

Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee

20th January, 2014 at 12 noon
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: Councillor Chambers (Chair);
Councillor Spence (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Delaney, Eustace, Hogarth, Tranter,
Wright and Young.

1/14 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 9th December, 2013 be approved as a correct record.

2/14 **Review of Non-Uniformed Sickness**

Further to Minute No. 33/13 (4th November, 2013), the Committee received a report on the activity and outcomes of the review of non-uniformed sickness absence including the possibility of incentives and the process of rewarding employees for attending work.

In developing the report a focus group with representatives from each Directorate had been set up and group members were asked to undertake some investigative work and feed back. The findings of this work had been encapsulated within a report to the Service's Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) and had been shared with trade unions. As a result of this approach it was identified that some common and specific themes were emerging from across the Directorates.

The Service had, over time, reported sickness absence as days lost as a full-time equivalent (FTE) to determine performance against key performance indicators. The focus group considered that at a time of financial pressures the actual cost of sickness absence should be reported. This would include the additional costs associated with the absence and not just the employees' pay.

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Members were surprised to hear of the incentive of the award of additional annual leave to green book staff in recognition of good attendance. It was noted that it had been agreed that this incentive would no longer be available for any new employees and that discussions were ongoing with trade unions with regard to the Service possibly “buying back” such additional leave.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the following recommendations agreed at the Services Strategic Advisory Group relating to the review of non uniformed sickness be noted:-
 - (a) to measure sickness absence by costs and days;
 - (b) to discontinue the process of giving additional leave for good attendance for employees not currently in receipt of this additional leave;
 - (c) to proactively support the robust implementation of the existing performance management framework for all employees; and
 - (d) the recommendations of SAG to improve employee attendance;
- (2) that progress against the recommendations, from the next financial year, be notified to the Committee through the quarterly reporting system.

3/14 **Equality and Diversity Quarterly Update**

Further to Minute No. 28/13 (21st October, 2013), the Committee received a quarterly Equality and Diversity update. The Equality and Diversity work review approved in October included a gap analysis against the Excellence level of the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) Equality Framework and its Equality Objectives. The timeframe drawn up to complete an early assessment against the key themes of the FRS Equality Framework had been complied with.

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The report made recommendations of actions that would align the Equality and Diversity work to The Plan whilst responding to the current gaps identified against the Excellence level of the FRS Equality Framework. The report also outlined the timeframes required to work towards excellence through a phased approach as agreed by the Corporate Board after consultation with the Strategic Advisory Group. This proposal also outlined the appropriate stage of the process to review the Equality Objectives. It also provided the Equality Workforce Monitoring Data as at 1st November, 2013 as required to be published annually under the Specific Duties of the Equality Act 2010.

In conclusion the report provided an overview of the Service's current progress with regard to the published WMFS Equality Objectives 2012-2015.

Members praised the initiatives that were being undertaken to ensure that equality and diversity objectives were met. With regard to the figures showing that although 80% of the practical tests were passed by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) candidates in the recent recruitment process, only 15% of the successful candidates were BME, members were informed that officers were examining the data, but that one reason might have been that many of the candidates were women. Members were also informed that candidates were measured by their fitness and therefore age was no barrier to recruitment.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the completion of the work agreed at the meeting of the 21st October 2013 meeting ne noted;
- (2) that the key recommendations for action moving forward to support the Service in achieving Excellence within the FRS Equality and Diversity Framework be approved;
- (3) that the Equality Workforce Monitoring data that the Service is required to publish by 31st January, 2014, in response to the regulations which came into force on 10th September 2011 under the Specific Duties of the Equality Act 2010, be received;

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- (4) that the overview of the Service's current progress against the existing West Midlands Fire Service Equality Objectives be endorsed.

4/14 **Firefighter Recruitment Processes Review**

The Committee received a report on the progress to date of the scrutiny review of firefighter recruitment processes.

At the first meeting of the Scrutiny Working Group on 25th November, 2013, members had received a report detailing the recent recruitment activity and the selection processes carried out. A presentation had also been delivered to members. 55 new entrants had been identified following this exercise. The Working Group had commented on the robust nature of the exercise and the thoroughness of the selection processes and the analysis undertaken.

Staffing figures had since indicated that a further 46 new entrants would be required between July and October, 2014. Whilst considering the options available, members agreed that the next group of high performers from the online process should be considered. In addition, those applicants who were unsuccessful at later stages during the first phase were being invited to re-enter the process at the written test stage. This second exercise was enabling members of the Working Group to interview those participating, both assessors and candidates, and to observe the selection tests as they were being carried out.

Members were informed that there were to be further selection tests over the week 27th to 31st January, 2014 and that members of the Working Group should contact Jo Simmonds if they wished to attend.

Resolved that the progress made on the scrutiny review of firefighter recruitment be noted.

5/14 **Prevention Strategy**

The Committee received a report on an overview of the Prevention strategy and approach and the relationship and links to key Performance Indicators.

Members were informed of the process of setting annual Performance Indicator targets and how, in the last ten years, the number of Accidental Dwelling Fires responded to by the Service had decreased by 36.9%. This figure however would not continue to decrease and numbers were starting to plateau. It was therefore safe and sensible to assume that whatever education or safety was put in place to reduce such fires the very nature of accidents was that there would always be some. In striving to reduce the number of incidents the Service was always looking at new ways to make contact with and support the vulnerable. However, influencing and reducing the number of incidents became harder with situations that were hard to predict and where people were hard to reach and the current economic climate started to have a significant impact.

In depth analysis of the links between the number of accidental dwelling fires and their causes was being undertaken but even without taking these findings into account there was still an overarching link between all associated performance indicators and social inequality and deprivation. Home safety checks were now undertaken on a point allocation system based on an individual's risk; if the individual was vulnerable and required specialist services they might be referred to a Vulnerable Persons Officer. The performance management of this points based approach was intended to encourage more effective engagement with partner organisations working with the most vulnerable people within communities. The recent Command Team review had restructured and refocused the teams towards this partnership approach by providing Partnerships Officers and Community Risk Reduction Officers to support the Command Team to deliver this agenda.

The current Prevention Strategy ensured that the commitment to reducing risks and improving community safety as determined in The Plan through prevention based activities was maintained to the highest possible standards to meet social, moral and legal responsibilities in making the West Midlands safer.

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It also ensured value for money in extracting the most benefit from the Service's prevention and protection activities.

The aim was to embed the principles of the Health and Wellbeing Agenda within this Strategy to ensure that prevention based activities supported both vulnerable individuals and vulnerable properties with particular reference to the economic and community value.

The report set out how the Service proposed to interact with its partners to enhance prevention measures under the headings of; tackling health inequalities, partnerships, data sharing, Serious Incident Reviews and proposals for overcoming the current barriers to implementation.

The Chair and members of the Committee were supportive of the initiatives being undertaken or proposed in the Prevention Strategy and would liaise with all Section 41 members of the Authority to encourage them to share the information on what the Service was doing and could provide in this area within their respective authorities. The Chair also felt that the Service should do more to publicise such work and on the Service's achievement of becoming the first fire and rescue service to achieve Marmot status.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the strategic approach to the Prevention Strategy be endorsed;
- (2) that members proactively support in their own areas and organisations:-
 - (a) data sharing initiatives;
 - (b) Command Teams to develop local partnerships;
- (3) that the process for gathering intelligence and embedding learning outcomes from the Serious Incident Review process be supported.

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6/14 **Work Programme 2013/14**

The Committee noted its work programme for 2013/2014.

(Meeting ended at 1.32 pm)

Contact Officer: Rosemary Jones Democratic Services Unit Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council 0121 569 3896
