

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

5 MARCH 2019

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Anthony Boyle, Peter Brennan, Roy Gladden, Janet Grace, Andrew Makinson, Lisa Preston, Lesley Rennie and Paul Tweed

Also Present:

Apologies of absence were received from: Cllr Sharon Connor and Cllr Steff O'Keeffe

1. Chair's Announcement

Prior to the start of the meeting, information regarding general housekeeping was provided by the Chair to all in attendance.

The Chair confirmed to all present that the proceedings of the meeting would be filmed and requested that any members of the public present who objected to being filmed, make themselves known.

No members of the public voiced any objection therefore the meeting was declared open and recording commenced.

2. 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.

Members Resolved that:

- a) There were no declarations of interest made by individual Members in relation to any item of business on the Agenda.
- b) There were no additional items of business declared by the Chair, to be considered as matters of urgency.
- c) There were no items of business requiring the exclusion of the press and public during consideration thereof, due to the possible disclosure of exempt information.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, held on 17th January 2019, were approved as a correct record and signed accordingly by the Chair.

4. Minutes of the People Scrutiny Rapid Review

The Minutes of the People Scrutiny – Rapid Review, held on 17th January 2019, were approved as a correct record and signed accordingly by the Chair.

5. Community Risk Management Presentation - Arson Prosecutions

Members of the Committee were provided with a presentation by Station Manager Joe Cunliffe from the Incident Investigation Team, regarding the Arson Reduction Strategy and its impact on convictions and more importantly, the community.

The presentation provided Members with an overview of the Arson Reduction Strategy. Members were informed that the Strategy is based on the National Crime Agency's - Serious and Organised Crime Strategy; which follows the "4 P's Model" – *"Prepare, Prevent, Pursue and Protect"*.

Members were advised that the Arson Reduction Strategy takes account of these "4 P's", as well as the HMICFRS inspection criteria, particularly around ensuring that MFRA is efficient and effective at protecting people.

Members were informed that officers have established effective communication pathways with a range of partners; and are embedded within key partnership groups, enabling them to receive regular intelligence. The Fire Investigators also deliver training to Watch Managers, to raise their awareness.

Other activity aimed at preventing arson, includes environmental action days, focusing on fly tipping and waste reduction, which are focused within high priority wards, experiencing high levels of arson and ASB activity.

Members were advised that officers provide training to children and young people, with the aim of reducing fire setting behaviour. They were also informed that Arson Advocates undertake target hardening activity, where people have been the victim of hate crime, arson, or threat of arson.

It was highlighted to Members that MFRA take a holistic approach; and as such, are already involved in activity around each of the 4 areas. However, utilising the Police model, provides common language for when staff are working with partners.

Members were also informed that although the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy is a national model, it has been stripped back to enable it to work at a local level, with a partnership approach taken.

Questions were raised by Members around fly tipping, particularly in areas where they still have a black sack collection; and what liaison takes place between agencies around this issue.

Members were informed that where an issue with fly tipping is identified, it will be signposted to the appropriate local authority or bin Collection Company. They were informed that if the refuse is not collected, the issue can become our problem as it will often result in low level fires. Members were also advised that we liaise with the Environmental Agency; and that our officers have developed really positive relationships with all agencies involved.

The presentation then informed Members of the role of the Arson Officers. They were advised that there is an Arson Officer for each District, with the Liverpool District having 2 Arson Officers, due to its size. The role of Arson Officers is focused around ASB fire related activity, for example wheelie bin fires. The Arson Officers are involved in providing community reassurance and organising community walks in conjunction with partners. Such walks enable key joint messages to be communicated; and can result in the collation of intelligence. Members were advised that often people are not prepared to speak to the Police, however they will talk to our staff and other agencies.

Members were then informed of the Street Intervention Team (SIT), which also plays a role in the Arson Reduction Strategy. They were informed that the SIT has been operating in Liverpool since 2009; and has recently been expanded into Sefton and Knowsley Districts. The teams are funded by partners, with MFRA providing the administration, training and uniforms.

The presentation then detailed the role of the Incident Investigation Team, which currently consists of 4 Station Managers. Members were advised that as well as investigating the cause of fires, the IIT also investigate other incidents, such as RTC's, accidents; and cases of accidental ignition. Members were advised of the significant investment the Authority have made in the IIT Officers, which has enabled them to obtain the skills and qualifications required to do their role effectively. Having the relevant qualifications and skills, enables the team to produce expert reports that stand up to scrutiny in court.

Members were advised that the qualifications achieved by the IIT Officers, are in line with the recently implemented National Fire Chief Council's – Code of Practice for Fire Investigation, developed in line with the Institute of Fire Engineers and the UK Association of Fire Investigators. They were also advised that the IIT Officers are currently being trained to the level of competence required to meet the Code of Practice for Fire Scene Investigators; and the standards set out by the Forensic Science Regulator in the ISO/IEC 17020, which by 2020, is likely to be a requirement to carry out fire investigation work within the criminal justice system.

The presentation then explained that arson is a form of criminal damage; and that there are varying levels of arson, including small ASB fires, deliberate vehicles fires, fires within void properties, deliberate fires within business; and deliberate fires within domestic properties.

Members were advised that the motives for arson vary greatly; and include disputes between businesses, families, neighbours etc., insurance fraud, debt, domestic abuse, or mental health issues. Smaller, deliberate secondary fires, tend to be young people engaging in ASB, which although the fire itself can be relatively minor, the impact on the community can be significant.

Members were informed of some of the initiatives in place to reduce incidents of arson. These include the formal investigation of car fires in priority wards, the PAT Scheme around securing void properties, submission of fly tipping reports to local authorities to ensure waste is removed; and the implementation of Community Risk Management routes, which direct fire appliances and other MFRA teams to areas with an identified threat or risk of arson. They were also provided with an overview of Operation Bangor, which takes place each year over the Halloween and Bonfire Period, in conjunction with partners, with the aim of reducing incidents of arson.

The presentation then covered some of the other areas where the IIT have had an impact. For example, the RAF1 scheme, where findings of investigations involving white goods, are correlated and shared with manufacturers; and improving awareness with NHS, Care Providers and manufacturers around the fire hazard of paraffin based emollients, which can act as accelerants.

Members were then provided with some information regarding the cost of arson. They were advised that based on a report published by DCLG in 2011, the average cost of arson, nationally, per year, is £2.1 billion, with the estimated cost of every fire fatality being around £1.65 million. They were also advised that the real cost of arson will be significantly higher when you factor in all of the hidden costs, such as lack of economic growth, loss of businesses; and lack of confidence and social cohesion.

Members were informed that in 2017/18 the IIT investigated 513 incidents, 20 of which resulted in court cases, with 18 of those 20 receiving early guilty pleas, as a direct result of the quality of evidence and reports submitted by the IIT. They were advised that the savings to the public purse as a result of those early guilty pleas, was approximately £84k. Members queried whether those saved costs could be recovered by MFRA, but were advised that they cannot.

The presentation went on to provide Members with information around a specific case study "Operation Milna", which clearly highlights how everything works together in practice. Members were informed that over the period of several months, there was a large quantity of fires occurring within the Wavertree area, the majority of which were occurring within the early hours of the morning. As a result, a significant amount of resources were deployed within the area, from both MFRA and Merseyside Police. Subsequently, there was a deliberate fire within an Aparthotel, at which the perpetrator was captured on CCTV. The CCTV footage of the perpetrator was circulated to crews; and a firefighter based at Toxteth Community Fire Station recognised the individual captured on the footage, as being present at a number of the earlier incidents within Wavertree, where the individual would stand and watch as the incident was being dealt with.

Members were informed that the footage was shared with the Probation Service, who recognised the individual as someone within their system. As a result, the individual was identified, prosecuted; and ultimately received a 10 year custodial sentence.

In terms of the impact of the Arson Reduction Strategy, Members were informed that deliberate fires in occupied properties had seen around a 35% reduction, deliberate vehicle fires had reduced by just over 26%; and the number of ASB fires had also reduced significantly.

With regards to vehicle fires, Members were informed that they are seeing more incidents involving scooters, motorbikes and quad bikes, as these are increasingly being utilised for drug distribution and other such criminal activity.

Questions were raised by Members regarding the significance of organised crime in arson. They were advised that it is very common, with the majority of deliberate fires in premises occurring as a result of petrol bombings; and being linked to organised crime. Also, the majority of vehicle fires are linked to organised crime, such as drug dealing and debt.

Comments were made by Members regarding the quality of the investigations undertaken by the IIT, highlighted by the number of perpetrators who plead guilty; and questions were raised as to how the IIT work together.

Members were advised that in terms of the fire investigation part of the IIT role, the officers do work very much as a team, with officers being on call on a rota basis. With regards to large incident, such as the Arena car park fire, or some fatalities, the IIT will often work together, due to the scale of the incident.

Members also commented that there can often be links between organised crime and the dumping of hazardous waste/ fly tipping; and asked if MFRA have any involvement in this. Members were advised that in terms of hazardous waste and fly tipping, this would be referred on to other agencies for action.

Reference was made by Members to some of the initiatives they are involved in within their own Wards, where partners work together for the good of the community. It was commented that such initiatives often enable intelligence to be gathered, as well as helping to break down barriers and build relationships within the community.

The Chair thanked Officers for the presentation and requested that thanks be conveyed on behalf of the Authority, to all staff involved in delivering the Arson Reduction Strategy, commenting that the decreases in incidents highlighted are remarkable.

Members Resolved that:

- a) The content of the presentation be noted.
- b) Thanks be conveyed on behalf of the Authority, to all staff involved in the production and delivery of the Arson Reduction Strategy.

6. Forward Work Plan for Community Risk Management Scrutiny

Members were requested to consider and identify further items for scrutiny, for inclusion within a Forward Work Plan.

The Chair asked Members if there was anything within the presentation that they would like to scrutinise further, or any topics that they would like to conduct a “Rapid Review” around.

Discussion took place around a number of suggested topics.

Members Resolved that:

- a) The following topics, be included within the Forward Work Plan for Scrutiny:
 - How MFRA work with Merseyside Police and other partners, around tackling Organised Crime.
 - How MFRA work with partners regarding vulnerable individuals with mental ill health (including incidents of suicide/ threat of suicide).
- b) A “Rapid Review” be undertaken around the building planning process and involvement of MFRA in planning decisions; and the regulation of HMO’s.

Close

Date of next meeting Thursday, 9 May 2019