MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

19 MARCH 2026

MINUTES

Present: **Councillor** James Roberts (Chair), Dave Hanratty, Jeanie Bell, Heather Westhead, Andrew Makinson, Grahame McManus, Les Byrom and Edna Finneran (Acting as substitute for Lynn O'Keeffe).

Also Present:

Chief Fire Officer	Nick Searle
Deputy Chief Fire Officer	Dave Mottram
Assistant Chief Fire Officer	Ged Sheridan
Director of Finance & Procurement	Mike Rea
Monitoring Officer	Ria Groves

25. Announcement from the Chair

The Chair, Councillor James Roberts, informed Members that it was Councillor Jeanie Bell's final Committee meeting. He expressed his thanks and appreciation to her on behalf of the Authority. He also wished all Authority Councillors the best of luck in the upcoming elections.

26. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Lesley Rennie and Lynn O'Keeffe (It was noted that Councillor Edna Finneran was acting as substitute for Councillor O'Keeffe).

27. Declarations of Interest

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

28. Urgent Business Approved by the Chair

Members noted that as part of the New Dimensions 2 programme for National Resilience, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service were asked by MHCLG as Lead Authority for National Resilience to explore the acquisition of assets to assist in the response to wildfires as part of a 12-month pilot. Officers were advised that the assets would need to be procured in anticipation of the wildfire period which provisional commences in May each year.

Members also noted, due to the urgency of the matter, the award of the lease contract to Lloyd Limited for £309,890.16 was treated as urgent business under Standing Order 17 of the Authority's Constitution. As the time scales did not allow for the decision to be brought before a Committee, the Chief Fire Officer and the Chair of the Authority agreed to exercise their powers to discharge the decision-making function of the Authority in accordance with their powers under Standing Order 17.2 to approve the award of the lease contract to Lloyd Limited on behalf of the Authority.

The Chair asked for this matter to be brought to Members attention at the next meeting of a Committee. Members noted and agreed with this approach.

29. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on 20th January 2026 were agreed as an accurate record.

30. Financial Review 2025/26 Quarter 3, October - December

Director of Finance and Procurement, Mike Rea introduced the report and highlighted to Members that the financial review report covered the period from October to December 2025, which provided assurance that the approved budget remained robust and that the forecast position would be contained within available resources. It was explained that the report addressed revenue, capital, reserves, and treasury management.

Members were advised that the net revenue budget of £77.9 million remained unchanged and that Officers had identified a number of favourable variances. These included £250,000 savings within the non-uniform employee budget due to vacancies, a £300,000 favourable variance on the radio communications contract, and £150,000 additional income from services to strategic partners. It was highlighted that the contingency for pay, and prices had not been required, resulting in a one-off saving of £250,000. Members were advised that investment income was also forecasted to exceed the target by £300,000, bringing total one-off savings to £1.25 million.

In relation to the capital programme, Members noted that Officers had reviewed scheme timelines and identified several realignments and savings. The programme had been updated for £3.6 million of changes, including additional funding for the National Resilience Uplift Programme and savings across equipment, building and IT schemes.

Members were advised that the reserves position, set out on page 25, outlined no drawdowns or adjustments during the quarter.

Regarding treasury management, it was highlighted that the Authority continued to receive services from Liverpool City Council. Members noted the Bank of England’s decision in December 2025 to reduce the bank rate to 3.75% and that inflation had fallen to 3.2%. It was highlighted that the Authority anticipated no new long-term borrowing in 2025–26 and held £62 million in investments and £33.7 million in outstanding debt at the end of December 2025.

The Chair, Councillor James Roberts, noted that at the previous budget strategy day he had anticipated a reduction in the Bank of England base rate. He stated that subsequent events had altered the outlook and that the future direction of interest rates had become uncertain. Mike Rea informed Members that the Bank of England had met earlier that day and had held the base rate at 3.75%. He reported that earlier expectations of inflation falling toward 2% had shifted, with forecasts now indicating a rise to 3.5%–4% within the year.

Councillor Andrew Makinson referred to the £191,000 allocation for the Museum within the capital programme. He noted that the scheme had repeatedly been deferred, He asked whether any of the proposed works were safety related or whether they were general refurbishment that could continue to be postponed. Mike Rea confirmed that the works were not safety related. He stated that the proposal concerned a potential expansion of the museum's footprint to accommodate additional vehicles. He advised that the scheme was likely to be deferred again, particularly in light of the prevailing uncertainty around interest rates.

Councillor McManus noted that diesel prices had risen by 20 pence and referred to BLD031 – diesel tanks on page 32, asking whether this represented storage costs. Mike Rea reported that BLD031 represents storage costs and that the Authority was contracted with a fuel supplier, but prices followed the market. It was highlighted that diesel costs were included within transport and premises budgets and were not separately itemised within the report. Members noted that a £1.8 million pay and prices reserve had been created to help manage inflationary pressures, including fuel.

The Chair queried whether diesel was treated as a revenue or capital cost. Mike Rea confirmed that diesel was a revenue cost, while replacement tanks were a capital cost.

Councillor Hanratty asked whether the Authority remained on track approaching year end and whether any issues required highlighting. He also asked for any indication of the forthcoming pay award, noting that last year's budgeted 2.5% increase had resulted in a 3.2% award for both firefighters and staff. Mike Rea stated that no issues were forecast for the year end budget position and confirmed that the medium-term financial plan included a 3% provision for the next financial year. He reported that the Unison had submitted an initial pay request of 10% or £3,000, with no employer response yet, and invited Nick Mernock to comment on the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) position.

Director of People and Organisational Development, Nick Mernock reported that the Green book (Unison) pay claim was high and might allow some flexibility. He confirmed that the FBU Grey book claim had not yet been submitted, as further work was underway on proposals to broaden the firefighter role. He stated that the FBU was expected to seek a cost of living increase, with the scale dependent on progress with the role broadening work and Treasury funding. He noted that cost of living pressures would continue to fluctuate in the coming months.

The Chief Fire Officer reported that discussions at the Local Government Association (LGA) conference indicated that pay negotiations were on going and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) had advised services to budget for a 3% pay increase, which had been reflected in the Authority’s budget.

Councillor Byrom reported that the LGA fire conference had also recommended a 3% planning assumption, which the Authority had adopted.

RESOLVED that;

a) the contents of the report be noted;

b) the use of the forecast £1.250m savings to fund capital expenditure and reduce the level of borrowing be approved;

c) the proposed revenue and capital budget alignments be approved; and

d) the Director of Finance and Procurement be instructed to continue to work with budget managers to maximise savings in 2025/26 and use any savings to reduce the level of capital borrowing.

31. Service Delivery Plan 2025-26 Quarter 3, October - December Update

Chief Fire Officer Nick Searle presented the Service Delivery Plan for October to December 2025.

It was highlighted that Fire Control had received 18,912 emergency calls from April to December 2025, an increase of 2,514 on the previous year, and that 97% of 999 calls were answered within 10 seconds, achieving the 96% target. He reported to Members that the 2025 bonfire period recorded the lowest deliberate secondary activity, with 123 incidents attended, 50 fewer than two years earlier, and noted that planning for the next Operation Bangor had already commenced.

Members were advised that carbon output for all buildings was lower than quarter two and well below the target, reflecting investment in air source heat pumps and photovoltaic cells.

It was reported that overall sickness absence at the end of quarter three was 5.3%, exceeding the 4% target and higher than the previous year. The Chief Fire Officer noted that long term mental health and musculoskeletal conditions remained the main contributors and that Officers were reviewing data, benchmarking, and current interventions to identify improvements.

The Chief Fire Officer, highlighted that work was underway to strengthen the management of other duties staff, including improved recording, bringing staff into headquarters where appropriate, and identifying roles that supported wellbeing and contribution. Members were advised that although sickness levels remained high, the service continued to perform strongly. It was highlighted that the Authority had chosen to retain the existing sickness target rather than reduce it and would continue efforts to improve attendance over the next 12 months.

Councillor Hanratty noted that sickness and absence levels remained high despite the work of the Task and Finish Group and the extensive support provided by the Authority. He expressed concern that mental health related absence had not improved and asked what further measures could be taken to reduce sickness and support staff. The Chief Fire Officer highlighted that the Authority's Occupational Health provision, particularly for mental health, was exceptional. Members were reminded that the decision not to raise the sickness target would not reflect the seriousness of the issue.

The Chief Fire Officer advised Members that work was underway to improve support for non-operational staff and noted that some absences were linked to delays in medical treatment.

The Chair, Councillor James Roberts, noted that sickness absence data was sensitive but asked what benchmarking information was available and whether this was something the Authority could undertake or whether it required action by the Ministry. The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that benchmarking was carried out across the wider fire and rescue sector and that the Authority's performance was comparable with other services.

In relation to Special Service calls, Councillor McManus referred to page 43 and queried whether the Service redirected emergency calls to other agencies, such as the police or ambulance, when appropriate. He also raised a further query regarding sickness trends shown on page 58 and queried what early interventions were available to staff. The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the Service did not discourage Special Service calls and always responded where assistance was needed. He stated that calls were redirected to the appropriate agency when the Service was not the lead responder.

The Chief Fire Officer reassured Members that the Authority had a high-quality, award-winning occupational health service. He stated that a wide range of support was available, including physiotherapy and other treatments where appropriate, with the priority being to help staff return to work safely and promptly. It was noted that staff feedback consistently rated occupational health as outstanding.

RESOLVED that;

a) the contents of the report be noted; and

b) the attached Service Delivery Plan updates (Appendices A - J) for publication on the website be approved.

32. Service Delivery Plan 2026/27

The Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle presented the Service Delivery Plan for 2026–27, it was explained that the plan brought together actions from the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), functional plans, station plans, and performance indicators, and noted that the Authority was entering the final year of the current CRMP while beginning work on the post-2027 plan. Members were advised that that performance was monitored monthly by Officers and reported quarterly to the Strategic Leadership Team and Authority Committees. It was noted that each function had produced a new plan for 2026–27 and that internal scrutiny arrangements had been adjusted to give greater responsibility to directors and functional leads.

Councillor Hanratty welcomed the report and queried communication activity, noting the need for regular public messaging on seasonal risks such as barbecues and summer-related fires. He queried how the Authority ensured that safety themes were promoted throughout the year. The Chief Fire Officer stated that the corporate communications team used multiple channels, including social media, the website, and engagement with community groups, to share safety messages across Merseyside. It was confirmed that the Service worked continuously to maximise reach and engagement.

Director of Strategy and Performance, Deb Appleton added that communications followed national themes but also responded quickly to emerging local risks. It was reported that social media engagement was strong and that the small team planned content proactively while also reacting swiftly when required.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Ged Sheridan highlighted that while national NFCC seasonal campaigns continued, the Service was increasingly focusing on local, responsive prevention work, including refinements to Operation Bangor and realignment of resources following policing structural changes. It was highlighted that a water safety campaign would be launched in areas with historic issues. The importance of combining national themes with targeted local activity was noted.

Councillor Hanratty raised concerns following a vape shop fire in Scotland, noting the rapid growth of such premises across Merseyside. It was asked how the Service would promote fire safety compliance, ensure business owners understood their responsibilities, and consider inspections or other interventions. The Chief Fire Officer advised that the Authority would await the findings of the fire investigation in Scotland, but it was noted that lithium ion batteries continued to present a significant sector wide risk.

Councillor Bell commented positively on the Service Delivery Plan, noting that the document was clear, accessible, and well designed. It was highlighted that the inclusion of a dedicated section on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion was particularly welcoming. A query was raised regarding whether the published version would be available in accessible formats, including text to speech. Deb Appleton advised that accessibility features were supported through the website's "Recite Me" software.

RESOLVED that;

a) the contents of the report and accompanying appendix be noted; and

b) the attached Service Delivery Plan as contained in Appendix A for publication on the Authority's website, be approved.

33. **New Dimensions 2 - HVP Hose**

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle introduced the report, noting that it related to the National Resilience New Dimensions 2 Programme, seeking approval to award a contract for the procurement of 250mm high-volume pump hose as part of the national asset refresh.

Members were advised that the contract would be awarded to Angloco Ltd for £770,750.87 to supply 3,120 metres of hose and associated equipment following the outcome of a procurement process.

The Chair, Councillor James Roberts asked whether there was only one supplier available. It was advised by Head of Procurement, Hywyn Pritchard that, a competitive exercise was held with .two bids received, and Angloco identified as the preferred bidder following the outcome of the evaluation.

RESOLVED that:

a) the contents of the report be noted; and

b) the award of the contract to Angloco Limited, at a total cost of £770,750.87 for the procurement of 3120 metres HVP hose and ancillary equipment be approved.

34. **Award of the Scientific Support Services Contract**

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle introduced the report, advising Members of the outcome of the procurement exercise for National Resilience DIM (Detection, Identification and Monitoring) training and sought approval to award contracts for specialist scientific support services.

It was noted that the current contract expires on 31 March 2026 and that the procurement exercise resulted in one bid for Lot 1 and two bids for Lot 2, with preferred bidders identified through evaluation. It was confirmed that funding for both contracts would be met through the National Resilience Grant provided by MHCLG.

RESOLVED that;

a) the contents of the report be noted;

b) the contract award for Lot 1 (DIM1 and DIM2 training courses) to Bureau Veritas UK Limited, for an estimated value of £442,448 be approved; and

c) the contract award for Lot 2 to Hazmat Training Limited for a contract value estimated at £307,560 be approved.

35. ND2 Procurement: Award of Contract for CBRN DIM Equipment

Chief Fire Officer, Nick Searle, introduced the report noting that the report outlined the outcome of the procurement exercise for PCR devices under the National Resilience ND2 Programme. Members were advised that the contract would be awarded to Southern Scientific Ltd for £780,459, covering the devices and associated consumables.
Councillor Bell sought assurance that the preferred supplier had been selected on the basis of quality and capability rather than cost alone. The Chief Fire Officer advised that tender evaluation considered multiple factors and that financial value was not the sole determinant, with emphasis placed on ensuring the equipment met operational requirements.

RESOLVED that;

a) the contents of the report be noted; and

b) the award of a contract valued at £780,459 to Southern Scientific Limited, for the procurement of PCR units and associated consumables available be approved.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 23 July 2026