

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 24 May 2024 commencing at 10.00 am at the Committee Room - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT

Cllr Bernard Fisher	Cllr Steve Robinson
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair)	Cllr Brian Tipper
Cllr Mark Mackenzie- Charrington (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Kathy Williams
Cllr Alan Preest	

Substitutes:

Cabinet

Members: Cllr Dave Norman MBE, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries

Apologies: Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2024 and of the informal meeting held on 8 March 2024 were approved as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. HMICFRS INSPECTION REPORT

- 4.1 Adam Openshaw, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO), presented the outcomes and recommendations of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection report to the Committee.
- 4.2 It was noted that the final round 3 inspection report for Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) was published on 3 May 2024. The inspection had taken place between September and December 2023.
- 4.3 It was noted that inspectors had recognised the progress made in some of the areas highlighted for improvement during the previous inspection, with 3 recommendations resulting from the causes of concern and 9 areas for improvement (AFIs) discharged. GFRS was also found to be adequate in preventing fires and other risks and responding to fires and emergencies.

- 4.4 The Committee was advised that GFRS had received a cause of concern for business fire safety, however this was seen to be a trend for multiple fire and rescue services across the UK currently.
- 4.5 Members were informed that the two main areas identified as requiring improvement related to culture and equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). HMICFRS had recognised in its inspection report that a lot of the improvement work in this area was still in its early stages. This work now needed to be embedded and evidenced as sustainable and systematic moving forward. Members were informed that plans were in place to continue to address pockets of challenging behaviour, as well as to increase staff understanding of the importance of positive action.
- 4.6 HMICFRS had recognised that 94 percent of GFRS staff understood the core values, which reflected the work that had been carried out in this area and on the workplace charter. The report also recognised that senior leadership engagement was improving.
- 4.7 The ACFO highlighted the results of the HMI survey, which depicted a 22 percent increase in GFRS staff respondents. Some of the positive indicators resulting from the survey included an 18 percent increase in staff who agreed that they were treated with dignity and respect, a 6 percent increase in staff who agreed that ideas and suggestions were listened to, a 15 percent increase in the number of staff who agreed that they had confidence in mechanisms for providing feedback, and a 15 percent increase in staff who agreed with the ability to challenge ideas without detriment.
- 4.8 Further clarity was provided on the additional cause of concern identified by HMICFRS, which related to how GFRS undertook its regulatory duty to carry out inspections of buildings and keeping the public safe through regulatory inspections. 3 recommendations needed to be addressed to discharge this cause of concern. The first recommendation related to the Service's high risk building inspection programme and the limited resources currently available to undertake it. It was noted that a shortage of trained inspectors was a national issue, with officers tending to complete inspection training whilst employed by fire and rescue services before transferring to employment in the private sector.
- 4.9 The second recommendation was related to quality assurance, and the third related to GFRS's out of hours service. To address this, plans were being put in place to ensure officers with specialist skills relating to building inspections were available out of hours.
- 4.10 In terms of the next steps, members were informed that an action plan would be submitted for the new cause of concern. The delivery of the improvement plan relating to culture and EDI would continue, to demonstrate that improvements were embedded. It was noted that the Improvement Board, which had been overseeing

the action plan to address the causes for concern identified during the previous inspection, would now cover a broader remit to ensure improvement more widely.

- 4.11 It was also noted that the Service would shortly be considering its methodology for looking at qualitative and quantitative metrics, as part of its increased focus on assurance. This would consider staff feedback on initiatives and include the introduction of cultural dashboard metrics.
- 4.12 A member expressed their disappointment that GFRS had not made enough progress against the inspection criteria, highlighting that none of the areas had been judged as 'good' or 'outstanding'. They commented on response times failing to meet targets, on issues with protection staff, and the issues relating to fairness and diversity. The member asked the Cabinet Member for their view on the inspection report.
- 4.13 Cllr Dave Norman, Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety, and Libraries, highlighted that, since 2019, inspections of fire and rescue services had become much more rigorous, and that nationally, the bar set by the inspectorate had been continuously and significantly raised in the years since then. He recognised that GFRS had been impacted by issues that had occurred prior to the first inspection in 2019, and therefore GFRS's journey of improvement had been challenging. He was frustrated by some of the comments made by the inspectorate in its report and advised that the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and himself would have the opportunity to challenge aspects of the report at an upcoming meeting. However, Cllr Norman was confident that the Service was moving forward in the right direction, that GFRS had made significant improvement, and that this now needed to be embedded with the support of all involved.
- 4.14 A member expressed their disappointment that scrutiny members had not received prior notification of the publication of the inspection report and commented that the press release did not reflect the contents of the report. Whilst recognising that some progress had been made, the member felt that GFRS was taking steps backwards. They asked whether officers accepted the report and whether a response to it had been submitted. They requested that scrutiny committee members have sight of any response submitted.

ACTION – Adam Openshaw

- 4.15 In response, the ACFO advised that the deadline for a response was 14 June 2024, and that the improvement team was currently working on producing the action plan and response for submission. He echoed the Cabinet Member's comments regarding the raising of the bar by the inspectorate nationally, and that he accepted the work that needed to be done. He explained that whilst the gradings in the report were important, the truth was in the narrative of the report which highlighted the need to embed progress that had been made. He hoped that this would be evidenced in the next inspection.

- 4.16 It was requested that scrutiny members receive regular updates on progress against the action plan.

ACTION – Adam Openshaw

- 4.17 Clarification was sought on the membership of the GFRS Improvement Board. It was understood that the Board met every 6 weeks.
- 4.18 It was proposed that a report on this discussion be attached to the scrutiny report for the June County Council meeting for all members of the fire authority to have the opportunity to discuss the results of the inspection.

ACTION – Laura Powick

- 4.19 A member asked when the next inspection was likely to take place. In response, it was explained that it was likely to take place in 2025/26.
- 4.20 The member then proposed that GFRS consider engaging with an external independent adviser as soon as possible to help GFRS prepare for the next inspection.

ACTION – Chief Fire Officer/ Lead Cabinet Member

- 4.21 In response, the Cabinet Member advised that the CFO was in conversation with similar fire services across England and the CFOs of other services in the South West on working together to prepare for inspections. He added that the other services in the South West were in a worse position than GFRS. He also proposed engaging in an LGA Peer Review the year before the next inspection.

ACTION – Chief Fire Officer/ Lead Cabinet Member

- 4.22 A member queried the level of challenge within the Service against promoting the right culture, and what was being done to educate staff and eradicate this behaviour. In response, the ACFO confirmed that there were pockets of challenging behaviour, however significant work had been undertaken to address this, including the development of a workplace charter and core values which were displayed in every fire station in Gloucestershire. Improvement teams had engaged with leaders across the Service on how to further embed the charter, and leaders were being asked to make a pledge on how they could personally contribute to this. He added that the Service was keen to demonstrate it would not tolerate poor behaviour, and clear expectations had been established in consultation with staff.
- 4.23 In response to a further question, it was explained that there were performance management procedures in place to address challenging behaviours by individuals. Leaders in the Service were being educated on applying these procedures.

- 4.24 A member quoted the report where it stated that 36 percent of staff felt that senior leaders did not always act as role models or maintain the core values of the Service. They asked how this was being addressed. In his response, the ACFO drew attention to evidence that there had been a 15 percent increase in staff who had trust in senior leaders. He acknowledged that they still had progress to make and advised that they were undertaking additional leadership forums where leaders could engage with senior management. The ACFO and the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) were also meeting with all middle managers every month to articulate expectations, such as the importance of visibility. The ACFO added that there had been 13 new appointments at a senior level who had signed up to the new workplace charter.
- 4.25 The member further cited from the report that 40 percent of staff were still awaiting their appraisal, and asked what was being done to address this. They also noted the high level of staff absence due to stress and musculoskeletal injuries and queried why this was the case.
- 4.26 In response, the ACFO explained that a lot of work had been done to make appraisals more accessible and user friendly, and better training had been provided on how to undertake them. It was noted that the completion rate for appraisals now stood at around 80 percent. He advised that they were following a more individualised approach to the completion of appraisals with on-call firefighters. Members were also informed that statements from the workplace charter were now included on appraisal forms to hold staff to account.
- 4.27 A member commented that when Gloucestershire police went into special measures, senior officers visited other forces looking into the issues that were deemed inadequate. They asked whether the fire service was doing anything similar.
- 4.28 In response, the ACFO clarified that GFRS was not in special measures but were under enhanced monitoring, which resulted in the Service being viewed by the inspectorate more regularly. He advised that GFRS had been coordinating with other fire services and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and had engaged with an LGA Peer Review on communications. He added that they were learning from London Fire Brigade, which had also faced concerns relating to EDI and culture, as well as West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, which had successfully introduced a cultural assessment framework.
- 4.29 The member further expressed their surprise that councillors, such as the Chair of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny committee, were not members of the Improvement Board. In response, the Cabinet Member emphasised the importance of scrutiny members holding the Improvement Board to account, and therefore it would not be appropriate for the Chair of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee to sit on the Board.

- 4.30 In response to an additional query from the member relating to the training of GFRS staff on EDI, the Committee was informed that GFRS had invested into cultural awareness training, alongside unconscious bias training for all its staff. A training programme was being rolled out to improve staff understanding of positive action, with staff being asked to contribute how they would personally make a difference in terms of positive action and EDI. Phase 2 of this programme would be rolled out to on call firefighters. A series of 'Have A Go' days were also being held, whereby staff would meet with underrepresented groups in their communities to make them aware of the career opportunities available to them within GFRS.
- 4.31 A member stated that they did not perceive GFRS to be a failing force, recognising the impact of the Government's higher level of standards for fire services nationally on the outcomes of GFRS's inspection. They sought clarification on the numbers of staff who had completed the inspection survey.
- 4.32 In response, the ACFO explained that moving forward, GFRS needed to provide evidence that the work being undertaken to address the issues raised by the inspectorate were embedded. He explained that the bar for inspections was going up across the board, and many similar fire services had received similar inspection reports to GFRS. He added that there had been increased focus on risk management, particularly as a result of the Grenfell tragedy.
- 4.33 A member called for an external adviser to look at management failings within the Service.
- 4.34 Another member asked about the reaction of staff to the inspection report. In response, it was understood that the response had been mixed, with a number wanting more recognition of the work that had already been undertaken to address the issues. However, many were now moving to a position of accepting the findings and looking at how to embed and evidence the progress that had been made.
- 4.35 A member raised their concern regarding the number of staff who had completed the inspection survey and asked about morale in the Service. In response, it was acknowledged that morale had taken an initial hit because of the inspection report, however they were now seeing growing momentum amongst staff to take on the challenges identified. It was explained that 60 percent completion of the survey was seen as a good return, particularly in comparison to other fire services.
- 4.36 The member also asked how GFRS had engaged with the Fire Brigades Union on the inspection outcomes. In response, the ACFO explained that they regularly met with all the unions to discuss the issues. It was understood that any response from the unions on the inspection report would be published on their websites.
- 4.37 A member queried what was being done to increase the numbers of protection staff, and to increase confidence amongst staff to use enforcement powers.

Members were informed that nationally there was an issue with the recruitment and retainment of protection staff. The action plan which would be submitted to HMICFRS would determine how GFRS planned to address the issue.

- 4.38 The Chair summarised the discussion and the resulting recommendations, which included the proposal for an LGA Peer Review ahead of the next inspection and for the engagement of an external independent adviser to support and have oversight of the implementation of improvements.
- 4.39 A member stated their view that officers within the Service needed to have the capability to address the issues themselves. Another member countered that whilst this was important, it would be of value to look to other tools, such as an external adviser, to provide additional support.

5. GFRS WORKWEAR

- 5.1 David Stevens and Kristine Stokes, Logistics and Resources Managers, GFRS, provided an update on the procurement and implementation of the new workwear/ uniform policy for all GFRS uniformed staff.
- 5.2 Members were informed that in 2016, a previous CFO had decided to change the GFRS uniform from navy blue to black with no staff consultation. This was a contentious decision, with many staff unhappy about the change. The change to black uniform had even resulted in an attack on a member of fire service personnel as they were mistaken for police.
- 5.3 Members were informed that following the decision in 2016, no uniform contract had been formally agreed which had led to a reduction in the quality of uniform standards. It was understood that the majority of fire services across the UK wore navy blue uniforms which meant sourcing for black uniforms had been difficult.
- 5.4 It was explained that almost 300 responses had been received to a staff consultation on changing the uniform back to navy blue, with the majority favouring the change back.
- 5.5 The survey had also revealed that the majority of staff felt the current uniform was not fit for purpose, rating it as either one or 2 for quality. The new workwear needed to be robust and able to withstand the physical aspects of job, as well as looking smart. It was also recognised that the current uniform was not fit for a diverse work force. This had been addressed in the proposals for the new workwear.
- 5.6 It was understood that an AI sizing app and ordering system would be implemented whereby staff could be individually sized and uniform could be ordered as required. This would result in improved efficiencies as stock would no longer have to be stored.

- 5.7 A member queried the cost to the Local Authority of the new uniform rollout on an annual basis. In response, it was confirmed that proposed annual costs would be similar to current costs, with an initial outlay of just over £151k to cover the change from black to navy blue workwear for all unformed staff.
- 5.8 In response to a further query, it was explained that the new uniform was of an improved quality. It had been designed as a technical garment, with double seamed trousers and a toughened and flexible waistband and belt. It was understood that the contract with suppliers had been formalised which would enable them to be held to account.
- 5.9 It was confirmed that the supplier of the new workwear was UK based. The commitment of suppliers to social values had been a critical aspect of the tender process.
- 5.10 A member commented that at a distance, the new navy blue uniform could be mistaken for black. In response, officers advised that navy blue was a fire service standard and by changing back to it, GFRS was aligning itself with other services in the sector.
- 5.11 A member welcomed the inclusion of coloured embroidery on the uniform badge, likening the old silver coloured badge to the ones incorporated on police uniforms. Members were informed the quality of embroidery had been considered as part of the tender process, with samples from all potential suppliers considered for quality and high visibility. It was also noted that many staff had been impressed with the intricacy of the new badge.
- 5.12 It was confirmed that the uniform did require ironing.
- 5.13 A member commented that they were surprised staff still had an issue with a decision which had been taken 8 years ago, suggesting that there were other issues to worry about.
- 5.14 It was noted that the new uniform also included new boots which provided ankle support and were fit for the changing role of the fire fighter.
- 5.15 The Cabinet Member highlighted that 'GCC' had been incorporated onto the new uniform to ensure GFRS staff felt part of the Local Authority, and to commit the County Council as the Fire Authority to supporting the work and effort of GFRS. He added that this time, executive officers had engaged with staff on the change of uniform so that it was right for them and the community they served.
- 5.16 A member stated their support for the changes to the uniform, recognising the importance of having the best possible workwear and equipment for staff to carry out their roles.

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- 5.17 Clarification was sought on the AI sizing app. In response, it was explained that it resulted in improved sizing for individuals and brought efficiencies as stock would not need to be stored.
- 5.18 In response to a query on the track record of the supplier of the new uniform, members were advised that they had a good track record and that it was one of the biggest suppliers in this area. The quality of their supplies had also been evident.
- 5.19 It was confirmed, following a query, that there were plans for a hard launch of the new uniform. This was expected to be in June, once they were confident all staff had a full issue of the new kit.
- 5.20 It was understood that a three-stage plan had been developed to dispose of old uniform stock. This included identifying companies to ethically dispose of or recycle the stock, keeping some items for presentation purposes or for use by sports teams, and donating to worthwhile causes.
- 5.21 It was confirmed that a project to review GFRS formal wear was in its initial stages.
- 5.22 The Committee wished officers well with the rollout of the new workwear.

6. FIRE STATION COVER REVIEW

- 6.1 The ACFO provided the Committee with an update on the consultation process for the Fire Station Cover Review.
- 6.2 Members were informed that 312 people had engaged with the consultation on proposals, of which 97 were GFRS staff. 15 engagement sessions had taken place with staff, and 5 with members of the public. Due to the level of interest amongst staff regarding proposals, a further survey had subsequently been developed relating to how changes to shift patterns were proposed to work.
- 6.3 It was noted that an FAQs document had been developed as questions had been raised, and in response to requests from staff, all information that had informed the proposals was available on the staff intranet.
- 6.4 Members were advised that once the consultation had finished, responses would be analysed, and final recommendations would be presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 4 December 2024.
- 6.5 In response to a query, it was confirmed that unions had been consulted with regarding proposals.
- 6.6 In response to a further query, it was confirmed that one of the reasons for the proposals relating to Cinderford Fire Station and the changes to the shift patterns

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was to achieve a reduction in response times in the Forest of Dean and across Gloucestershire as a whole.

- 6.7 A member asked whether consideration had been given to recruiting additional whole time fire fighters. In response, the Committee was advised that the use of on call fire fighters was the most cost effective way to meet demand, with current availability of on call fire fighters at 70 percent. The difficulties of employing on call fire fighters was recognised, and options to address this were being considered, such as through changes to contracts.

7. GFRS PERFORMANCE DATA AND UPDATES

The Committee noted the performance data.

8. WORK PLAN

The Committee's Work Plan to be updated as follows:

- An item on the impact of the new Government on Fire and Rescue Services, to include any changes in policy, to be scheduled for the meeting in September 2024.
- A report on the impact of climate change on the fire service, including how to address the risks such as flooding and wildfires, to be scheduled for the meeting in September 2024, alongside the update report on GFRS Net Zero Carbon Progress.

9. FUTURE MEETINGS

A few members raised an issue with the day Committee meetings were held on. This could be addressed going forward.

ACTION – Laura Powick

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 12.25 pm