

# **Examining the Culture of Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service**

## **Scrutiny Task Group**

### **Final Report**

#### **1. Introduction**

The ambitions for the task group were as follows:

- To explore the current culture within the Fire and Rescue service (to understand its behaviours, attitudes, values and beliefs) and recommend changes to improve it.
- To ensure that GFRS is fair and transparent in its relationships with others and its working practices (including procurement) and establish how the service can be more robustly scrutinised to ensure any issues relating to governance or culture do not reoccur.
- To propose ways in which GFRS can move forward as a county council fire and rescue service, working in collaboration with other council and blue light services
- To consider any issues relevant to the work of the task group that arise from the report presented to Audit and Governance Committee into the sale of a fire service vehicle.

#### **2. Background**

- 2.1 In June 2018, the Chief Fire Officer resigned acknowledging 'poor judgment' by not recognising the significance of his personal interest in acquiring a fire service vehicle, where the disposal process had been overseen by himself. This was the result of a whistleblowing allegation that has led to the commencement of an extensive investigation carried out by Internal Audit at the County Council including a review of relevant policies, practices, systems and processes. Progress updates against any actions identified through these reviews will be provided to Audit and Governance Committee.
- 2.2 Following the resignation of the Chief Fire Officer, a number of additional whistleblowing allegations were received which detailed other governance issues and concerns around the culture within the Fire and Rescue Service.
- 2.3 Scrutiny members agreed to set up a task group to support the work being carried out with a specific focus on the culture of Gloucestershire Fire and

Rescue Service. This group would be supported by Jon McGinty as Managing Director/ Commissioning Director and Mandy Quayle Head of Human Resources. Those officers helped to support members in their inquiry and provided evidence that has helped to formulate this report.

2.4 Membership of the task group: Councillors Iain Dobie, Kate Haigh, Jeremy Hilton (Chair), Stephen Hirst, Shaun Parsons, John Payne, Will Windsor Clive.

2.5 The task group have met with the following:

- Acting Chief Fire Officer
- Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries
- Commissioning Director
- Head of Human Resources
- Consultant on GFRS Culture Review
- Leader of Council
- Chief Executive
- Trade Unions (invitations sent, meeting did not happen)
- Internal Audit

2.6 The Cabinet Member has been undertaking a series of visits across Fire and Rescue Service stations in order to improve visibility and ensure that there was clarity as to the mechanisms in place for raising concerns. Cllr Hilton (Chair) has joined the Cabinet Member on some of these visits to get a sense from the ground of the issues.

### **3. Context**

3.1 Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service has been held up as an efficient and well performing service.

3.2 There is a national discussion around the future role of firefighters to reflect a movement away from being a purely responsive service to a preventative one. The role of a firefighter is therefore changing and this had been the subject of union discussions and in places resistance.

3.3 Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service is on a change programme looking to move the service forward. This leads to the service focusing on prevention and further integration with areas such as adult social care. This is against a backdrop of initiatives to improve gender balance and to introduce more modern working practices.

3.4 Members have explored the effects of that change programme, and how it was handled, on employees. Where members have examined events leading

to the departure of the Chief Fire Officer, it has been to better understand if those events were representative of wider cultural issues.

#### **4. Review of culture**

- 4.1 Members questioned officers and representatives on the series of events that had led to the Chief Fire Officer leaving the service. It is understood that a criminal investigation into his actions is ongoing and that audit activity is continuing. The task group note that the whistleblowing procedure was used and was effective in enabling issues to be raised.
- 4.2 The task group understood that a review of culture had been undertaken in July 2016 and that a stock-take was carried out early 2018. Members used these reports as a starting point to understand how the culture in the service had developed over a number of years. The consultant undertaking that review was invited to speak to the group and he provided his thoughts on the emerging issues. This evidence, was used alongside the staff surveys, the current audit work and whistleblowing process. The task group decided that further surveying or canvassing of Fire and Rescue Service employees would be counter productive, recognising that there may be a degree of fatigue around this type of engagement.
- 4.3 It is recognised that the former Chief Fire Officer was enacting a large amount of change within the Fire and Rescue Service over a short period of time. There was a sense of urgency around the change with the impression given that over previous years the service had not moved forward at an appropriate speed. The consultant was brought in by the former Chief Fire Officer in order to carry out a health check of the culture of the service and advise how to help bring along those staff feeling disengaged with the change programme.
- 4.4 At that stage the service was seen as being five years behind the social care preventative agenda and the Chief's approach had been to accelerate this quickly. It was suggested that the approach adopted had been quite directive and that the review was an opportunity to 'draw breath'.
- 4.5 The report in 2016 was received by the then Chief Fire Officer at the same time as staff at a meeting with over 200 people. A commitment was given by the Chief to address the issues identified within the report together.
- 4.6 All staff remained committed to the goal of protecting the public and while the majority of staff accepted the new roles required of them, some were struggling with a sense of disenfranchisement and frustration. There was perceived to be a growing divide between staff and their managers. It was suggested that this sense of alienation was most keenly felt by whole-time firefighters.

- 4.7 The Executive Summary of the report outlined: *‘We often heard accusations of a “bullying culture” by management. However whilst we were provided with many examples of poor and clumsy management we encountered few specific cases of bullying and it appeared that more often managers were simply dealing with sensitive cases in an un-empathetic way. Just when careful and nuanced management was needed the imposition of a procedural approach often made matters worse.’*
- 4.8 Members of the task group expressed some concern about an over reliance on the use of temporary promotions within the Fire and Rescue Service. Internal Audit are looking into the detail of this matter.
- 4.9 The report suggested that the communication of change had been unstructured and inconsistent and this was the focus of a lot of disenchantment from employees. Issues had been identified about the way in which middle ranking officers were equipped to handle the change programme within the service. Many middle managers themselves felt excluded from the decisions they had to enact.
- 4.10 In 2018 when the stock-take was being carried out, there was a sense that the former Chief’s patience had run out and was more directive and intolerant. The communication was more organised but was ‘preachy’.
- 4.11 While training had been provided to middle ranking officers, they did not always have the experience and skill set to communicate and manage this change. Some work had been carried out on developing leadership values and behaviours and there was an employee engagement network in place which had led the stock-take.
- 4.12 It was suggested that by early 2018 there was a core of people who had gone backwards with regards to their feelings about the change and that they were becoming increasingly alienated and cynical about the leadership. The report outlined that there was a sizeable group that had changed their views little in the 18 month period and were unconvinced by change and were hurt that their concerns seemed to be unacknowledged.
- 4.13 While the direction of travel for the service being driven by the then Chief Fire Officer has been a very forward thinking and modern one, the leadership style was more akin to an old fashioned command and control approach.
- 4.14 In addition to the information provided through the review, members noted that the quantity and content of the allegations raised through the whistleblowing process further suggested an organisation that was fractured.
- 4.15 Aside from the divisions created during the change programme, it was felt that the actions of the then Chief Fire Officer evidenced a culture of interpreting

guidance and policies for the best possible gain. Assurances have been given that the situation in the service has been stabilised. The start of the audit process and the strengthened governance in the form of Director-level oversight was seen by members as a good first step.

## **5. Supporting change**

- 5.1 Members recognise that the service has undergone a significant period of change. At the start of that change programme there was some support provided through a consultant who had the skills and expertise in cultural change. It was suggested that when that individual had left, the skills and capacity to support the change was lacking. As the Service has been more greatly integrated with the County Council it was now receiving some support from HR, but it is questionable whether in this instance the Fire and Rescue Service truly took advantage of any support that might have been available, or whether a true shared and comprehensive service had been achieved. Recognising these points, the task group emphasises the importance of ensuring that the County Council uses its resources effectively in order to provide HR support for the change programme that is underway.
- 5.2 While morale within the service has obviously been affected by recent events, there is no evidence to suggest it is at 'rock bottom'. Firefighters are keen to stress that the actions of one individual are not representative of the measure of the organisation. In terms of the cultural divisions there has been an acknowledgement of a clumsy management style and of a perception that senior officers were 'saying one thing, but doing another'.
- 5.3 A new Chief Fire Officer has been appointed who has been in post since February 2019. This is an opportunity to help enact cultural change from the very top of the organisation and to provide a fresh look at the service.
- 5.4 Members felt that Senior Officers had perhaps not envisaged the size and extent of the change when starting the change programme or overseeing additional responsibilities. With that in mind Members were keen to ensure that the Chief Fire Officer has the ability and support to focus on the task at hand. The task group recognises the benefit of the Chief Fire Officer having a wider role within the County Council. It helped to attract high quality candidates to the role and ensures that there is real integration with services including adult social care and a more joined up public protection service. However, it is important that those wider responsibilities as part of the senior management of the Council do not impinge on the Chief Fire Officer role. The task group asks that this is a key consideration during discussions with the new Chief Fire Officer to ensure the right balance.

5.5 The Commissioning Director gave information to the Task Group gleaned from interviews he had conducted with a number of other Senior Managers and Chief Fire Officers from other County Councils with embedded Fire and Rescue Services, about the degree of integration and collaborative working that was taking place elsewhere in the country. Among key points raised by most, if not all, of these interviews were:

- There appeared to be greater integration and reliance on county council back office services (HR, communications, IT, Finance and Property) to provide a broad range of support services to those respective Fire and Rescue Services than appears to be the case in Gloucestershire.
- A single set of values applying to County Council and the Fire and Rescue Service staff within this.
- Most had successfully integrated their Fire and Rescue Service within a wide range of public protection and related County Council services, such as Trading Standards, Civil Protection and Resilience. In some instances, this was only at a principal officer level (e.g. Chief Fire Officer managing a range of Public Protection services), in others there was greater integration throughout staffing structures. Some had taken integration even further with commissioning functions (e.g. the Fire Service being involved in/responsible for commissioning drug and alcohol abuse protective support services)
- Gloucestershire still appears to be a sector leader in its approach to preventative activity and integration with social care.
- Several examples of good collaboration with other blue light services even whilst Fire was embedded within and closely integrated with County Council functions (e.g sharing local stations and property, Fire Responder roles co-funded by County, Police and Ambulance).

## **6. Governance**

6.1 Members understand that the Chief Fire Officer has a scheduled one to one meeting with the Chief Executive every month and regular catch-ups through Senior Officer meetings. Members queried the role of the previous Commissioning Director. It was explained that the Chief Fire Officer reported directly to the Chief Executive, but that the Director had commissioning ownership of the Integrated Risk Management Plan. Other than that, there had not been a formalised working relationship with the Commissioning Director. 'Triangulation arrangements' therefore were limited between the Chief Executive, Chief Fire Officer and Commissioning Director, potentially

restricting any 'sense check' of the messages being escalated upwards from the service. The task group understand that with the new arrangements in place, the relationship with the Commissioning Director has been strengthened and that this triangulation approach was now robust.

- 6.2 Members emphasised the importance of appropriate financial controls being put in place. The Audit work was focusing on ensuring that these protocols and policies were in place and that they were being consistently followed throughout the organisation.
- 6.3 The task group has discussed the role of elected members in providing support and scrutiny to the Fire and Rescue Service. It was recognised that there was frustration from some members around the amount of scrutiny being carried out by the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee which had responsibility for this service area had not been able to give public protection the focus it needs as a vital part of the County Council's ambitions. The task group felt that there was now a need to revisit the arrangements for scrutinising the service to ensure it had greater prominence.
- 6.4 The task group feel that there needs to be greater member ownership of the change programme and support provided to the Cabinet Member. In speaking to the Cabinet Member it was suggested that some kind of oversight board be provided with political representation to monitor progress of the programme. If the Cabinet Member set up a Cabinet Panel then this could be moved forward fairly quickly.

## **7. Summary of Recommendations**

The task group has made a series of recommendations to support the extensive work that is being carried out:

- A. Explore whether the Fire and Rescue Service can adopt a more integrated model of back office support service, such as HR, IT, Property, Communications and Finance. In particular, whether a stronger business partner model might provide the service with greater access to skills and expertise to help the service manage its change programme. The HR leadership at the County Council should possess the necessary expertise to enable it to play a leading role in culture change within GFRS.
- B. Redefine the role of the Chief Fire Officer within the County Council to reflect the positive integration of services but not overload the role during such a vital time of change.

- C. Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service should adopt the County Council values. This will reflect that the service is part of the County Council with a shared culture.
- D. Ask the current Scrutiny Review to consider the most appropriate way of strengthening scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service.
- E. The task group has suggested that Cllr Dave Norman as Cabinet Member responsible for Public Protection set up a Cabinet Panel to ensure oversight of the current change programme within the Fire and Rescue Service. (it is noted that this could include cross party membership.)

## **8. Next steps**

- 8.1 This report has highlighted the current position of the service, identified the progress that has already been made, and detailed the continuing work being carried out to ensure that the Fire and Rescue Service is best equipped to meet its changing role. This includes a cultural shift that will take time and will need to be handled carefully and with the right support.
- 8.2 The task group note that the establishment of a Cabinet Panel will provide the oversight of the change programme within the Fire and Rescue Service. The Scrutiny Review will provide recommendations on scrutiny going forward including scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service. In addition, the task group recognises that the Internal Audit compliance reviews will continue and will be reported through the Audit and Governance Committee.

**Cllr Jeremy Hilton**  
**Chair of GFRS Scrutiny Task Group**