MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 JANUARY 2024

MINUTES

Present:	**Councillors** Paul Tweed (Chair), Gillian Wood, Dave Hanratty, Ed Lamb, Linda Maloney, Lesley Rennie and Terry Byron.

Also Present:	Assistant Chief Fire Officer	Dave Mottram
	Deputy Monitoring Officer	Caroline Berry
	Head of Finance and Procurement	James Campbell

7. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Doreen Knight and Monitoring Officer, Ria Groves.

8. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest for this meeting.

9. ACFO's Update

Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Dave Mottram, alerted the Members to the passing of Chief Fire Officer, Wayne Bowne, from the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service. The Members wished to place on record their condolences for his family and they acknowledged that he had been a good friend to the Service.

10. Minutes of the Last Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on the 14th September 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

11. The Environment and the Impact on MFRS's Operational Response - Wildfire Specialism

Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Dave Mottram, presented the report noting that wildfires had emerged as a serious threat for the Service, in terms of how it tackles incidents and the environmental impact of the Authority's actions.

Station Manager (SM) John Kellaway led the presentation as the National Wildfire Tactical Advisor. He provided an in-depth description of wildfires and their causes. Members were advised that fighting a wildfire could be hard physically for the firefighters especially as they predominantly occurred during the summer months and required additional PPE (Personal Protective Equipment).

Members heard that in the IRMP 2021-24 a commitment had been made to establish a wildfire specialism on Merseyside and that it had been successful.

Focusing on Merseyside, it was noted that the key areas of risk were Formby and Heswall with Bidston Hill accounting for 320 incidents, 4x more than any other location.

Members were advised that the Authority provided residents with information on how to make their properties more defensible from wildfires. The Authority also sought to work with key stakeholders such as Natural England and the National Trust and it was reported that the Authority worked well with Wirral Council who owned the land at Bidston Hill.

Members were advised that MFRA staff were trained in Northumberland (the lead Service the UK). It was noted that there was a wildfire exercise planned with Wirral to take place between February and March.

SM John Kellaway presented the upcoming challenges for the Authority and provided Members with an in-depth analysis of the equipment used at wildfire incidents.

The presentation provided Members with a breakdown of the number of incidents over the last four years noting that changes in land management may have resulted in more incidents.

With regards to coworking with the Local Authorities, Councillor Paul Tweed asked which Councils were working with the Authority on this risk. SM John Kellaway advised that Wirral Council was currently the only Council to take part but advised that this could be due to reduced workforces/funding. It was explained that the measures that were needed to lessen the impact of wildfires were not costly and included things like making fire breaks in rural areas.

Members heard that Wirral Borough Council had undertaken a Wildfire Risk Assessment with input from the Authority and this had proved helpful when seeking to protect the land in an urban environment. This approach had been cost neutral as the Council has redistributed its resources to undertake preventative work such as controlled burns.

Councillor Gill Wood noted that Bidston Hill was in her ward and how she had seen it on fire in the past, noting how quickly the fire could spread across the land. She asked how the Authority interacted with ‘Friends of’ volunteer groups who cared for some green spaces. Schools and community groups were also highlighted as potential stakeholders who could help.

It was explained that the Authority sought to work with all stakeholders to ensure that the risk could be mitigated as much as possible. As an example, the Authority worked well with the ‘Heswall Dales’ group and the local Park Rangers. Furthermore, Fire and Rescue Services across the country shared learning and best practice through an online registry and at regular meetings.

Members were advised that the Authority also had drone capabilities which helped to combat wildfires in an innovative way.

RESOLVED that:

a) the introduction of the Wildfire Specialism into Operational Response capabilities of MFRS be noted;

b) scrutiny was applied to the approach adopted; and

c) an update be brought back to Members in 12 months' time.

12. Review of Sickness Absence

Director of People, Organisational Development and Legal, Nick Mernock and Health and Wellbeing Manager Kelly Patterson presented the item which provided a review of the impact of sickness over the last three years.

The presentation provided Members with an overview of sickness in recent years, noting the different approaches that had been taken to see significant reductions.

Members noted that the main causes of sickness were Covid-19, mental health and musculo-skeletal injuries with the latter increasing.

With regards to ranks, it was explained that there was an even split across most operational ranks with a slight decrease in absence for Group Managers and Area Managers.

The presentation outlined the Authority's approach to absence management which started during an employee's probationary period.

Kelly Patterson presented the health and wellbeing measures in place for the staff including a wide range of support initiatives for those struggling with their mental wellbeing.

The last staff survey had shown that staff were aware of the health and wellbeing support services available to them with 97% of staff indicating favourably.

With regards to challenges, it was noted that long waiting times in the NHS had affected long term sickness, and this was true across all local authorities. As an interim measure, the Authority had introduced reasonable adjustments wherein staff could continue to work in an alternate role whilst awaiting treatment.

In conclusion, the Authority implemented a multifaceted approach to manage sickness and continued to invest significantly in the wellbeing support available for the staff.

Councillor Dave Hanratty suggested that further scrutiny would be required to consider this item and it was agreed that a Task and Finish Group would be convened before the next Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED that:

a) the performance in relation to sickness absence and the impact on our service delivery be noted;

b) the suite of management activities and support in place to reduce and mitigate the impact of sickness absence be noted;

c) consider and scrutinise the continued suitability of the approaches taken; and

d) a Task and Finish group be established to consider the item in more depth.

13. Scrutiny Forward Work Plan

Deputy Monitoring Officer, Caroline Berry presented the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan report asking Members to advise if they wished to make any changes.

RESOLVED that the proposed Scrutiny Forward Work Plan 2023-25 be reviewed.

Close.

Date of next meeting Thursday 25th April 2024.

Signed:_____ Dated:_____