

SOUTH WALES FRS INDEPENDENT CULTURE REVIEW REPORT 2024



REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

For Information

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Members of the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS) Independent Culture Review 2024 report.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Members note:

- the contents of the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS) Independent Culture Review 2024 report.
- that the Chief Fire Officer will review the SWFRS Report and its recommendations in detail and look to implement improvements to the local arrangements, where appropriate.
- further reports will be provided as necessary.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Autumn 2022 saw the publication of the Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade, finding widespread and disturbing bullying, harassment, and discrimination.
- 3.2 In response to this review, and other allegations in multiple services, the Police, Crime and Fire Minister commissioned HMICFRS to produce a “Spotlight” report on values and culture. The Report was published in March 2023 and highlighted widespread unacceptable behaviour.
- 3.3 The Home Secretary then commissioned HMICFRS to conduct a thematic inspection of the handling of misconduct in fire and rescue services. This will examine the effectiveness and consistency of the misconduct processes and will report back in June 2024.
- 3.4 Following serious allegations within SWFRS, the Service commissioned an independent culture review to inform and evidence the necessary steps for positive change.

3.5 The final report was published on 3 January 2024. A copy of the Report can be found at: <https://www.southwales-fire.gov.uk/newsroom/news/independent-culture-review-publication/> and is available in the Members Library.

4. SWFRS INDEPENDENT CULTURE REVIEW REPORT 2024

4.1 The independent culture review was established to assess the existing culture of the SWFRS and present a practical set of recommendations for positive change.

4.2 To achieve the purpose as set out in paragraph 4.1 above, the independent review team established the following terms of reference: -

- (1) assess the existing policies, procedures and systems relating to bullying, harassment, grievances, whistleblowing concerns, dignity at work, complaints and any other processes for raising complaints and concerns of behaviour and standards. Comparing these to best practice and identifying any actual or perceived barriers to reporting or making complaints about bullying or harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour and consider the ways in which these policies, procedures and systems are applied in practice and how that impacts on culture
- (2) assess existing policies and procedures relating to discipline of staff, comparing them to national terms and conditions of employment and best practice. Consider the ways in which these policies, procedures and systems are applied in practice
- (3) review, consider and report on how over the last seven years historic reports and complaints of incidents of bullying, harassment, whistleblowing concerns, and dignity at work complaints and any other relevant complaints and/or grievances were dealt with and responded to by the Service
- (4) review, consider and report on how historical staff disciplinary cases over the last seven years were dealt with by the Service, including consideration of whether there was any further action (positive or negative) in respect of the individuals complained of (for example, any further disciplinary cases against them, any patterns of behaviour and/or any promotions) and how that impacts on culture
- (5) establish whether the Service has appropriate prevention and other control measures in place to deal with any reasonably anticipated risks arising from bullying, harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour
- (6) assess the effectiveness of development programmes and training that support dignity, respect and prevention of bullying, harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour
- (7) assess the effectiveness of development programmes and training for managers in dealing with complaints of and/or disciplinary cases related to bullying, harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour

- (8) consider and comment on the values, behaviours, standards and decisions of leaders at all levels in the Service, both professional and personal (where relevant), and how they impact and/or influence culture
- (9) consider the impact of individual or group behaviour and standards of staff, both professional and personal (where relevant), and how this influences culture
- (10) consider and comment on the Service as a place of work with regard to ensuring the treatment of staff with dignity and respect and maintaining an open and supportive culture, and in particular establish whether the Service has appropriate support in place for staff experiencing and/or witnessing traumatising events and the impact those have on mental health, well-being and behaviour, and/or raising complaints of bullying, harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour
- (11) identify within the Service areas of strength, examples of good practice and exemplar behaviours
- (12) identify other relevant examples of best practice, guidance, policies and procedures
- (13) consider for any other matters the Independent Chairperson considers are directly related to the purpose of this Review
- (14) consider the difference in experiences of staff, including the impact of procedures, customs and practices, based on but not limited to age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, any other difference including their occupational group and rank
- (15) make recommendations in the light of findings arising from the Review

5. SUMMARY FROM THE REPORT

5.1 The Service has many positive aspects. They include: -

- a universal proud commitment to service of the community
- a usually warm and supportive watch culture
- an excellent internal occupational health service
- positive measures to support mental health and the neuro-diverse
- the Chief Fire Officer's championing of the prevention of violence against women and girls

5.2 However, there are also serious deficiencies in the Service. They include: -

- poor communications, systems, policies and procedures
- insufficient role modelling by leaders and managers
- a lack of transparency in recruitment and promotion procedures, meaning it is difficult to be certain that they are fair, and free from nepotism
- a lack of diversity
- the tolerance of problematic behaviours, including: sexual harassment; negative assumptions about women; domestic abuse and physical aggression outside of work; the expression of negative views in relation to the protected characteristics of sex, race and/or religion; bullying; harmful ‘banter’; drug and alcohol abuse; and improper interference with procedures
- misconduct, including criminal conduct, that has previously gone insufficiently addressed, to the detriment of the Service’s culture
- a lack of encouragement and support for people to speak up, and insufficient action when they do
- inadequate training, resulting in the problems identified above
- self-interest, and a lack of respect for colleagues in all roles and ranks

5.3 The Review Team were encouraged by the steps the Service has already started to take to recognise and address its failings. These include: -

- the instigation of this Review
- a greater commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (“EDI”)
- improving its Human Resources functions
- a more robust and consistent approach to disciplinary matters
- improving promotion processes to address some of the issues that have been identified.

5.4 Such actions demonstrate that the Service is committed to improving its culture. However, it has much further to go.

6. REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The Report’s detailed, phased, list of recommendations are attached as Appendix 1.

7. NEXT STEPS

7.1 The SWFRS Independent Culture Review Report contains disturbing and difficult information that exposes unacceptable behaviour and attitudes. It also identifies underlying failures in leadership, governance and decision-making by management at all levels of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service.

- 7.2 Going forward the Brigade, as a committed 'learning organisation', will need to take the time to consider the report in full, but clearly the findings are wholly unacceptable of an inclusive, modern, blue light emergency service.
- 7.3 The Authority and the Brigade have a well-defined and unequivocal stance on equality, diversity, and inclusion – making it clear that there is no place for harassment, bullying or discrimination in Cleveland Fire Brigade or indeed the wider fire and rescue service. We have clear policies in place on bullying, harassment and discrimination and regularly work with staff networks and representative bodies to improve these. We also have a well-established Values and Behaviour Framework which incorporates the national Core Code of Ethics that clearly sets out the staff behavioural standards which we expect all our people to follow.
- 7.4 But, as a learning organisation driven to continually improve, we must never be complacent. That is why we will be reviewing the report and its recommendations in detail and look to implement improvements to our existing prioritised plans, where appropriate.
- 7.5 We aspire to be a great place to work where everyone can be themselves and will be using the findings of this report to further support our work towards this.

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