

PEOPLE COMMITTEE

(Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Authority)

23 July 2021

Present:

Councillors Bown (Chair), Best, Brazil, Clayton (Vice-Chair), Peart and Thomas

Apologies:

Councillor Hannaford

* **PC/21/1** **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Audit & Performance Review Committee (as replaced by the Audit & Governance Committee) held on 3 March 2021 be signed as a correct record.

* **PC/21/2** **Appointments to the Internal Disputes Resolution Panel**

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Governance & Digital Services (PC/21/1) that sought appointees from the membership the People Committee to serve on the Internal Disputes Resolution Panel (set up to consider and determine complaints made by individuals under stage 2 of the Firefighters' Pension Scheme Internal Disputes Resolution Procedure).

RESOLVED that Councillors Bown, Clayton and Hannaford be appointed as Members of the Internal Disputes Resolution Procedure (IDRP) Panel until the first meeting of the People Committee after the Annual Meeting of the Authority in June 2022.

* **PC/21/3** **People Committee Future Scrutiny Arrangements**

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (PC/21/2) that set out a proposal for a suite of measures to assist the Committee in its focus on monitoring performance against the Strategic Policy Objectives.

There were three Strategic Policy Objectives applicable to this Committee which were:

- 3(a) – ensure that the workforce was highly trained and had the capability and capacity to deliver services professionally, safely and effectively;
- 3(b) – increase the diversity of the workforce to better reflect the communities we serve, promoting inclusion and developing strong and effective leaders who ensure that we have a fair place to work where our organisational values are a lived experience; and
- 3(c) – recognise and maximise the value of all employees, particularly the commitment of on-call firefighters, improving recruitment and retention

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the measures had been mapped across to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) strategic areas but if the Committee wished to scrutinise other areas, the Service could build this into the forward plan.

The Committee raised the following points in considering the proposed performance measures:

On strategic policy objective 3(a):

- whether the health and safety reporting on accidents at 25% was suitable as this seemed high and the Committee may benefit from seeing the raw data;
- if mental health associated with the Covid-19 pandemic was being looked at in the Service;
- on operational core competence, whether the Service would be able to respond and demonstrate compliance through the performance measures set out (monitor at 95%) if asked specific questions by HMICFRS. It was suggested that the Committee should see trends coming along so that it could ensure compliance perhaps to a higher level; and
- whether benchmarking of sickness absence against other fire and rescue authorities was undertaken and how the Service was performing currently compared to others especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer replied that the Service could include the monitoring of near misses within the health and safety reporting but that this may increase numbers which was a positive step if there was a consequent reduction in accidents. He advised that 25% was the level set by HMICFRS as to when a report would be needed. The Service was happy to consider another figure though. He referred to the monitoring of health and safety issues through the Strategic Safety Committee which was chaired by the Chief Fire Officer. A full report would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

In terms of core competence, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer clarified that the Service was not just reporting at 95% but, if performance fell below this, it would trigger a full report to the Committee as to why this had happened. The Service monitored core competence at 98% in practice.

In terms of the monitoring of sickness absence, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer suggested the submission of a report to the next meeting of the Committee. He confirmed that the Service was monitoring the position on sickness absence closely with the Covid-19 pandemic ongoing currently.

RESOLVED

- (a) that, with the inclusion of the monitoring of near misses within the Health and Safety reporting, the performance measures identified in Section 2 of report PC/21/2 be approved for monitoring progress against Strategic Priority 3 and its associated policy objectives; and

- (b) That the proposal at paragraph 2.2 and 2.3 of report RC/21/2 for presenting this information to future meetings be approved.

* PC/21/4

People Strategy: Progress Report

The Committee received for information a report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (PC/21/3) that set out the progress made to date with implementation of the Service's People Strategy.

At this point, the Chair expressed thanks to all operational and non-operational staff for their work undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic and she asked the Deputy Chief Fire Officer to report this back.

It was noted that there had been good progress in many areas of the People Strategy which was due to be implemented by 2022. The report set out the progress made under each theme as statements of the "here and now" to shift thinking from aspirational to Service commitments in terms of a workplace environment and culture. The report, together with a presentation made at the meeting, set out some of the key actions taken under the 4 main areas of focus, including:

Leadership:

- A comprehensive, curated approach to how the Service developed its future leaders, underpinned by the National Fire Chief Councils (NFCCs) Leadership Framework, had been implemented;
- To support leadership accountability, a new approach to performance management with the Service's values and inclusion at its core had been developed. This included a suite of supporting policies and toolkits for performance conversations, capability and a new approach to investigations and discipline.

Learning & Development:

- There were new platforms available for self-awareness and development with a coaching culture in place;
- Ensuring people feel safe through the "Safe To" initiative, including learning from our experiences, successes and mistakes and sharing ideas to make things better.

Inclusion:

- The intervention programme "Safe To" provided the tools to make inclusion a reality through deliberate behaviours including the development of a toolkit to promote Fairness and Respect;

- To improve workforce diversity the Service had instigated a clear focus on positive action in Firefighter recruitment and development through paying attention to how communities view us as an employer, a new 'always open' approach to recruitment and accessible practical assessment facilities; and implemented the 'Our Time' sponsorship programme; and
- A new Fairness and Respect policy had been introduced.

Ways of Working:

- Flexible, On Call contracts had been introduced;
- More flexible and smarter working was being trialled and was being evaluated for longer term application;
- A new, robust strategic workforce planning approach was being developed.

Learning and Development:

- Work had been undertaken on Training for Competence and following national best practice to deliver quality assured, risk based training to ensure a professional, safe and high performing workforce;
- A range of new creative learning interventions had been curated and implemented for operational cohorts.

* **PC/21/5** **Annual Fitness Testing: Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (PC/21/4) that set out the background and progress made with the implementation of a new fitness testing regime within Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised the Committee that the Service measured fitness in order to ensure cardio vascular health on the fireground. HMICFRS had raised four points during a revisit under a Cause for Concern on fitness testing in 2019 which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to at the meeting. It was noted that HMICFRS was due to carry out its second inspection of the Service in September 2021 and that the Service would not have implemented all of the fitness tests described in the policy by then due to the safety measures required as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The Fitness team was now managed under the Academy. One of the main changes implemented to address the cause for concern in respect of the recording of data was that fitness was being reported and monitored as a core competence with data stored in a central repository.

The Committee acknowledged the improvements made to fitness testing and the point that the delays in implementation of all of the new regime had been due to the safety measures required as a result of the pandemic. A regular update on progress was requested by the Committee. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded that the Service could submit three monthly updates to this Committee on progress.

The Committee also suggested that there may be similar issues in respect of the storage of data elsewhere within the Service and that this should be reviewed. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer replied that the way in which the Service gathered and kept data historically was being reviewed and work was in progress on this matter within the Governance & Digital Services Department. The Director of Governance & Digital Services advised that this was an efficiency issues and that the Resources Committee was set to look at this matter. Microsoft 365 enabled tooling for data for fitness testing but he would now look at the wider issue and where this should be reported in.

The Committee also drew attention to the point that it was crucial for it to have accurate performance data so that it could challenge in a timely manner and avoid any cause for concern in the first instance. Issues should be flagged early on rather than the Service just confirming that all was fine. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer acknowledged these points and indicated that they would be picked up.

RESOLVED that the improvements in performance on Firefighter Fitness Testing as set out within report PC/21/4 together with the action being taken to address the HMICFRS cause for concern as identified in paragraph 1.5 be noted.

* PC/21/6

Annual Diversity and Recruitment Report 2020

The Committee received for information a report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (PC/21/5) that set out the Service's Annual Recruitment & Workforce Diversity Annual Report for January to December 2020.

The key findings identified in the paper circulated included (amongst others):

- The COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the recruitment of external people into operational roles as recruitment events and assessments were unable to take place or had significantly reduced capacity. On Call had 89 new starters, compared to 170 in 2019 and 138 in 2018;
- In line with the previous point, there was a reduction in female On Call new starters, which at 14, was 7 less than in 2019. Together with 2 new female Wholetime staff starting in the same period, the Service reached the highest ever female representation in operational roles with 106 roles occupied by women;
- The On Call vacancies female application percentage was 16.6%, which is 2.5% higher than in 2019;
- The number of applicants with a minority ethnic background was higher than our community (5-6%) with support staff at 9.7%, On Call at 7.7% and Wholetime 6.5%.
- Operational female representation had remained broadly the same, with 14 women joining as On Call Firefighters and 5 taking on a Wholetime position, and 13 women left On Call positions;
- For On Call, the female turnover was twice (18.1%) the level of male turnover (9.5%). This may indicate retention issues specific to this period during the pandemic;

- In comparison to female representation, the amount of women gaining promotion in the operational roles was disproportionately low and no women gained a permanent promotion. This may indicate the existence of some barriers to progression;
- The attraction rate from female applicants for Support vacancies near enough reflected the community;
- No applicants from ethnic minority groups were offered a Support role despite a 5.2% applications rate;
- The representation from ethnic minority groups in the service (0.8%) was 2-4 times less than in the community; and
- Application rates from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) for Support (4.9%), On Call (3.8%) and Wholetime (10.1%) were all higher than the community (2.2%).

The Committee made reference to the point that the Service had gained 14 operational staff but lost 13 and asked for an explanation. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that exit interviews were voluntary so the Service did not have data on all cases. The ones that had been received showed issues in terms of work/life balance, however. The Service recognised that there was a need to improve the exit interview process. The turnover of operational staff may be related to staff being unable to continue with their roles due to additional pressures that may have arisen from the Covid-19 pandemic. It was noted that the Service would be monitoring the cost of training and loss of staff and would report back at the next meeting.

***DENOTES DELEGATED MATTER WITH POWER TO ACT**

The meeting started at 10.00 am and finished at 11.50 am