



**AVON FIRE AUTHORITY
PEOPLE & CULTURE COMMITTEE**

9 JUNE 2022

MINUTES OF MEETING

PRESENT: Councillors Bromley, Davies, Hopkinson, Jacobs, Massey, Monk, Tucker, Wilcox (Chair).

The meeting started at 10.00am

1. APPOINTMENT OF THE CHAIR FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was proposed by Cllr Davies and seconded by Cllr Monk that Cllr Wilcox be re-elected Chair of the People & Culture Committee for the 2022-2023 municipal year. There was a vote and it was:

RESOLVED – that Cllr Wilcox be elected Chair of the People & Culture Committee for the municipal year.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr A Brown.

3. EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURES

The emergency evacuation procedures were explained.

4. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest from Members.

5. PUBLIC ACCESS

No public access items had been received.

6. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

Members and Officers introduced themselves.

1. The Chair confirmed that the meeting would be recorded and uploaded to the Avon Fire Authority (AFA) website.
2. The Chair explained the voting system for the meeting, i.e., votes against a motion would be recorded first, followed by abstentions, then votes for.

7. MINUTES OF THE ORDINARY MEETING OF THE PEOPLE & CULTURE COMMITTEE ON 4 MARCH 2022

Cllr Monk proposed, and Cllr Massey seconded that the Minutes be approved.

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the People & Culture Committee held on 4 March 2022 be approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

8. DICE STRATEGY PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received a report from the Culture and Inclusion Manager (CIM) who provided a progress update on the Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion, Equality (DICE) strategy for 2019/22.

The key points emphasised were –

1. Since the launch of the current DICE strategy in 2019, the DICE team had experienced several changes to its structure and capacity which had significantly impacted its ability to consistently deliver against the objectives and actions. Recruitment had begun to fill the vacant positions.
2. The DICE unit was currently undertaking a restructure and the CIM was working with Human Resources (HR) and t/ACFO Vaughan Jenkins to recruit new staff members to the team.
3. Following discussions between t/ACFO Vaughan Jenkins and Amanda Mills, Amanda has been appointed to the DICE team on a 50% contract aligned to her facilities time as FBU official. This is seen as an exciting appointment for the team as there are many synergies between the DICE and FBU official role, not least “fairness for all”.
4. The DICE Strategy was currently under review and would be republished by the Autumn 2022, with updated objectives aligned with the recently published Service Plan 2022-2025 DICE objectives, recommendations and areas for consideration from the DICE Internal Audit 2020/2021 and the 2021/2022 Culture Survey reports respectively.

The CIM emphasised that it was intended that the DICE principles would be embedded into every department of the Service which already included the work undertaken with HR and Corporate Communications. This included involvement with events such as Pride and St Pauls Carnival.

The CIM highlighted a number of successes which included:

1. A community and partnership database which contained over 40 key partners, accessible to all staff members and which would lead to a greater route into our communities and key stakeholders.
2. The Service had renewed our Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Stand Against Racism & Inequality (SARI) for a further 3 years. SARI had provided training to HR, the Service Leadership Team (SLT) and on station which has been successful.
3. Work with the Transformation team on DICE policies to ensure they were inclusive and free from equality barriers. Also worked together to develop a digital system would go live in late 2022 and would improve safeguarding along with providing better scrutiny on policies and key areas.
4. Reviewed e-learning programme which was better aligned to the Service Plan, Service Values, Culture Change and Fire Standards. Participation would be monitored by the Learning & Development Unit.
5. Watch Managers training, which consisted of modules on non-violent communication and behavioural aspects of supervisory management from an equality and diversity perspective. This would support and enable managers to help de-escalate situations before they could manifest.
6. Monitored actions from the Culture Change Programme included ensuring that our working environments created 'a better place to work in'.

Arising from Members questions the following points were clarified:

1. A question was asked regarding the plans and progress for the re-organisation of the team. The CIM advised that the recent survey had highlighted emerging themes which need to be addressed by the DICE team and included in the strategy. Therefore, the new occupant of the DICE post would concentrate on engaging with fire station staff along with our key partners within the community.
2. The CIM advised that the Service Cultural journey was ongoing, and the new member of the team would also become involved in encouraging a diverse intake of recruits and committing to more community engagement. For example, contact has been made with young people at a local boxing club which has resulted in genuine interest being shown in the fire service. Collaboration is continuing with Bristol City Council (BCC) and the Department of Work & Pensions, and six recruitment events have been attended this year so far.
3. A Member asked whether any themes had been found following the Home Safety Visits undertaken for the vulnerable in our community. Although the CIM was not involved in such visits, he does work closely with the Risk Reduction, Business Fire Safety and Vulnerable Adults teams. The community partnership database would give these teams access to a wider range of communities and would improve his work with those teams.

The t/ACFO added that the Service had utilised the underspend from the DICE budget to create two new posts to attract diverse applications into the operational recruitment process. These Community Advocate posts have proved successful to date in the recent recruitment process for WDS firefighters and the intention going forward is to continue using these posts for community outreach work in our most underrepresented communities. There is also a desire via a business case which will shortly be presented to SLT to utilise the Stepping Up programme funding plus

an additional amount of budget to create an externally facing DICE role in order to access our wider communities and continue to seek to make Avon Fire & Rescue Service an employer of choice.

It was RESOLVED –

That the People and Culture Committee noted the content of the report and the DICE strategy.

9. EMPLOYMENT CASE UPDATE 2021-22

The Committee received a report from the HR Manager who provided a summary of formal discipline, grievance and Employment Tribunal (ET) cases for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

Key points highlighted were –

1. Since the Baker report in 2017, scrutiny had improved. A Single Point of Contact (SPOC) has allocated responsibility for cases to ensure they are dealt with appropriately and consistently. The SPOC and HR share learning from cases to help educate Service wide communications, training, changes to policy, processes and behaviours to reduce the likelihood of further cases.
2. Cases are discussed at Service Leadership Team (SLT) meetings as part of regular HR and cultural improvement updates.
3. SLB has drafted a zero tolerance statement which is currently being consulted upon with key stakeholders across the Service.
4. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, HR had not been able to visit Stations/Departments. Visits have now resumed and these help build relationships and help support employee and managers to identify and address inappropriate behaviour at an early stage to reduce the need for formal action.
5. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) has carried out external scrutiny, meeting with the HR Manager to review discipline and grievance cases and compare against other Services.
6. Members were reminded that the Service has 850 staff, so the percentage of incidents were low, but it was appropriate to review to identify trends.

Arising from Members questions the following points were clarified:

1. In relation to discipline cases, the HR Manager agreed that it was difficult to be open and transparent about specific cases while also protecting employees and victims. The HR Manager asked Members to consider how they would prefer to receive HR information from her especially as she would be limited on how much detail she can provide to them in open reports.
2. Cllr Wilcox, as Chair of the P & C Committee asked for further details to be provided to him.

It was RESOLVED –

That the Employment Case update 2021-22 was noted.

10. CULTURAL CHANGE UPDATE 2022

The Committee received a report of the CIM who provided an update on the results of the focus groups facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS) during February and March this year. The focus groups were used to gain a more in-depth understanding of the negativity that, while noting the limited survey response, was reported most in three staff categories; those with 10+ years' service; corporate staff; and those who had experienced discrimination, prejudice, harassment, or bullying. The report proposed the next steps towards progressing our cultural journey following analysis of the data and information collated from qualitative report findings and these focus group sessions.

Earlier this year, the Service commissioned OCR to conduct a second culture survey to provide a snapshot of progress and themes identified in the first survey. The staff focus groups report of findings provides a summary of focus groups and provided an insight into emerging themes. Members had previously reviewed the first report which highlighted movement in progress.

Key points highlighted during COVID-19:

1. Staff attitudes changed, relationships in the organisation became more positive and caring.
2. Senior managers were far more visible and proactively engaged with staff.
3. There was more training and development on offer for staff which in turn had progressed staff promotion and leadership.

Issues identified in the survey included:

1. Consideration – managers should be equipped with better tools to deal with inappropriate behaviour and address issues at an early stage.
2. Zero tolerance approach to bullying and harassment – this was highlighted in particular around race and ethnicity and had not been previously raised in the Baker report.
3. The number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff in the Service is quite low and this would be investigated.
4. Need for better communication around diversity – it appeared that there were still pockets of mistrust around positive action and in particular the attitudes of staff towards female staff on station.
5. Training & Development – more focus was required on supervisors and managers understanding diversity and the barriers to processes.
6. Focus and concern that legacy issues identified in the first survey still remained, including wholtime aspects and a division between operational and corporate staff.

The CIM added that these points would be considered as objectives under the DICE strategy. When he joined the Service in 2018, he felt that the morale was low but since then had lifted and there were 'green shoots for improvement'. He added that colleagues were willing to engage and embed our values. There was still more work to be done, but major improvements had been made.

The CIM confirmed the next steps were:

1. Revise the 'Make Avon a better place to work' document which would result in a new culture change action plan.
2. Continue to promote culture and embed our values
3. Continue to work with and alongside HR including with recruitment
4. Focus on creating safe spaces – the BAME network would be reinstated and menopause and neurodiversity working groups set up.
5. To introduce quarterly snapshot surveys internally.

Arising from Members comments and questions the following points were clarified:

1. Members agreed that it was important that if employees weren't happy, they understood the reasons why so this could be investigated and resolved. The Fire Authority need to make sure that the culture is appropriate, that staff feel valued and wanted them to complete these surveys. It was worrying that there was a low take up. There have been improvements but there was more work still to be done and the AFA should work together to improve this.
2. It was noted that the response rate is low despite receiving reminders, but it could be worse in other public sector organisations. It was asked whether employees felt that there was little point completing the survey as it will take up their time and nothing would happen. Could a question be added to the Personal Development Review (PDR), to ask whether the survey had been completed? The CFO added that survey requests via email was common usage but, in some areas, this was not so appropriate such operational firefighters. It was agreed that the HR Manager and CFO would review this area of the PDR along with objectives including culture.
3. Members raised a query on the progression of staff within Control when applying for other positions within the organisation. The CFO explained that Control was the unique critical first point of contact and critical in terms of resourcing. Opportunities to move for progression could be a point of frustration as it was a small team, however, 2 control room staff had moved and 1 was on secondment.
4. Members referred to sections 1.6 and 1.7 on page 126 and were disappointed that staff were feeling undervalued especially those working in prevention. Members felt that this should be prioritised.
5. Members highlighted sections 1.12 -1.4 around slow decision making and questioned how these processes could be accelerated.
6. The CIM agreed that an action plan will be created for the 'key areas of consideration' highlighted.
7. Members asked whether staff are aware of and had the ability to use the Whistleblowing process? The HR Manager advised that staff were aware of the policy and process but hoped that it would not be necessary to use and that other avenues would be used first.

The CIM highlighted:

1. New recruits – he has been allocated a presenter slot at the wholetime training school. His observations of the recent intake showed an improvement in diversity including women and BAME.

2. Culture Change - there are two main areas which require review - our people and the structure of our organisation. The Transformation Team is working on policies, processes and impact assessments and the changes made will help to make our processes slicker and reduce stress within the workplace.

It was RESOLVED –

That the Culture Change Update 2022 was noted.

11. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT QUARTERLY REPORT

The t/ACFO provided a report to the Committee, on behalf of the Group Manager, Learning & Development, which provided an update on Operational Training and Organisational Development.

The key points highlighted were:

1. The Breathing Apparatus (BA) re-qualification course has moved to Hicks Gate Fire Station and could accommodate up to 40 firefighters a month. It was initially advised that 53 firefighters had an out-of-date BA qualification, but further analysis showed that 17 were booked on a course and 19 firefighters were on modified duties so the position was much stronger than initially thought.
2. Grenfell – the Phase 1 initial training had been carried out and phase 2 will start in mid-June in conjunction with Bristol City Council (BCC) and using high rise buildings in the Avon area.
3. Severn Park – the annual training plan began in April and focused on recruit training. Two wholtime training schools of 24 recruits have taken place along with three on call training schools of 20 firefighters of which AF&RS had 10 places on each course. The transfer of the BA course had allowed training to focus on new recruit training and increased use of large meeting rooms. In addition, SLT and AFA meetings had also made use of the larger rooms available.
4. Hazardous material and malicious threat training, such as marauding terrorist attack training, had taken place alongside South West Ambulance Services Foundation Trust (SWASFT) which included the best possible means to protect staff in these environments. There are also a number of trained speciality teams such as National Interagency Liaison Officers (NILO) at Hicks Gate and Clevedon.
5. National resilience teams are trained at Avon, who could be called to deliver specialty resource elsewhere such as the recent dam burst in Derbyshire.
6. Hazardous detection identification and monitoring capability had been recently assessed. The Service performed well with no improvements identified.
7. Technical rescue – the NFCC has released a rescue boat code. Training was previously provided at the Menai Straits channel. A firefighter has been seconded from Bath Fire station into Learning & Development, will be delivering the same course in the Severn estuary, which has the similar water conditions to the Menai Straits. This had reduced travel time, costs and had less impact on family life and could be offered to other Services in the future.

8. Recruits Training: the first Apprenticeship Course took place earlier this year and was 2 weeks longer than usual to receive the impact/updates from Weston College. All 24 recruits are now on station and would have touch points with Weston College up until their 2-year assessment. The second Apprenticeship Course started in April and HR are currently recruiting for the February 2023 school.
9. Development Pathways was launched in September 2021 – discussions would take place at PDR/appraisal and include where staff hope to be in the future and what actions are required to move themselves forward. There are 35 trained mentors in the Service to help with this progression.
10. Leadership Academy: This is based on Avon & Somerset Constabulary's version and is a suite of development courses for aspiring staff.
11. Mediation skills training for managers had been introduced, with the intention to deal with any issues at the earliest possible opportunity before they escalate.

In answer to Members questions the following points were clarified:

1. Mentoring – the t/ACFO outlined that staff were encouraged to volunteer to become a mentor and take the opportunity to be mentored.
2. The frequency of BA training – the t/ACFO advised that a tool is used to review if staff are out of compliance. Training numbers were restricted whilst at Severn Park, however, when analysed only 17 members of staff had not re-booked their training.
3. Members were pleased with the arrangement with Weston College, it was confirmed that the contract was ongoing.

**It was RESOLVED –
That the Learning & Development Quarterly Report was noted.**

12. GENDER PAY REPORTING

The Committee received a report from the CIM which provided an update on the Gender Pay Gap 2022.

The AFA as a public sector employer with more than 250 staff is required by law to publish gender pay gap information under the Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017. The gender pay gap shows the difference in the average pay between all men and women in a workforce. It compares hourly rates of pay and any bonuses staff may receive by gender, highlighting any areas of imbalance.

Key points emphasised were –

1. For the first time, there was a positive increase in favour of female staff. It was confirmed that since reporting had begun, there had been a reduction year on year. The Service still had a lower percentage in terms of other Fire and Rescue Services. This is due to an increased female representation in the middle and higher quartile bands. Staff had been given opportunities to progress including

attendance of courses such as Springboard. This was also reflected in initiatives being worked on by DICE and HR.

2. HR had made improvements on recruitment including community and partnership data bases, delivery of unconscious bias training and values-based questionnaire during the application stage. Recruits had mentioned that they had been impressed with the values-based questionnaires.
3. The Service continued to encourage female staff to apply for promotion and progression.

The t/ACFO mentioned that in recognition of his DICE work, the CIM had been awarded a Stepping Up 2022 Award. Many congratulations.

The report was proposed by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Bromley.

It was RESOLVED –

That the Committee noted and approved the content of the Gender Gap Report 2022 and to approve the publication of the Report.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting would take place on 16 September 2022 at 10.30am, at Headquarters.

14. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair proposed and Cllr Massey seconded and it was:

RESOLVED - that the public be excluded from the meeting during the following items of business on the grounds that they contain exempt information pursuant to Schedule 12A, Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972 and that in accordance with Schedule 12A, Part 2, paragraph 10 of the Local Government Act 1972 the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Cllrs Monk, Tucker, Jacobs, Davies and Hopkinson left the meeting at 11.55hrs whilst Cllrs Massey, Wilcox and Bromley remained.

15. CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF THE ORDINARY MEETING OF THE PEOPLE & CULTURE COMMITTEE HELD ON 4 MARCH 2022

Cllr Massey moved and Cllr Bromley seconded that the Minutes be approved.

RESOLVED – that the Confidential Minutes of the People & Culture Committee held on 4 March 2022 be approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

16. PENSION DISCRETION CASE

The Committee received a report from the Director of Corporate Services (DoCS) who provided a summary of the case. Officers from the Pension Administrators were available to assist with Member questions.

DoCS provided an overview of the papers provided to Members for a decision on a request from a former employee to exercise a pension discretion:

Two of the report recommendations were unanimously by Members and the Clerk would draft a letter of determination.

The meeting ended at 13.05hrs

Chair