

Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee
14 July 2025

Conducted as a public meeting at WMFS Headquarters
and digitally via Microsoft Teams

Present: Cllr Gavin Lloyd (Chair), Cllr Marcus Bernasconi, Cllr Catherine Miks, Cllr Mohammed Idrees, Cllr Jasbinder Dehar, Cllr David Barrie, Cllr Ken Ferguson, Professor Simon Brake (online).

Officers: DCFO Simon Barry, Tom Embury – Interim Clerk, ACFO Richard Stanton, Kelly Harding – Interim Director of People, ACdr Marc Hudson – Head of Development, ACdr Steve Ball (until item 17/25) Kelly Letts – Democratic Services (Online until 12.00)

01/25 **Apologies**

There were no apologies for absence received.

02/25 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

03/25 **Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14 March 2025**

Resolved

1. That the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14 March 2025 were approved as an accurate record.

04/25 **Training and Development Update**

Head of Inclusion and Development, Marc Hudson gave the committee an update on the actions taken in response to the Scrutiny Review, undertaken on training and development in April 2023.

The committee was informed of the 15 recommendations outcomes, including significant investment made across recruitment and progression. This included investment in programme such as the Springboard course designed to support women looking to progress to supervisory manager roles – given that the service recognises this is a gap.

For trainees, Marc Hudson outlined the move to a 12-week course, greater emphasis on expectations and behaviours and screening for neurodiversity as part of the process. It was confirmed that the service had completed a review of the offering of development internally, and that a new career development pathway had been implemented to support people to progress throughout the service.

Marc Hudson noted that the HMI inspection had taken place before this work had been completed which is why there were several Areas for Improvement in this area. It is

expected that these changes will address the outstanding training and development AFIs.

A member welcomed the additional screening during the recruitment phase and dyslexia. More information was requested on the springboard course. Marc H informed this is a national program and it was agreed that further information be shared with the members.

Members welcomed that training stations had been relocated into a more centralised location making it easier for access. Also highlighted that only once in eight years has the Authority been able to watch the training process. Compliments were extended to the training instructors on their professionalism and motivated delivery.

Marc Hudson highlighted the significant difference between the old and new training model is now we are able to significantly reduce operational disruption to training which was the biggest complaint from staff.

A member highlighted the case of a young firefighter in London who died by suicide as a result of bullying on a new station. They queried whether there was a mentorship approach for new Firefighters and Trainees. Marc Hudson confirmed this will be part of that of the newly implemented apprenticeship approach.

Further detail was provided by Marc Hudson and Kelly Harding on the additional Staff Networking Groups, and the additional support and investment made for the leads of the group to ensure they have the protected time and the resources they need to successfully engage with group members. The Senior Leadership Team were meeting with leads quarterly for development days.

Members queried whether the service continued to make progress with employing more BAME staff to better represent local communities. Marc Hudson recognised progress had plateaued over the recent months but can share a list of activities we plan on collaborating with members over the next 12 - 24 months

Interim Clerk, Tom Embury, highlighted that percentages of female and BAME workforce were Key Performance Indicators which were shared with full Fire Authority as part of six-monthly performance reporting.

Members enquired on how much involvement trainees had with the history of the FRS in the trainee FF induction. Marc H confirmed that all Trainee Firefighters and other staff are encouraged to visit the facilities available. Members suggested it would be beneficial for Authority members to visit the museum as well.

Queries were raised after having direct feedback from a recent group of Trainee FF about how they get exposure to the latest vehicles they will be using when on station. It was agreed that the budget positioning and the priority for operational vehicle replacement meant that for hands on training experience a new vehicle couldn't be used, but one trainee appliance was now the same model as that used on station and the other would be replaced soon. However, Trainee FF are also exposed to the same models as are used on stations as part of shadowing arrangements. Members suggested it may make sense to bring operational vehicles to training centre for familiarisation as well.

Members queried whether there would be an option for residential periods of training, as was highlighted by Trainee firefighters as part of the Training and Development Scrutiny review. Marc Hudson confirmed that due to the distributed training model, and the closure of a central training centre some years ago, this was an approach WMFS no longer have the facilities in place to be able to provide.

The Chair questioned the approach for supporting additional training for supervisory managers, and what the “tools” that are described in the report looked like. Marc Hudson confirmed this was part of the CDLP, and involved links to training and development in multiple areas. It was confirmed that officers would share details of this programme with members.

Resolved

1. That it be agreed that the Committee members note the progress achieved to date.
2. That it be agreed that the Committee has formally signed the actions off as completed.
3. That it be agreed that officers share detail of Career Development Leadership Pathways (CDLP) and the Springboard programme with members.
4. That it be agreed that arrangements be made for Authority members to tour the new Incident Command training facility at Headquarters.
5. That it be agreed that arrangements be made for Authority members to visit the fire service museum at Aston Fire Station.

05/25 **Business Continuity**

Head of Response Steve Ball presented the recommendation, which included a request to note the legal and statutory business continuity requirements of the Authority, and a request for the committee to scrutinise and provide input on the proposed approach to Resilience Contracts.

Steve Ball outlined the approach that had been previously progressed to Audit and Risk Committee and the recommendation that would have been made to Fire Authority to consider this approach. However, the introduction of the Minimum Service Levels Act by the previous government had rendered this approach redundant. However, Labour have subsequently committed to remove that legislation and are not currently implementing it, meaning that an alternative approach was once more required to be considered.

Steve Ball emphasised that the financial figures and example contract included within the report were at this stage illustrative and based upon another FRS which had similar contracts in place. Further work would be needed to develop a finalised approach for WMFRA, which would be subject to further input from FRA before implementation.

It was made clear by DCFO Simon Barry that the request at this stage was to give members an opportunity to scrutinise and that officers were not looking for a decision now. It was noted that due to changes in legislation this was the right time to review and needs to be revisited.

Questions raised by members as to whether there were any gaps known and risks involved with supplier resilience. DCFO Simon Barry confirmed that the primary concern

was around having the right number of people rather than equipment, but further detail can be brought forward around any potential contract gaps.

The Chair inquired as to what the requirements to monitor any such approach by scrutiny committee would be. Tom Embury confirmed that at this stage, without a firm proposal or implementation, it was not clear, but it would ultimately be for scrutiny committee to determine how it wished to monitor and scrutinise this approach, if and when it would be approved by the Authority. This could mirror other areas of regular scrutiny where the committee receives annual or six-monthly update reports.

Discussion took place on the engagement of officers and Representative Bodies during the review process prior to any sign-off. The chair provided the opportunity to the observer from the FBU to raise any thoughts at this initial stage. Sasha Hitchens, FBU, highlighted the unions view that these were strike breaking contracts, emphasising this was the first time she was aware of the paper. The position from the FBU was to oppose this current approach. Having reached out to FBU members at Merseyside FRS, their feedback is that these contracts hadn't been successful there, and would cost significantly for little benefit. The Chair requested to have more evidence on this work done at a national level be included in any FRA paper and requested that officers engage with Representative Bodies on the further development of this going forward.

Resolved:

1. That it be agreed that Members noted the legal and statutory duties of the Authority to respond to emergencies, and to maintain robust business continuity arrangements.
2. That it be agreed that Members noted the previous recommendation of the Audit and Risk Committee from 27 November 2023, that the Authority consider the implementation of internal Resilience Contracts.
3. That Members scrutinised the proposed approach to business continuity resilience and provided feedback to officers.
4. That Members will make a recommendation to Fire Authority to consider the implementation of Resilience Contracts as a means of mitigating risks associated with business continuity.

06/25 **Introduction of BRV+**

ACFO Richard Stanton provided Members the opportunity to scrutinise the implementation of the BRV+ model, as approved by Fire Authority on 23 June 2025, and provide such feedback and recommendations as deemed necessary to inform the next stage of the project.

Papers provided included access to the SLT paper outlining the detail of why a change in approach was necessary. ACFO Stanton highlighted some particular points to note;

- The contamination considerations meant that BA sets will no longer be stored in the cab but in the lockers at the back of the vehicle, reducing crew exposure to contaminants.

- The BRV+ has similar capability to a BRV just with additional capacity to carry four rather than three staff, and the ability to hold more water, whilst using the same Hale pump as a BRV.
- The new BRV+ does not have 4X4 capabilities as we would need to capture better data to inform the usage of this during incidents.

The Chair requested more information for new members on why a change in approach was needed. ACFO Station explained that originally the service planning to replace the BRVs with a similar type of vehicle but with a higher weight allowance to allow more water to be carried. However, the service hit a number of number of procurement challenges with that, with only one possible supplier, limits on available chassis and long lead in times for production. As a result, an alternative “off the shelf” model was going to be utilised instead.

Following member queries, it was confirmed that the BRV+ would replace 10 current BRVs with the remaining 9 stations continuing with BRVs, with the plan to replace them on a more like-for-like basis in future.

Members suggested a change of the name from BRV+ and a consideration to be made to the number of abbreviations used to describe vehicles. There was concern over how this would impact on fire control when mobilising vehicles. ACFO Stanton confirmed there is a glossary of abbreviations available. The abbreviations support the Command & control systems to mobilise effectively. Officers will work with staff to ensure the new naming configurations are suitable.

Resolved:

1. That it be agreed that members note the proposal outlined in the Authority paper of 23 June 2025 (Appendix A) and the more detailed SLT paper (appendix B) which considers key issues relating to the implementation of the BRV+ model.

07/25 **Local Government Ombudsman - Annual Review Letter 2024-25**

Interim Clerk Tom Embury, update the Committee on the content of the Local Government Ombudsman’s (LGO) Annual Review Letter of West Midlands Fire Service, in line with the Committee’s role in scrutinising the Service’s complaint handling. This is in addition to the six-monthly updates on internal complaint handling that will be provided to the Authority, and this letter will be brought to the committee on an annual basis when it is received. It was noted that there had been no complaints raised to the LGO regarding WMFS or WMFRA. The Interim Clerk did note that he was aware of at least one case raised with the LGO in 2025/26 so far, so there would be more to report on this year.

The Chair queried whether the service are signposting people to the right places, so we make sure people are aware they have the right to complain to the LGO and how do complaints come into the FA. The Interim Clerk confirmed that yes, it is made clear on the service website how a complaint can be raised, and there are internal policies, which have been shared with Scrutiny Committee, that ensure responses are provided in a timely manner. At the final stage of any complaint complainants will be informed that they can escalate their complaint to the ombudsman. It was made clear that

complaints are not handled by the Authority but by the service or by the LGO. The FA see the outcomes on a 6 monthly basis and can scrutinise the implementation of such outcomes.

Resolved:

1. That it be agreed that Members note the content of the LGO Annual Review Letter 2024-25 (Appendix A).

08/25 **Scrutiny Committee Terms of Reference**

Interim Clerk Tom Embury provided Members with an opportunity to provide initial feedback on areas for improvement and amendment within the current Scrutiny Committee terms of reference, as part of the full review of all aspects of the Constitution. The foreseeable timescale was that it would come to full Authority in September and again to Scrutiny Committee in October. This is the first opportunity for members to provide feedback.

The Chair noted that the current that we are still not providing the three pillars of scrutiny within the ToR, missing “call in” as a mechanism. It was agreed that this would be added to drafts for consideration.

Members raised a query in reference to section 7.38 of the Terms of Reference and how these fits in with the work of the JCP. Tom Embury explained that whilst HR policies and performance metrics are discussed at JCP, JCP is not a public or statutory committee but instead a part of the service’s Employee Relations Framework, and therefore this information still needs to come into Scrutiny Committee for public scrutiny.

It was acknowledged that sickness rates, which are included within Scrutiny’s Terms of Reference, are not currently reported to the Committee but instead to the full Authority as part of six-monthly KPI reporting. This will be an area for consideration – as either the information should also be brought to the committee or should be removed from the Terms of Reference.

A member also suggested that efficiency, productivity and best use of resources should be included within the Terms of Reference but ensuring recognition of the difference in role between Scrutiny and Audit and Risk Committee.

Resolved:

1. That it be agreed that member feedback on potential changes or additions be incorporated into draft changes for consideration by Fire Authority in September 2025. Amendments to include: “call ins”, efficiency, productivity and best use of resource be included with a clear distinction from A&R Committees role and consideration around sickness rates inclusion.
2. That it be agreed that Members noted the content of the statutory guidance on Overview and Scrutiny Committees as part of their considerations.

09/25 Progressing HMICFRS Findings and Scrutiny Areas of Focus

Interim Clerk Tom Embury provided an overview of the HMICFRS Inspection Process, including the overall gradings provided to the service in June 2025. This included more detailed discussion of the range of Areas for Improvement (AFI) identified by the inspectorate. Detail of the service's process for developing an action plan and updating the HMICFRS on progress was also outlined.

The Chair requested that the Scrutiny Committee receive quarterly, rather than six-monthly updates on progress against AFIs and other considerations from the HMICFRS process. The Chair also expressed his view that the committee should consider all the elements of the AFI.

A member suggested that focus should be on those areas of the AFIs that were not already subject to regular update to the committee or wider Authority.

Members discussed the range of AFIs and those of particular interest, including AFIs 5, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 15-18. It was agreed that in some cases these could be combined into one scrutiny review topic.

Members resolved to delegate the matter to the DCFO and Interim Clerk to work in consultation with the Scrutiny Chair and Vice-Chair to determine topics for further scrutiny review.

Members expressed a desire to ensure that such scrutiny reviews were coordinated to ensure most efficient use of time, especially considering the significant additional workloads for FRA members at the moment.

Resolved:

1. That it be agreed that Members noted the processes that the Service has in place to enable the timely, appropriate and assured achievement of actions required to deliver the AFI identified in the Service's report.
2. That it be agreed that quarterly reports on progress against AFIs be brought the Scrutiny Committee.
3. That it be agreed that a delegation be given to the Interim Clerk and the DCFO to agree, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, on the topics for specific scrutiny review from amongst the AFI areas, based on member feedback in the meeting. Such reviews to be included within the updated workplan from October 2025.
4. That it be agreed that scrutiny review meetings either be coordinated to align to existing scrutiny and authority meetings or take place online to ensure member participation.

20/25 Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2025-26

Interim Clerk Tom Embury presented the draft workplan and highlighted that there would be a number of additions based on resolutions at the meeting.

Also clarified that the Staffordshire Rope Rescue collaboration, which was now a matter for Scrutiny Committee following merger with Collaboration and Transformation Committee.

Resolved:

1. That it be agreed that members noted the work programme 2025-26

Meeting concluded at 12.20pm