

HUMBERSIDE FIRE AUTHORITY
GOVERNANCE, AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 JULY 2021

PRESENT: Independent Co-opted Members Mr D Chapman (Chairperson), Mr J Doyle, Mrs P Jackson, Mr A Smith and Mrs M Thomlinson.

Councillor Briggs as an observer.

Phil Shillito - Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Paul McCourt - Director of Service Delivery, Niall McKiniry - Director of Service Improvement, Martyn Ransom - Head of Finance, Jason Kirby - Temporary Head of People and Development, Simon Rhodes - Head of Corporate Assurance, Ruth Gilmour - Head of Human Resources, Sam O'Connor - Head of Organisational Development, Mathew Buckley - Monitoring Officer/Secretary, Samm Campbell - Committee Manager, Gavin Barker - External Audit (Mazars) and Andy McCulloch - Internal Audit (TIAA) were also present.

The meeting was held at the Humberside Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Kingston upon Hull. Meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m.

PROCEDURAL

60/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE - There were no apologies for absence.

61/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - There were no declarations of interest.

62/21 MINUTES - *Resolved* - That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14 June 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

63/21 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES, OTHER THAN ON THE AGENDA - There were no matters arising.

GOVERNANCE

64/21 UPDATE: MATTERS ARISING/FEEDBACK FROM FIRE AUTHORITY - The Monitoring Officer/Secretary provided feedback on items considered by the Fire Authority at its meetings of 25 June 2021.

Resolved - That the update be received.

Audit

65/21 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT - EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION - Andy McCulloch (TIAA) presented a report summarising TIAA's audit of equality, diversity and inclusion.

The report explained that the Service's policies relating to equality, diversity and inclusion were up-to-date, that relevant data was properly benchmarked and that mandatory training was in place for employees. The audit had resulted in three recommendations: one Category 2 and two Category 3. The report concluded with an assessment of 'reasonable assurance'.

Resolved - That the report be received.

66/21 INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE - Andy McCulloch (TIAA) presented a report updating the Committee on progress in relation to the internal audit process.

The first audit activity of the 2021/22 plan, focussed on equality, diversity and inclusion, had been completed. Four other audits were due to be undertaken during July and August of 2021. TIAA had adopted a flexible approach to its work during 2021/22 in order to adapt to changes to Covid-19 restrictions.

A Member asked whether TIAA had been pleased with the progress made on the 2021/22 audit plan. The level of engagement between TIAA and the Service had been good.

Resolved - (a) That the update be received, and

(b) that the Committee offer its thanks to TIAA and the Service for their diligent work in relation to the audit plan in the light of the challenging conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

67/21 EXTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE - Gavin Barker (Mazars) presented a report updating the Committee on progress in relation to the external audit process.

Variations to the fees for the 2019/20 external audit process had been approved by the HFA and the Service would be billed in due course. Mazars had begun its work to develop its opinion in relation to the 2020/21 audit. Despite ongoing recruitment issues, Mazars was on track to meet the statutory deadline of 30 September 2021. Mazars had appointed some new members of staff, but they had not yet started working for the organisation. While Mazars planned to be operating at full capacity in the near future, it continue to endure some difficulties with the delivery of its services in the meantime.

Resolved - That the update be received.

FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE

68/21 DRAFT ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ASSURANCE 2020/21 - The Director of Service Improvement submitted a report summarising the draft Annual Statement of Assurance for 2020/21.

The Statement of Assurance was required annually by the Home Office and would be published on the Service's website following its approval by the Fire Authority. The draft Statement demonstrated the Service's compliance with the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England (Revised 2018) in relation to: financial assurance, governance assurance and operational assurance.

Resolved - That the report be received.

69/21 HMICFRS INSPECTION UPDATE - The Director of Service Improvement provided the Committee with a verbal update in relation to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service's (HMICFRS).

Since the Committee's previous meeting, the Service had received notice of the date of its next inspection by HMICFRS. Field work for the inspection was due to start in the week commencing 13 December 2021. Due to the ongoing challenges with Covid-19, the field work was due to be undertaken over the course of four weeks (rather than two) and would span the Christmas period. The Service was due to receive self-assessment documentation from HMICFRS imminently and would have four weeks in which to complete and return its self-assessment.

While the Service was on the right trajectory and had addresses HMICFRS's recommendations resulting from its previous inspection, the Committee was reassured that the Service would not be complacent in its approach to the next inspection. The inspection was due to be led by Andy Cooke, formerly Chief of Merseyside Police.

Resolved - (a) That the update be received, and
(b) that the Committee offer its thanks for, and take assurance from, the significant hard undertaken by the Service in preparation for its next HMICFRS inspection.

SCRUTINY PROGRAMME

70/21 ANTI-BULLYING CAMPAIGN - The Temporary Director of People and Development submitted a report in response to the scope within the Committee's Scrutiny Programme for 2021/22.

The Service was inspected by HMICFRS in 2018 and subsequently developed its Service Improvement Plan, incorporating areas for improvement identified both by the Strategic Leadership Team and HMICFRS. The Service had revised its policies and begun an anti-bullying campaign. The Dignity at Work Policy had been subject to consultation, agreed with the Fire Brigades Union, and implemented in October 2019. The Dignity at Work Policy defined bullying:

"Bullying is characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient."

This definition had been directly informed by that of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), which was used in Employment Tribunal cases. The Dignity at Work Policy had also been subject to consultation, agreed with the Fire Brigades Union, and implemented in October 2019. The Service had also procured and implemented the Employee Assistance Programme (Minute 94/20 refers), which included 24/7 support for staff members, and mandatory training to improve awareness with regard to bullying. Staff were also regularly reminded of the ways in which they could report bullying.

Formally reported incidents of bullying within the Service, while infrequent, were always treated seriously and investigated thoroughly. Mediation was usually offered by trained members of staff from the Service's Human Resources (HR) department in order to prevent the escalation of any problematic behaviours. Data relating to grievances and disciplinary matters were routinely uploaded to the Firewatch system, which also fed into the Service's bespoke tracking software and monitored by HR. The data did not, at the time of the meeting, reveal any concerning patterns.

During its inspection of the Service in 2018, HMICFRS had conducted an open staff survey, which had been followed by another in August 2020, the summarised results of which had been appended to the report. The first survey had caused concern as 26 percent of respondents had responded in the affirmative to the question, 'have you felt bullied or harassed at work in the last 12 months'. In the second survey, the percentage of affirmative responses to the same question had dropped to 14. However, both surveys had been conducted openly and anonymously, meaning that the results could not be verified. The Service had conducted four staff impact assessments since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and, while they were not focussed on bullying and harassment, sought to understand the impact on, and supported required by, staff during the pandemic. Overall, the Service acknowledged the need to conduct further surveys to obtain a clear understanding of a variety of factors, and had decided that a series of shorter, thematic surveys would yield

better results than a single, longer annual one. The Organisational Development and Corporate Communications teams were in the process of developing a plan to undertake these surveys.

A Member drew attention to the fact that, while the Service reported that only 13 cases of bullying had been reported (either as a grievance or through disciplinary procedures) between November 2018 and May 2021, 26 percent of 206 respondents indicated that they had felt bullied or harassed in response to HMICFRS's 2018 survey. The Strategic Leadership Team had, at the time, been surprised by the survey's results, considering that the relevant policies were well understood by a heavily unionised workforce. There were two main problems with the quality of the data obtained through the HMICFRS survey. The first was that it was uncontrolled: any person who had the web link could have completed the survey and could have done so more than once. The second was that the survey had not defined what was meant by 'bullied or harrassed' before posing the question. Additionally, HMICFRS had not been able to verify its survey data during its field work, while it had been able to during its inspections of other fire and rescue services. The only reliable data the Service received was the result of what was reported directly by its employees. However, the Committee was assured that the Service was responsive in such instances, helping its employees to access the support they needed, investigating thoroughly and not acting only in the light of firm evidence.

Members were concerned by the responses received by HMICFRS in relation to the following questions in its 2018 survey:

- 20 percent of 206 respondents had disagreed with the statement, 'I am treated with dignity and respect at work', and
- 34 percent of respondents had disagreed with the statement, 'I would recommend my service to a friend as a place to work'.

Following the 2018 HMICFRS inspection, the Service had begun a process of cultural change, starting with the Supportive Leadership Framework at the top of the organisational structure, and also including the anti-bullying campaign and Employee Assistance Programme. The Committee was assured by the Service's responses to the results of the survey, but encouraged the Service to use its appraisal processes and exit interviews to gather high-quality data in relation to issues such as bullying. The Committee also noted the response to one of 2018 survey questions concerning feelings of fairness in relation to promotion processes and agreed to add a point to the scope of its item, Promotion within Uniformed Roles, due to be considered at its meeting of 6 September 2021.

Finally, the Committee agreed that, as part of its follow-up to the current item (due to be heard at its meeting of 11 April 2022), the Service's report should contain feedback from the relevant unions, and asked that the Temporary Director of People and Development work to include this in the report.

Resolved - (a) That the Service use its exit interviews and appraisals process to develop a clearer understanding bullying and changes to its organisational culture;

(b) that initial feedback on the progress of recommendation (a) be reported during the follow-up anti-bullying campaign item due to be heard on 11 April 2022;

(c) that the Service obtain high-quality data through a survey of staff in order to develop a clearer understanding of bullying and organisational culture than that afforded by the HMICFRS surveys of 2018 and 2020, and

(d) that the report for the follow-up anti-bullying campaign item contain feedback from the relevant unions.

71/21 GAS COMMITTEE SCRUTINY PROGRAMME 2021/22 - The Committee Manager submitted a report summarising the Committee's Scrutiny Programme 2021/22.

Resolved - (a) That the Programme be updated in accordance with Minute 70/21, and

(b) that the Programme be received.

72/21 ANY OTHER BUSINESS - There were no items.