

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

18 SEPTEMBER 2025

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Edna Finneran (Chair), Jeanette Banks, Doreen Knight, Mike Sullivan, Heather Westhead, Andrew Makinson, Kieran Murphy and Lynn O'Keeffe (Substitute).

In Attendance:	Assistant Chief Fire Officer	Ged Sheridan
	Monitoring Officer	Ria Groves
	Financial Accountant	Neil Bushell

7. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Dave Hanratty, (Councillor Lynn O'Keeffe attended as a substitute), Councillor Sam Gorst, who was unable to attend due to the change in the meeting date and Co-opted Member Mr Anthony Boyle.

8. Declarations of Interest

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

9. Minutes of the Last Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on the 22nd July 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

10. Enforcement and Prosecution Update

Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Ged Sheridan, introduced the report and advised on the areas previously identified by His Majesties Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) as requiring improvement, relating to Enforcement and Prosecution.

Area Manager Kevin Longshaw, Head of Protection, delivered a presentation to Members providing an update on progress against the identified recommendations from the 2023 HMICFRS report. It was highlighted that significant focus had been placed on Enforcement and Prosecution, as well as high-rise building safety following the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

HMICFRS reported that regulator confidence in the department's understanding of prosecution processes was perceived to be low, and this was therefore identified as a significant area for improvement.

Despite this, Members were reminded that the Service was still graded as 'Good' for Public Safety and Fire Regulation. Within the most recent tranche of inspections, Merseyside was one of only 16 other Fire and Rescue Services to achieve this rating, demonstrating that the Service remained in a strong position overall.

In relation to Enforcement and Prosecution, Members were advised of the directorate feedback or actions from the last inspection. It was noted that the required actions were:

- *The Service should assure itself that its use of enforcement powers prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk.*
- *Not all the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent and systematic way or in line with the service's policies. We found evidence in all records that the authorising manager had given signed approval, but the HSE's enforcement management model wasn't completed as a part of the fire safety audit.*
- *Inspectors lose confidence in the prosecution process*
- *The Service could improve how it shares information with other enforcement agencies.*

Members were advised that progress against these actions would be monitored through the 2024/25 Functional Delivery Plan, the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) internal review process, and the Authority's wider governance framework.

The Chair, Councillor Finneran, sought clarification regarding the action referring to inspectors losing confidence in the prosecution process. Kevin Longshaw explained that this concern related specifically to prosecutions rather than enforcement activity, noting that staff had previously demonstrated inconsistency in their understanding of the relevant processes, and as such, there was no confidence in the prosecution procedure.

The Authority was required to ensure enforcement powers identified the highest risk and address inspectors losing confidence in prosecution process. It was highlighted that since the last HMICFRS inspection, a dedicated Enforcement and Prosecution team was introduced as part of a broader restructure; everyone would be trained following procedures being revised and updated. There were more regular meetings between the Protection Department and Legal Department. There was also a dedicated Protection Compliance Group formed to discuss on going cases, review and escalate appropriately as well as a number of forums and meetings to monitor deliverables. The result of this was that when speaking with team members, now the team felt confident to follow through a prosecution if there had been a failure to comply.

Councillor Murphy questioned whether the recommendation on improving information sharing with other enforcement agencies from the inspection was more of a suggestion rather than a direction. In response, it was highlighted that whilst a recommendation was a suggestion, there would be an expectation by HMICFRS that the Authority would have actioned the suggestion or have adopted alternative actions which would achieve the same result.

Councillor O’Keeffe queried whether a focus in the current inspection would be on the loss of confidence amongst staff relating to prosecutions as it was a recommendation from the last inspection. Kevin Longshaw confirmed this would be the case and reaffirmed the changes implemented, including systematic audits, refreshed policies, and additional training to boost staffs’ confidence in the process.

Members were also advised that within the governance structure, a Standardisation Group would undertake a review of audits carried out and check whether the correct procedures had been followed and if not, was there a rational for this. This allowed greater scrutiny of assurance along with regular reviews of policies and actions the department must meet through its Functional Plan and CRMP deliverables.

Councillor Banks raised a query as to how often policies were reviewed. Members were advised that policies were reviewed annually, the Functional Plan objectives were periodically reviewed and updated quarterly.

Councillor Banks added that if policies were reviewed annually, how was it that there had been a lack of prosecutions since 2020 and Kevin Longshaw noted there were clearly some gaps within previous assurance processes and the reviews were not being executed appropriately. It was advised that structural updates were now firmly established and all the gaps addressed.

Kevin Longshaw further advised that information sharing with partner agencies, including Trading Standards, Ofsted, and the Food Standards Agency, had been strengthened. Members noted that this collaboration supported compliance across multiple areas, particularly during premises inspections. It was confirmed that a formal reporting process to notify other regulators of potential issues were now in place.

Councillor Sullivan queried whether all relevant agencies were included in information sharing, noting that Merseyside Police had not been mentioned and would be expected to feature prominently. Kevin Longshaw advised that information was shared with Merseyside Police where relevant to enforcement matters or when concerns arose.

Councillor Knight referred to a recent incident that occurred in her ward, Speke, and commended the fast response time from Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service along with the effective partnership working demonstrated alongside other blue-light services in addressing fire concerns relating to a group of shops.

Kevin Longshaw acknowledged the positive outcome. Members were advised of additional work and collaboration with Prevention colleagues and wider

multi-agency partners, which continued to strengthen through ongoing partnership work.

Members were informed of the use of technology to record audits and information sharing. These remained as an ongoing piece of work of incorporating electronic notifications to alert staff regarding information sharing to other agencies into the current system.

Councillor Sullivan queried whether Artificial Intelligence (AI) was being used to help identify any risks. It was confirmed that AI was not yet in use within the Protection Directorate however it was being explored to enhance procedures and support regulatory activities in the future.

Members were informed that actions taken since the last inspection demonstrated continued progress, with work underway to maintain this standard and move towards achieving an “Outstanding” rating in future assessments.

Councillor Murphy queried how close the Authority was to achieving an “Outstanding” rating and whether this was realistically attainable in the upcoming inspection. Members were advised that the rating process was more qualitative, not quantitative. Kevin Longshaw reassured Members that the key focus for the Authority would be to build on improving visibility and evidencing strengths more clearly.

Councillor Banks referred to the 2024/25 data provided within the report, noting there had been no prosecutions despite unsatisfactory outcomes following enforcement. She queried what factors were preventing further progress. Kevin Longshaw explained that when Enforcement Notices were being issued, businesses were given extra time to comply. In some cases, extended compliance periods meant that previously prepared case files no longer met the public interest tests and the threshold for prosecution. This is why the review of the internal governance and training had been provided to prevent this reoccurring.

Kevin Longshaw advised the data relating to satisfactory and unsatisfactory audit outcomes demonstrated that the majority resulted in a satisfactory outcome which was positive. He noted that fluctuations in figures could be influenced by new legislation and the expanding scope of inspections.

Members were advised that the Authority focus was on high-risk buildings, which had led to more premises being made safe and compliance levels improving.

Councillor Murphy suggested that future reporting for Fire Safety Audit outcomes should be displayed as percentages rather than raw figures to assist with clarity. It was agreed and confirmed that comparative percentage data for 2022/23 and 2024/25 would be provided to Members.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the substance of this report the associated presentation accompanying be noted and;
- b) the progress of the enforcement and prosecution actions by the Service as detailed within the accompanying presentation be scrutinised.

11. Culture Action Plan

Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Ged Sheridan introduced the Culture Action Plan report to Members.

A detailed presentation was provided by the Director of People and Organisational Development, Nick Mernock, who outlined the progress made to date.

Nick Mernock presented an update on the Culture Action Plan, noting that work began in November 2022 following national reviews of culture within Fire and Rescue Services. Members were informed that the Plan focused on values, culture, and misconduct and was developed in response to the 35 HMICFRS recommendations produced, 20 of which applied directly to Fire and Rescue Services.

Nick Mernock informed Members that a Culture and Inclusion Board, People Plan, and EDI Culture Plan had been established internally, alongside strengthened leadership behaviours.

It was noted that the Culture Action Plan now included over 50 measurable actions aimed at transparency and accountability. Members were advised that key developments included the introduction of a Cultural Dashboard to monitor wellbeing, fairness, and disciplinary trends, as well as the adoption of a “Just Culture” approach to resolve low-level issues quickly and constructively.

Members were updated on the positive progress reported through staff survey results, increased understanding of the Code of Ethics, and stronger engagement across all levels. It was also advised that the Culture Action Plan also aligned with national guidance and that a review would take place within the next six months.

Members were given detail of the work undertaken by officers to address the actions identified in the Cultural Action Plan. Members were also advised that training was being provided to ensure all staff understood the NFCC Core Code of Ethics, the Services Leadership Message, the Service Values and the Service expectations regarding behaviours and how to challenge poor behaviour. Additionally, Colours leadership training for supervisory and middle managers was also being delivered. The training provided the skills to have powerful conversations, identify poor behaviour and reflect on the leadership role.

CMI training continued for middle managers and Professional Standards training for those with line management responsibility covering conduct, absence and capability processes to strengthen managers skills. This was complimented alongside E. Learning for all staff on conduct, capability and absence management arrangements and Code of Ethics, Values and EDI training for all staff.

Members were also informed of the work undertaken to focus on the expected conduct of staff and support offered to encourage people to report wrongdoing. Members were advised that the Probation Service Instruction was amended to make clear that staff could be immediately dismissed if they failed to meet the required standards of behaviour set out in Core Code of Ethics and Service Values.

Clear guidance had been provided to staff on how to raise a grievance or whistle-blow along with a Joint Statement issued with representative bodies encouraging staff to anonymously report concerns through Safecall. The Anti-Bullying & Harassment Policy was updated to include of the Authoritys actions to provide reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment. An independent external review of disciplinary and grievance investigations (Safecall) was completed and the Conduct Service Instruction was amended to make clear that for complex or serious cases, the Service may make use of suitably qualified external investigators.

The Chair, Councillor Finneran thanked Officers for the report and suggested providing an update to each Merseyside District Council to share the Authority's progress. Nick Mernock confirmed that arrangements were already in place to highlight those efforts.

Ged Sheridan confirmed that Area Managers were already aligned with each Council in Merseyside, which included attending relevant boards to ensure consistent messaging and information sharing. It was reported that this also provided an opportunity to reinforce work on current plans and brief councils on the development of the Authority's CRMP.

Nick Mernock highlighted efforts to strengthen managerial capability, including promoting staff internally to middle management roles and developing their skills.

Councillor Sullivan commended the report as excellent, noting the importance of middle management and acknowledged the positive work undertaken with trade unions

Councillor Banks also praised the report. She expressed that she was pleased to see that 12 investigations had been completed and that no bullying incidents had been recorded. She noted that, while such behaviour could occur in any organisation, the current position demonstrated that cultural improvements were being made, particularly within middle management.

She also noted the importance of retaining experienced staff in managerial roles was emphasised, as this supported continuity, organisational knowledge, and ongoing cultural development.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the contents of the report and accompanying presentation be noted and;
- b) the progress of the Service in its Culture Action Plan be scrutinised.

12. Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2025-26

Monitoring Officer, Ria Groves introduced the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2025-26 report to Members. It was reiterated that at the Scrutiny meeting, held on the 22nd July 2025, it was noted that one topic (Pathway to Net Zero) had been carried over onto the new 2025-26 plan, due to time constraints.

It was acknowledged that all items highlighted in blue were the remaining topics scheduled for the rest of the year.

Members were invited to provide any suggestions for topics to scrutinise over the remainder of the year.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the current progress of the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2025-26 be noted; and
- b) the outstanding items on the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2025-26 be reviewed.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 9 April 2026