

Minutes of **the meeting of the Combined Fire Authority for County Durham and Darlington held at Fire and Rescue HQ, Durham on 21 October 2024 at 10.00 am.**

Present:

Durham County Councillors:

Councillors A Batey, R Bell, J Cairns, T Duffy, C Hampson, L Howvels, R Manchester, C Martin, E Peeke, J Quinn, S Quinn, G Richardson, K Rooney, and J Shuttleworth.

Darlington Borough Councillors:

Councillors A Anderson, G Lee and M Snedker

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Atkinson, I Cochrane, N Jones, C Marshall, D Ray, K Shaw and S Zair.

Independent Persons:

The Chair advised that on the 27 and 28 September the services extrication team attended the UK rescue operations competition which was held in Portsmouth. The service came 6th place from 30 teams, including international teams for the RTC extrication event.

On the 12 October a team from the service competed in the National Breathing Apparatus Challenge. The team did well and for some members of the crew it was their first time at the National Breathing Apparatus Challenge.

The chair announced the sad passing of former Fire Control Project Manager SM Christine Robson on the 6 October 2024. Christine served from 1977 until retiring in June 2023.

A1 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

A2 Minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair (for copy see file of minutes).

The Chair noted that there was one action under Item A6, Annual Report which was a request for the contact details for the Fire Authority and CDDFRS services to be added to the Annual Report. The Chair confirmed that this has been actioned.

A3 Current Correspondence

The Authority received an update from the Director of Emergency Response in relation to current correspondence received from government and other bodies relevant to the Authority and the status of each (for copy see file of minutes).

A4 Notes of the Performance Committee held on 5 September 2024

The Authority received a report of the Chair of the Performance Committee which provided an update on discussions and recommendations from the Committee held on the 5 September 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

Members **noted** the content of the report.

A5 Notes of the Audit and Finance Committee held on 26 September 2024

The Authority received a report of the Chair of the Audit and Finance Committee which provided an update on discussions and recommendations from the Committee held on the 26 September 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

Cllr Bell noted that the backstop date for the 2023/24 accounts is the 28 February 2025. Although our accounts have been ready since the end of May, external audit will not start work on these until November due to capacity.

Members **noted** the content of the report.

A6 Notes of the Human Resources Committee held on 27 September 2024

The Authority received a report of the Chair of the Human Resources Committee which provided an update on discussions and recommendations from the Committee held on the 27 September 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

Members **noted** the content of the report.

A7 Fire Standards Progress Report

The Authority received a report from the Deputy Chief Fire Officer providing members with an update on the National Fire Standards and alignment of County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service against the approved standards.

Members **noted** the report.

A8 Community Safety and Arson Reduction Member Champion Update Report

The Authority received a report from the Community Safety and Arson Reduction Member Champion. Members were provided with a strategic update on the community safety and arson reduction initiatives within the Community Risk Management directorate of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

Cllr Lee questioned if actions identified through referrals taken for other partner agencies, during Home Fire Safety Visits, are logged and monitored centrally. K Carruthers explained that we are reliant on individual organisations to act upon their referrals. We are not aware of any cases whereby actions have not been followed up.

Cllr S Quinn noted that some individuals do not want to accept the support offered to them and that any interventions are recorded against their address.

Cllr Anderson asked if there are any Fire Cadet schemes operating in the Darlington area. K Carruthers explained that the schemes are run by staff on a voluntary basis and unfortunately there are no volunteers in Darlington at this current time, but we continue to encourage volunteers from the area.

Cllr Hovvells asked how we make ourselves accountable in terms of what we as a Fire Authority and other partner agencies do for our most vulnerable residents. K Carruthers noted that there are opportunities for multi-agency meetings to be called to discuss high risk cases where action plans are put in place, therefore holding each individual agency to account. S Helps explained that we are looking at how we can strengthen our referrals to other agencies so that we can improve our approach in helping those most vulnerable in our communities.

Members **noted** the report.

A9 Business Fire Safety Member Champion Report

The Authority received a report of the Business Fire Safety Member Champion. Members were provided with a strategic update on the business fire safety initiatives within the Community Risk Management directorate of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

Cllr Kellett noted that he has requested to attend a Fire Safety Audit so that he can familiarise himself further with the audit process.

The Director of Community Risk Management presented the report on behalf of Cllr Kellett.

Cllr Bell queried the reasoning behind businesses' noncompliance with fire safety regulations for their premises. B Cairns explained there are a wide range of reasons including lack of understanding of the guidance to blatant disregard for fire safety. We will support businesses during the process, but it is up to them to move forward with an appropriate solution. There are cases where there is no choice but to prosecute due to the gravity of issues presented.

Cllr Cairns noted from personal experience that dealing with private Fire Safety Consultants to agree a Fire Strategy for a building can be difficult and a lengthy process. Cllr Cairns asked if CDDFRS could extend their service offer and provide this for businesses. S Helps explained that it is our responsibility to uphold the legislation therefore we are unable to do this in our Service area, although noted VFS have historically offered this service to clients across the country.

Cllr Lee asked for clarification regarding the figures for unsatisfactory audits identified through the Risk Based Inspection process. B Cairns confirmed that unsatisfactory audits are premises that flag up any deficiencies including those that are very minor. This highlighted that we are targeting the correct premises and making a real difference to improving fire safety through our audits.

Cllr Lee queried the building regulations process in terms of fire safety, suggesting that the order in the way it proceeds should be amended so that issues are identified and rectified to achieve compliance of fire safety legislation prior to construction.

B Cairns explained the process for planning permission and building regulations, noting that the fire service is a statutory consultee within the process. He further highlighted that our fire safety order only applies once a premises is occupied.

Cllr Snedker highlighted that through previous experience in Scotland, the fire service had the right to veto a premises being occupied if deemed not safe and asked whether there was any appetite for this in England. S Helps noted that at this time there were no plans to change legislation in that direction.

Cllr Maddison highlighted that some tenants of housing associations experience difficulties in accessing windows due to their height and the use of safety equipment. S Helps explained that these issues would not be addressed through a building fire safety audit as the premises are classed as a residential dwelling. Issues could be picked up through a Home Fire Safety Visit and referred to the landlord.

Members **noted** the report.

A10 Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 2 Report

The Authority received a report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer providing Members with a summary of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase Two report, published on 4 September 2024.

Members **noted** the report.

A11 Any Other Business

Such other business as, in the opinion of the Chairman of the meeting, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration.

The Chair confirmed that there was no other business.

CLOSE OF MEETING