

Mark Preece
Chief Fire Officer
Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Dave Norman MBE
Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries

20 January 2023

Dear Mark,

Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service revisit

Between September and November 2021, we inspected Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) and identified two causes of concern. In January 2022 we issued both causes of concern and made the following recommendations:

Cause of concern

The service hasn't done enough since the last inspection to embed its values and associated behaviours, and promote a positive workplace culture.

Recommendation

By 28 February 2022, the service should develop an action plan to:

- improve how it engages with its staff to gain their commitment to the service's values and associated behaviours;
- engage with its staff to develop a compelling vision of the service's future culture and set out a clear pathway to achieving this which staff can understand and relate to;
- make sure all staff understand the behaviours which are expected of them and how these relate to the service's culture;
- support managers to confidently challenge and manage inappropriate behaviour;
- establish effective measures to monitor and manage staff workloads; and
- make sure all staff have equitable access to appropriate welfare support.

Cause of concern

The service hasn't done enough since the last inspection to improve understanding and awareness of the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and remove barriers to embedding EDI in the service.

Recommendation

By 28 February 2022, the service should develop an action plan to:

- engage with its staff to develop clear EDI objectives and a plan to increase awareness of EDI and its importance across the organisation. This should include understanding and addressing the impact positive action is having on staff;
- improve how it engages and seeks feedback and challenge from all areas of the service;
- understand the reasons for low declaration of staff diversity information and put in place a plan to address this;
- assure itself it has effective grievance procedures. It should identify and implement ways to improve staff confidence in the grievance process; and
- improve the understanding and use of equality impact assessments in all aspects of its work, and consider if its policies and procedures are inclusive and support those with protected characteristics.

On 24 February 2022, you submitted an action plan setting out how you would address the areas of concern and the recommendations.

I don't underestimate the scale of the challenge and the amount of work your service will need to do to address these causes of concern. Culture and values is a cause of concern that hasn't been resolved following your service's inspection in June 2019. Because of this, I decided it would be beneficial to move your service into 'enhanced monitoring', which aims to provide support so services can improve and address causes of concern.

We have been in regular contact with you through Fire Performance Oversight Group (FPOG) and Checkpoint meetings. We have had a one-to-one meeting and there have been regular meetings between the service liaison lead, GFRS senior leaders and the improvement board. These have helped us keep oversight of your improvement programme and progress.

Between 14 and 21 November 2022, we revisited GFRS to review progress on the action plan. We interviewed staff who were involved in developing the action plan, including you as chief fire officer, as well as managers, partner organisations and staff with responsibility for the improvement programme. We also interviewed staff based at stations

and headquarters. On 28 November 2022, we shared our initial findings from the revisit with you. This letter provides an update on our findings.

Action plan

The service has a comprehensive two-year action plan covering both causes of concern. It was developed in consultation with some staff groups, service stakeholders, staff representative bodies and Gloucestershire County Council (GCC). The service wasn't able to consult with all staff given the short timeframe to produce the plan.

All elements of the plan are assigned to a named principal manager and strategic lead. They have responsibility for implementing the plan and providing regular progress updates to the improvement board. It is important this clarity of responsibility and accountability is maintained throughout the lifetime of the plan.

The service was reviewing its action plan during the revisit to make sure timeframes were achievable and tasks were appropriately scheduled. It is important the revised plan and timeframe maintain the initial momentum generated for the improvement programme.

The service recognises it needs additional resources, knowledge and experience to implement its improvement programme. It has sought resources and support from GCC, and guidance and advice from specialist organisations including the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), Local Government Association (LGA) and a company specialising in supporting culture change in public sector organisations.

The service's action plan includes some basic metrics to assess progress. The service recognises it needs to develop a range of more effective measures. This is so it can assure itself that the plan is achieving the required improvements to workplace culture and understanding of the importance of EDI. We look forward to seeing how the service addresses this.

Governance

GFRS has established a service improvement board to monitor and scrutinise progress on its action plan. Chaired by the deputy chief executive of GCC, the board is made up of representatives from GFRS, GCC, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the LGA. The board provides robust, objective and independent oversight and scrutiny.

The service is setting up further arrangements to report and monitor progress on the plan. These include the programme management board and senior leadership team. Political scrutiny of the plan and progress is provided by the cabinet and fire scrutiny committee at GCC.

At our revisit we found some governance arrangements were still developing. For example, the senior leadership team doesn't receive regular updates about the improvement plan and some members of the GCC fire scrutiny committee haven't received training for their role.

Communications and engagement

The service communicated the findings of its 2021 inspection, the causes of concern and its action plan to all staff. This has been done through a combination of senior leader visits, team briefings, email and video presentations. Staff we spoke to knew about the findings and that there was an action plan.

However, the service recognises that its communications aren't always received or understood by all staff. Some staff we spoke to weren't clear about the detail of the action plan, improvement priorities or who was responsible for particular parts of the improvement programme. They found the format and content of communications complicated, not easy to understand and sometimes difficult to access.

The service recently commissioned the LGA to review its internal and external communication arrangements, with a particular focus on the improvement programme. In October 2022, it received initial feedback and recommendations, and acknowledges that it needs to respond to the report quickly. It has appointed a new communications manager, with interim support provided by GCC. However, at the time of the revisit, work on a communications strategy to support the improvement plan hadn't started. This risks losing the communications initiative and damaging the fragile progress it has made to date.

Progress against causes of concern

Workplace culture and values

The service has prioritised work on improving workplace culture and ensuring its values and associated behaviours are accepted and understood by everyone. It has focused on increasing the visibility and approachability of its leaders, managing staff workloads and improving access to well-being support for staff.

GFRS has commissioned a specialist company to help it improve workplace culture. This includes a development programme for managers, which aims to establish a starting point for cultural intelligence as a foundation for culture improvement in the wider organisation. The company is also supporting GFRS to develop its people plan and a vision of its 'target culture'.

We recognise culture change isn't easy and will take time to achieve and be accepted and understood by everyone. However, we were pleased to see evidence that the service was starting to make progress and workplace culture was slowly starting to improve.

Most staff saw senior leaders and managers as more open, approachable and receptive to challenge. Excessive workloads were being better managed, and staff felt their well-being was a greater priority.

These improvements are welcome, but more work is needed to consolidate this progress, continue to establish and build trust with staff, and make sure improvement takes place across the service and is accepted and understood by everyone.

Understanding of the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion

The service has started to change its approach to promoting the importance of EDI. It has introduced a programme of station visits to discuss EDI and its importance in the workplace, which were well received by staff we spoke to.

Increased leader and manager visibility, openness and approachability have also contributed to the service's changed approach to EDI. Amended recruitment and promotion processes have an increased focus on EDI.

An EDI staff group has been established to work with staff on the service's improvement plans and topics affecting particular staff groups. This is a positive step, but the group had recently been introduced at the time of the revisit so not all staff knew of its existence or role. We look forward to seeing this initiative grow.

Most staff are starting to see small but positive changes. However, some groups continue to have little trust in the service's intent and commitment to improve. They feel isolated and don't believe positive change will happen. The service should consider what it can do to further work with, and build trust and confidence with, these groups. It should also think about how it can limit the influence previous poor service culture and unacceptable behaviour has on the changes it is trying to make.

During the revisit, it was apparent that discussions about inclusion and diversity were often limited to two or three of the [protected characteristics](#). More work is needed to make sure there is a broader understanding of inclusion and diversity that extends to all protected characteristics.

We were pleased to see the service had started to make gradual improvements in its approach to EDI. We recognise the service is undertaking a complex improvement programme. It will take time for this to achieve improved outcomes for staff and the public. Given the importance of EDI and the time needed to achieve change, the service should consider if its improvement programme is appropriately prioritised.

Conclusion

The revisit team were pleased to see the service had started to make progress on both causes of concern. We recognise the service has invested time and resources to develop its improvement programme and establish robust monitoring and governance arrangements. It has sought resources and support from GCC, the sector and partner organisations, ensuring it has firm foundations for the changes it wants to make. It is now in a position to increase the pace of progress.

Initial communications about our inspection findings and recommendations, and the service's improvement programme, mean most staff are well informed. However, the service should respond quickly to the recommendations made by the LGA to make sure it doesn't lose its initial momentum and builds on the fragile progress it has made to date.

There are signs that workplace culture is slowly starting to improve and there is a growing understanding of the importance of EDI.

We are satisfied with the service's current progress. Although changes to date have been small, it is now in a position to push ahead and we look forward to seeing this work continue over the coming months.

We will continue to monitor progress against the two causes of concern through updates from the service, FPOG and Checkpoint meetings. We will further assess progress against the recommendations when we next inspect the service in 2023.

This letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Wendy Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

HMI Wendy Williams

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services