



NFCC
National Fire
Chiefs Council

The professional voice of the
UK Fire & Rescue Service

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To

Cllr Paul Marshall

Cllr Duncan Crow

I am writing as the chair of the Independent Advisory Panel (IAP) for the West Sussex Fire & Rescue Service. This board was established in line with a recommendation presented to the Minister for Policing and Fire and Rescue Services following a report on whether the service had the capacity and the capability to improve. Its membership included National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and Local Government Association (LGA) representation (which included a representative who is also working with the wider County Council in their parallel improvement journey around Children's Services). Two members of the board were also part of the delegation that prepared the report that was presented to the Minister.

We met on the 11th November 2020 and at the close of the meeting we all agreed that it was time to end this part of the process of change for West Sussex and we hope you can endorse that decision. We spent some time going through a presentation from the Chief Fire Officer Sabrina Cohen-Hatton reviewing actions so far and the plans ahead.

It was evident that she and her team have done an excellent job in establishing the foundations needed to grow the transformation of the service. There is clear recognition that it will take time and sustained effort to reach their ambitions, but the necessary action plans are in place. A continuation of the panel now seems redundant given the progress made.

Listed below are the actions taken also including points raised by the Minister and I hope they give you confidence that the service is moving in the right direction in capable hands.

The report to the minister commented on the lack of funding which had a disproportionate impact on the service, and a lack of effective oversight by the council. This is now being addressed through an additional £5.1m (over three years) and changes to governance and structure, with the Fire and Rescue Service now under a single leadership model reporting directly to the Chief Executive.

The service reviewed its financial position against the statutory duties required and a further uplift of £1m was secured in February 2020 and is built into the base budget. The board have discussed the resourcing requirements with the service and have seen that the additional capacity has allowed the service to respond robustly to establish the improvements required. It is clear that the additional resources have improved the resilience of the service, which is evident through their ability to respond and adapt to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The additional capacity has enabled the service to improve the way that resources are used to support crewing, prevention and protection work, the way risk is understood and to increase capacity to deal with people and training related issues which were starkly highlighted in the improvement report.

The report to the Minister recommended a full review of the services improvement plan to consider capacity, capability, priorities, timescales and performance indicators. The service has invested in programme management capacity and skills and fully revised its improvement plan, and reprofiled the funding requirements over a three-year period to deliver it. This additional capacity has enabled the service to effectively focus its resources in the most efficient way to improve the service. The commitment of the council to maintain its commitment to the improvement journey in terms of focus and funding remains steadfast despite the financial pressures for future years presented by the pandemic.

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services re-visited West Sussex Fire & Rescue Service in January this year. Following their visit, they recognised the quickening of pace of improvements since October 2019 and found a clear commitment and saw tangible improvements, especially since October 2019, in mitigating the risks to public safety that they had initially identified. It was particularly pleasing that HMICFRS found that staff felt supported. There has since been a significant amount of work throughout the service, particularly in prevention and protection. Both directorates have received greater resourcing, have restructured and have new, sound strategies that link activity into the IRMP. The service has invested in new IT systems which are now live and improve the reliability of data, performance monitoring and more efficient, mobile ways of working.

There has been an overwhelming amount of progress since the board first met on 11th December 2019. Four clear key priorities have been set out in the updates on progress of key areas as follows:

- Our People;
- Member Engagement;
- Business Planning Process and
- Operational Resilience and Assurance.

These priorities directly address the recommendations noted by the Minister in relation to staff wellbeing, concerns around member understanding and knowledge of the fire and rescue, capacity and capability to deliver the required improvements as well as the sustainability of the change through to long term improvements.

I summarise some of the notable achievements to date across the four priorities below:

People

The service has a significant programme of work relating to improving issues relating to people, with clear strategic priorities underpinned by a People Action Plan. A restructure created a position for a strategic lead to increase capacity here to ensure cultural change and people aspects are the cornerstone of business processes. Some key examples are:

- A clear vision and mission statement linked to its values and the behaviours staff are expected to display.
- A staff engagement strategy, which included independently facilitated listening groups that sought to further understand the causes of the people issues identified by the inspectorate

- A new appraisal system links personal objectives, performance and behaviour to the vision and mission and a Core Behaviour Standards & Expectations framework based its values and the NFCC Behaviour Framework.
- A new transfer & moves process that is transparent and is based on feedback from staff
- The introduction of a new process for promotion and talent management that is more transparent and addresses concerns raised by staff through staff engagement
- The introduction of a Diversity and Inclusion Advisor and 8 Diversity Champions
- A leadership development programme, including a Level 5 Operational Management Apprenticeship scheme
- Bimonthly People Surgeries
- A revised approach to wellbeing & inclusion
- Leadership development providing managers with skills required to lead through change
- Clear guidance on what constitutes bullying and how complaints will be dealt with has been issued, with staff now using formal processes more frequently to report inappropriate behaviour, demonstrating improved confidence in the service processes.
- Some innovative examples, such as the introduction of a Shadow Board, where members with lived experience of being in an underrepresented group review decision papers and provide input to the Service Executive Board to ensure the impacts on all members of the service are considered.

Business Planning

The service has fully reviewed its business planning processes and restructured to create capacity and align new internal governance processes that have reduced bureaucracy and enabling more efficient decision making with clear routes.

- The service has fully embedded a Performance and Assurance Framework which enables the monitoring and active management of performance against statutory responsibilities from a local level (including links to appraisal objectives to assist staff with understanding how their activity contributes to service objectives) though to public reporting through the scrutiny process.
- Local Risk Management Data and Plans have been introduced for each station area, which translates service objectives into community activity.
- The service has commenced their development of their next IRMP, which will include a full review of community risks and how to further improve operational resilience
- Data visualisation has been improved with the introduction of PowerBI and a roadmap for future improved use
- Introduction of the Design Authority Group (DAG) to ensure subject matter expert advice is fed into the business planning process and ensures alignment with wider county council business requirements.
- The service has been fully engaged with the development of the West Sussex Reset Plan with the wider County Council, ensuring Fire & Rescue Service priorities are appropriately represented.

Member engagement

The recommendations to the Minister noted that the County Council should continue its plan to improve the governance and scrutiny of the Fire and Rescue Service, with a view to securing an identity for the service with supportive development for Members in WSFRS related matters. Securing opportunities for effective Member engagement in its activities has since been a clear priority for the service.

There is now a dedicated Fire and Rescue Scrutiny committee, ensuring Members have the time and space to fully scrutinise the activity and performance of the service. The committee has now met twice, during which time they considered the Performance and Assurance Framework for Fire and Rescue which focused on strategic objectives and outcomes for residents and service users. Additionally, the scrutiny committee can scrutinise areas in greater depth through 'Task and Finish Groups'. This format was used to ahead of the Fire Authority decision to invest in a new Fire Station and Training Centre in Horsham on the 28th August and a further Task and Finish Group is planned for January to focus on the performance of the Joint Control Centre, following a year of the new arrangements.

The service also invested in a new bespoke development program for Members, based on the LGA guidance for good governance in Fire and Rescue Services, ensuring that those charged with scrutiny and governance have the full range of knowledge, skills and understanding to do so effectively.

The service actively explores opportunities to engage members at all levels, ranging from including the Cabinet Member on the improvement board to provide assurance of progress, to a more local level where the service is seeking to involve local Members in the development of Local Risk Management Plans.

Operational Resilience & Assurance:

The service recognises the critical importance of operational resilience and has made significant progress in assuring this. One of the recommendations noted by the Minister included a reference to the unsustainability of the operational rota at strategic level due as it solely relied on two officers, the Chief Fire Officer and the Deputy Chief Fire Officer. The service has since reintroduced the Assistant Chief Fire Officer position and introduced a new strategic officer operating model which included upskilling Area Managers to provide added resilience to ensure that West Sussex always has strategic operational cover to deal with major and significant incidents.

A Service Delivery Centre has been introduced which focuses on ensuring operational resources are prioritised in most efficient way. This has improved the availability of operational assets and reduced the burden on operational response managers of organising logistics, enabling them to focus on core activity such as training, prevention and protection work.

The service recognises the extent of the challenge presented by the retained duty system, which are challenges similarly faced by all Fire and Rescue Services who operate this duty system. They have clear steps in place to improve the resilience of retained appliances, including investment in Retained Liaison Officers to support recruitment and retention, county crewing to utilise off-duty retained staff to cover shortfalls and acquiring new training facilities with an operating model that will guarantee access to retained firefighters at times that reduce the impact on their primary employment.

The inherent challenges that the retained duty system presents make operational resilience challenging, however the improvements the service have made have seen an improved direction of travel. The Performance and Assurance Framework includes core measures relating to the availability of operational assets and response times, thus enabling the service to monitor performance and ensure Members have an opportunity to regularly scrutinise this on behalf of the public.

In conclusion the demonstration above of the progress to date leads me to believe that the steps that West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service have taken to improve the service are significant. It will undoubtedly take time to fully embed the improvements, and the service has a clear plan in place to do so. It is therefore my intention to close the Independent Advisory Panel. I will also be asking Roy Wilsher in his role as Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council to write to the Minister and advise him of the progress made.

My thanks to the advisory team who have given their time generously to support this process. It has been a pleasure to observe the progress made and I applaud Sabrina, her team and a good service which will undoubtedly grow further.

Kind Regards

Ann Millington QFSM
Chief Executive Kent Fire and Rescue Service