, however, this was no longer the case, making retirement projections more difficult to predict. Members were informed that over the past six years, three recruitment courses had been conducted annually. This would be reduced to two courses per year, with a longer-term goal of recruiting approximately 9–10 new firefighters annually. Consequently, adjustments to the recruitment process would be required to reflect these changes.

Councillor Dave Hanratty mentioned that there were a lot of benefits that could be utilised from all Fire and Rescue Services across the country by taking part in the apprenticeship scheme. The Chief Fire Officer noted that there had been firefighters from the Isle of Man on the previous recruit courses and the Authority had already had a further request from the Isle of Man and Guernsey for firefighters to be put on future courses. He made Members aware that there were apprentices in a number of control and Green Book roles across the Service. He also noted that participants in the King's Trust scheme did not necessarily aspire to pursue careers as firefighters; rather, the programme aimed to equip them with the skills required to gain employment within their communities.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted; and
- b) the award of a contract for the End Point Assessment of Apprenticeships to Skills for Justice Awards for a period of 5 years based on a total maximum value of the contract of up to £396k, all of which is fully paid from the Apprenticeship Levy, be approved.

25. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report and Equality Analysis - Workforce and Employment Data reports 2024/25

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle, highlighted the equality diversity and inclusion annual report which detailed the five equality objectives on pages 63 – 73. He noted that objective 1 showed that the Authority had 84 female firefighters which represented 13.8% of total firefighters, with the national percentage being 9.3%. Nationally, firefighters from an ethnic minority background equated to 5.4% and Merseyside showed 7.9% of the operational workplace being from an ethnic minority background.

Equality objective 3 showed that 51,242 home fire safety checks took place last year which was a huge amount and youth engagement activities and engaging

with the young diverse population showed continuing success. It was explained that in terms of the work of the Kings Trust engaging with young people from 16-25 who were not in employment or education, 58.3% of those were male, 19.8% were from an LGBTQ+ background and 77.1% considered themselves to have a disability.

The Chief Fire Officer highlighted the progression with objective 5 where MFRS was awarded the Fair Employment Charter, White Ribbon Accreditation work that was ongoing with Northwest Protection Governance Structure and the ASFA Award winners. He drew Members' attention to the workforce data and analysis starting on page 77 which showed that females in Fire Control was 87% with males being only 13% which showed that there was further work to be done in that area.

Councillor Jeanie Bell thanked the Chief for the amount of work that had gone into the report. She commented on the information about the Fire Cadets Programme on page 67 highlighting that the majority of attendees were white British which showed a lack of diversity. She asked what the Authority was doing to be proactive in recruiting in diverse communities for fire cadets going forwards. Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Ged Sheridan, advised Members that the Authority currently had a dedicated team in the prevention team who visited schools in Merseyside and next year there would be more involvement with wholtime firefighters on stations visiting schools. He noted the importance of young people seeing the diversity of firefighters when school visits take place and the Authority hope to see the benefits in the longer term.

Councillor Les Byrom highlighted the importance of fire cadets and the need for volunteers to come forward to continue this process. He also commented on the need to find people to grow a cadet community and give young people an opportunity to work with the Fire Service.

On page 63, Councillor Jeanie Bell highlighted the pay gap for support staff and wondered if this was within the Authority's control and whether it was something that could be improved going forwards. The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that he was aware of this small difference with non-uniformed staff and it was being looked at. He explained that there had been a lot more flexibility in roles since the new management team changed and there was fluctuation between grey and green book roles. The Authority had been transitioning roles that were historically classified as grey book positions into areas such as Prevention and Protection to promote greater fluidity within the organisation. This restructuring provided green book staff with opportunities to progress into more senior roles. It was confirmed that further changes were expected between now and next year. This shift had been driven, in part, by the recognition that non-uniformed staff previously perceived limited opportunities for advancement due to a number of senior posts being labelled as uniformed positions.

Councillor Jan Grace queried whether female firefighters were being actively encouraged to aspire to senior management level roles, and this was confirmed as true. The Chief Fire Officer commented that previously the Service did not introduce direct entry into senior roles, instead focussed on recruiting firefighters with the aim of career progression into senior management roles in time, which

was why it had taken a while for female senior officers to come through the ranks. The Chief Fire Officer also noted, following the time period the report refers to, the Service had now also recruited a female Station Manager and Group Manager. He added that when females saw females in those higher roles, they aspired to do the same and knew it was possible and he explained that there were now six female Station Managers and one Group Manager.

Councillor Chris Page praised the reference to the home fire safety checks in the vulnerable community as he saw an advantage of these when he attended older persons day and was very impressed with the teams' work. He mentioned that fire control statistics stood out to him on the report as there were not many leavers or new employees in that team, however, this team lacked diversity more than other areas. The Chief Fire Officer acknowledged that fire control were seen as separate in the past, however, over the last few years it had been made more inclusive as they now worked in the same building and more expenditure had gone into fire control, with the team growing. He added that the number of males in fire control had also grown, meaning that diversity was improving. It was noted that there did not used to be a lot of progression in fire control, however, that was no longer the case as there was more fluidity in the Service, with employees moving across departments whilst ensuring that the right person got the job.

Concerns were raised by Councillor Sam Gorst around the data table on page 89 and he asked if there were any specific BAME management programmes or opportunities at management level for firefighters or staff. It was advised that there were no specific BAME management programmes as it was the same for all members of staff, however, there had been an increase in senior officers recently, with the last temporary Group Manager process including two employees who were from BAME backgrounds. He added that whilst there was a positive improvement in that area, there was still work to be done.

Councillor Les Byrom commented that the Authority wanted the population of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority to look like the population of Merseyside and if there were any artificial barriers in the way, then Members should look to change this. He added that it was important for Members to have the key figures and statistics given in the report to see how the Authority was performing.

Councillor Chris Page stated that this was not a tick box exercise and the Authority wanted to give everyone the best opportunity so that they ended up with the best Fire and Rescue Service possible and recruited the best people. He added that there was a huge benefit from making all sorts of adjustments across the organisation for everybody. Councillor Les Byrom agreed and noted that the Authority's aim was to keep the public safe and have high regards to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Councillor Dave Hanratty praised the organisation on their policies, procedures, working groups and everything behind the scenes that ensured that employees were respected, appreciated and valued and had an organisation and culture that represented the community. He added that people wanted to work for the Authority and when attending staff engagement days, staff always made

comments that they loved working for the Authority which was a testament to the senior management.

It was acknowledged that the report stated dates from 2024-2027, however, Councillor Dave Hanratty asked to have that extended for a further five years to ensure that this could not be undermined regardless of what happened in the future. He stressed the importance of protecting all staff from now and in the future so that they felt secure in work and the roles they undertook.

The Chief Fire Officer advised that this was an annual report and so would be done annually and the objectives were from 2024-2027 which was tied in with the CRMP. He reassured Members that the planning for the new CRMP would begin in the new year, along with looking at whether the objectives were still fit for purpose moving forwards..

RESOLVED that:

- a) the contents of the report be noted;
- b) the publication of the ED&I Annual Report (1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025) on the Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) website be approved;
- c) the publication of the Equality Analysis – Workforce and Employment Data Report (1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025) on MFRS website be approved; and
- d) the publication of these reports demonstrating the Authority's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and demonstrates compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty be noted.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday 26th February 2026.