WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 DECEMBER 2023

1. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Report of the Chair of Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDED

1.1 THAT the Committee considers and approves the learning and recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Training and Development.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

For the Committee to receive the final report from the review which provides a summary of the findings and recommendations for improvement which conclude this review.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 At Scrutiny Committee on 24 April 2023, members agreed a terms of reference for a Scrutiny Review of Training and Development. This set out four specific aims for the review:

- Establish if the training and development approach taken by West Midlands Fire Service achieves the needs of the Service, in particular groups that are underrepresented in leadership roles.

- Identify the role of innovation and technology to enable approaches to training and development in improving effectiveness, efficiency and accessibility for all staff with particular attention to Neurodiversity.

- Actions to ensure inclusiveness and equality in how training is developed and delivered for all staff, especially those from groups which are currently underrepresented within the service.

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- Staff and specifically recruit experiences of training and development – what works well, and where further improvement could be made.

3.2 The review also aimed to explore in more depth how the service is delivering or going to deliver recommendations 26, 32 and 33 or the HMICFRS Spotlight Report on Culture and Values.

3.3 As part of the member-led approach to the review, Scrutiny Committee Members ran three engagement sessions with key stakeholder groups as part of review process. These were:

- Focus Group Session with WMFS Stakeholder Groups (Affinity, AFSA, FireOut, Inspire and Neurodiversity) held at Headquarters on 11 September 2023.

- Focus Group Session with watches held at Canley Fire Station on 25 September 2023.

- Focus Group Session with trainee firefighters at Walsall Fire Station on 26 October 2023.

4.   DISTRIBUTED TRAINING MODEL REVIEW

4.1 At the same time that this review was being developed, the service has been undertaking an internal review of our Distributed Training Model.

4.2 The DTM review is aimed at understanding the benefits and disbenefits of the existing mode, and developing a training model which delivers the most efficient and effective development to our staff across the suite of core competencies.

4.3 The review will ensure that our staff can be assertive, effective and safe at operational incidents, while also ensuring the effective use of resources and funding.

4.4 The DTM review team were able to follow the sessions highlighted in paragraph 3.3.

4.5   The review will report to SET in January 2024.

5.   KEY LEARNING AND FINDINGS FROM THE REVIEW

5.1   Below is an overview of the key learning and findings from the background research and three engagement sessions held as part of the review.

5.2   Overall experience of training

5.2.1   There were some strong views expressed about the weakness of the Distributed Training Model (DTM), and specifically the fact that this had mostly become assessment, rather than training focused. Some of those we spoke to felt that we were only expecting people to meet a minimum standard and no more, and that some staff were happy to only do the minimum, rather than push for excellence.

5.2.2   Beyond the basic level, which it was felt was delivered well, there was a desire to see an improvement in the consistency of the support and training available to operational crews. Often, the skills of a watch would be dependent upon the expertise and assessors that may be based at that watch or station. There was recognition that competitions and similar events allowed crews to train more and aim for excellence, but that this was self-driven, and not a requirement.

5.2.3   Station based assessors were seen to be of varying quality, especially as they did not receive additional training as part of becoming an assessor. Therefore, their competency is reliant either on skills already developed or work done outside of usual training. FREC training was given as an example of an area where the officers who deliver the training are specifically trained to a higher standard, including external CPD, but this isn't the case for most other specialisms.

5.2.4   Good station-based assessors were felt to have a high workload, especially those passionate about their area of expertise who would have to spend a lot of their own time either providing additional support to colleagues or preparing for training and assessment events. A single training session might require many hours of additional work to

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organise and then write up feedback for participants. This was made harder because of the lack of technology offered to assessors – such as laptops or mobile phones, making it hard to do this work away from station. The workload was also felt to impact on assessor's own training and skills and could be impacted by the need to support others, making it more difficult to, for example, get time to wear BA.

5.2.5 There was a concern that this workload, and the negative approach to development from some individuals, would put off other staff members from becoming assessors. The workload, with no additional financial benefit, and the large amounts of paperwork for some specialisms, was seen as a barrier.

5.2.6 Incident command training was highlighted as a particular area of weakness, especially for those at Watch and Crew manager level, where they had less access to a centralised resource and the "Command Fridays" that Flexi Duty System (FDS) officers have access to (which is Station and Group Manger level). Again, this is something that is impacted by the quality of support on any given watch or station – some operational staff who may wish to progress are limited by the skills of their superiors on station, who would need to provide support. Some would actively discourage others from trying to progress.

5.2.7 There was a view that more centralised training would be beneficial, or at least more centrally directed training provided by a pool of more expert trainers, delivered more locally. Conversely, it was recognised that centralised approaches took up a lot of time in travel, and that it reduced the overall resources available to respond to emergencies.

5.2.8 Time is regarded as a challenge, both because crews and officers have so many other priorities – from prevention and engagement work to administration which whilst priorities and important areas of work, distracts from training. Because time can rarely be held exclusively for training, operational incidents can be very disruptive to training, especially where it has to be delivered all in one go and a crew/officer cannot be off the run for the whole period.

5.2.9 Access to equipment was a challenge, as this could either require that it be booked long in advance – making ad hoc or rapid follow up training difficult or could not be accessed at all, because it had gone missing or ended up somewhere other than the centralised stores.

5.2.10 The other "soft" skills required for crews to undertake Prevention work such as Safe and Wells and community engagement are not a part of core training, and although information is available, it is largely online or via e-learning. The skills do develop naturally over time, and some are better placed for it than others. Again, people's confidence in this area may be dependent upon the support they have around them from their managers and watch, with people sharing their skills and experience.

5.2.11 Training for non-operational staff was recognised as much more ad hoc, and less well organised as there is no central list of competencies. Training and upskilling has to be more self-motivated. This in turn has impacts on progression.

5.3 **Overall experience of development and progression**

5.3.1 It was felt that supervisory managers in particular need more support to help develop their staff. The experience of those we spoke to was very mixed, with some supervisory managers being great inspirations who helped them on in their careers, while others were very much barriers who had "old school" attitudes which meant they feel everyone has to "do their time" before they can progress.

5.3.2 Feedback indicated a desire to see an all-round improvement in talent management skills within the organisation, to enable officers at all levels to spot talented individuals and help them to progress. This needed to extend beyond the usual routes for progression and promotion and better recognise the range of people's skills and their learning styles.

5.3.3   Linked to this, it was felt there was a need to improve retention (especially for underrepresented groups, see Section 6.4) and understanding of why people feel they need to leave the service – such as through the exit interview process. In this area we may be missing opportunities to understand what support could be offered to keep someone with the service, or to help them understand a potential path of progression within the organisation.

5.3.4   From the smaller number of green book staff we spoke with, there was felt to be fewer opportunities to progress within the organisation both because there are fewer green book roles, but also because the processes used for progression were designed around the operational, grey-book workforce. The smaller number of roles open to green book staff, and the more specialist nature of their roles means they will have fewer opportunities and less experience when it comes to promotion processes, especially when "up against" grey-book colleagues who may have had dozens of opportunities to pursue such a process.

5.3.5   Although it was recognised that the NFCC Leadership Framework was a positive development, there was concern that this produced "clones" in terms of management style and approach, as all officers meet the same standards and undertake a lot of the same training. This may have limitations on the diversity of leadership styles and approaches to management.

5.4   **Underrepresented groups specific experience of training and development**

5.4.1   Many of the points covered within 6.2 have particular resonance for staff from underrepresented groups. Identifying talent is particularly important for underrepresented groups if we are to ensure these groups progress and form part of our supervisory, middle and senior management cohort. We know that some groups are particularly underrepresented at certain management levels, and those we spoke to believe more could be done to support groups through these processes.

5.4.2   In our discussion with Networking Groups, it was strongly expressed that there is a need to increase understanding of the value of diversity amongst staff, and why interventions such as positive action has benefit for the service.

5.4.3   It was also recognised that role models in leadership positions and just in the role were important both for encouraging people to join the service and for those who may wish to progress within it. However, those in such a role have to give a lot of their own time and energy to being a role model, especially when they may be one of only very few in that position. Others seeing this may be put off playing a similar role both because of the workload and because of a desire to fit in within existing fire service culture.

5.4.4   The same is true of our networking groups, which play an important role in supporting underrepresented groups and informing the services policies and initiatives around DICE. However, while they do receive support from the service, they are largely a voluntary endeavour, and there are risks to their longer-term sustainability if they continue to be reliant upon good-will.

5.4.5   There was recognition of the importance of development opportunities specially aimed at underrepresented groups, such as the Women in the Fire Service Conference. Our Networking Groups

5.4.6   We heard that those that do put themselves forward, and who are seeking to advance in the organisation have faced poor attitudes and in some cases abuse, be that internal or external. They encouraged a more proactive approach to tackling abuse of those that put themselves forward as role models, for example online, and more effort to tackle those that claim that women, BAME or other candidates are promoted because of that fact, rather than on merit. It was claimed other fire services had taken a stronger line on this in defending their staff.

5.5 **The role of innovation and technology in training and development**

5.5.1 It was noted that the move towards increasing amounts of e-learning, while understandable from an efficiency perspective, meant operational staff had over a hundred courses a year to complete. There was a desire for more face-to-face learning, and a greater recognition of different learning styles. Those with neurodiversity, specifically dyslexia or ADHD, struggle with reading and engaging with large amounts of written training.

5.5.2 It was felt that the suggested approach to a "Distributed Training Team" could utilise new technologies to improve the training offered on a station while also reducing the impact of that training approach, for example by utilising more sustainable vehicles to bring equipment necessary for training, rather than relying on bringing equipment on PRLs.

5.6 **Twelve-week Trainee Firefighter Development Programme**

5.6.1 Feedback from Trainees around the extended, 12-week course was very positive. Trainees found the content of the course engaging, and even where aspects were difficult or challenging, understood why they were necessary, and felt supported in meeting the challenge.

5.6.2 Those interviewed were confident in how they could raise concerns and issues with their trainers, line managers or through other channels such as VIVUP. The trainees welcomed the ongoing support that would be provided to them by the training team even once they start on station.

5.6.3 Recruits felt that while their relationships as a group were positive, more could be done to help them bond as a unit, especially early in the programme when new to one another.

5.6.4 Trainees reflected on the intensity of the course and travel to and from training locations and discussed the importance of maintaining work-life balance, although there was also recognition this differed depending on age, location and family circumstances.

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5.6.5 Trainees highlighted First Response Emergency Care (FREC) as a particularly intense and complex part of the course, and therefore somewhere where additional time and focus would be welcome.

5.6.6 In multiple areas trainees would like to see more practical exercises alongside theoretical or classroom-based work for some areas, especially in the early days of the course when there is a particular focus on classroom-based activity.

5.6.7 Trainees and trainers both recognised that additional equipment and resources would have a positive benefit, especially as equipment used is often older than that used on station (e.g., appliances with manual rather than digital pumps), and there have been challenges with equipment breakdowns and wear and tear.

5.7 **Delivering on the HMICFRS Spotlight Report on Culture and Values**

5.7.1 Recommendation 26 from the Spotlight Report calls on Chief Fire Officers to "work with the Home Office [and NFCC] to consider how they can improve the training and support they offer to staff in management and leadership development. This should include authority members in respect of their assurance leadership roles and should ensure that opportunities are offered fairly across all staff groups."

5.7.2 Recommendation 32 requires that "chief fire officers should, as a priority, specify in succession plans how they intend to improve diversity across all levels of the service. This should include offering increased direct-entry opportunities." The Senior Officer team is already working with an external consultancy to better understand opportunities for improvement on diversity in middle and senior management.

5.7.3 Recommendation 33 requires that "Chief Fire Officers should develop plans to promote progression paths for existing staff in non-operational roles and put plans in place to reduce any inequalities of opportunity." Career development pathways will be introduced early 2024 as the first step to developing this.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 The below recommendations are categorised by the different elements of the agreed terms of reference of the review.

6.2 In making these recommendations, the Committee understands that the service is undertaking improvement work in a number of areas, and appreciates that the service is operating within significant financial constraints which may limit the capacity to implement such changes.

6.3 **Improving the training experience**

6.3.1 Recommendation – Investment in training equipment

Officers are recommended to investigate how the service can invest in additional training equipment to allow stations/watches to undertake more ad hoc training in a wider range of areas, without needing to wait a long time for equipment. A more effective approach to storage and distribution may also assist, so less equipment is misplaced or damaged. This has been similarly recognised for trainees under 6.4.1. below.

6.3.2 Recommendation – Consider balance of online and face-to-face learning

It is apparent that a significant number of staff struggle to engage with e-learning and would prefer more face-to-face training. Although e-learning clearly provides benefits in terms of accessibility and cost, officers should seek to understand how this balance might be changed and more can be done to support those whose learning style is not suited to a largely text-based approach.

Officers are currently reviewing the current suite of e-learning packages to identify, given the topic covered, their suitability as an e-learn and whether alternative approaches would be more valuable.

6.3.3 Recommendation – Improve support for station-based assessors

Station based assessors do a hugely important job and at their best are critical to driving excellence in the service. However, they are hampered by the weight of their workload and a lack of equipment to improve their effectiveness, and it appears there is a significant difference in the quality and workload of those undertaking the role. Officers are recommended to explore how SBAs could be provided with access to electronic equipment, such as laptops, to support their work, and more protected time within their role as a means of encouraging more people to become SBAs and as a means to recognising the significant additional effort required to do the job well.

6.3.4 <u>Further Consideration – Consider more station-based training around prevention activity and community engagement</u>

Prevention and community engagement are a core part of the fire service's work. While resources are available, they are mostly text-based and online. Officers should consider how they can provide more station-based and face-to-face skills training for all crews to support them in engaging and communicating with more vulnerable members of the community. Complex Needs Officers, who already have enhanced skills, could play a role in supporting this.

6.3.5 <u>Further Considerations – Development of Distributed Training Team</u>

Although it is recognised that there are resource and financial limitations, officers are encouraged to consider whether more could be done to provide a Distributed Training Team approach, rather than a heavy reliance on station-based assessment (which can still have a role). Some elements of this are already being recognised in the DTM Review.

6.4 **Trainee experience**

6.4.1 <u>Recommendation – Consider increased equipment and resource provision for training school</u>

Officers should consider what can be done to provide trainees with access to newer equipment to improve the

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training experience and ensure trainees are well prepared when they go onto station. Given the vital role that TFDP plays in setting up our firefighters to succeed in their future careers, officers should consider whether the level of resources, including training staff, could be increased.

6.4.2   Recommendation – Continue to ensure trainees are aware of support options

We were pleased to see that Trainees were well aware of the range of support that would be offered to them both while undertaking their training and once they were on station, including access to the service's mental health support, confidential reporting line and ongoing support from training school officers once they go on to station. We recommend that officers continue to monitor this level of understanding to ensure all trainees in future feel similarly supported.

6.4.3   Further Consideration –steps to improve team bonding for trainees

Bonding with their colleagues and feeling a sense of belonging is key to supporting our trainees to succeed. Based on the feedback received, officers should consider the feasibility of a short residential portion of the training course would be helpful. It is important to recognise that some trainees will have caring and other commitments, and that suitable flexibilities are considered, and to recognise the recent changes already made to this trainee course.

6.5   **Supporting underrepresented groups to train and develop**

6.5.1   Recommendation – Specific focus on progression into supervisory and middle manager posts for underrepresented groups.

Although WMFS has clearly improved the proportions of underrepresented groups in its workforce – with more improvement to come – it is equally important representation improves at every level. Officers are advised to make better use of the data collected on BAME, Women and other underrepresented groups at supervisory, middle and senior

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manager levels to understand what barriers may exist for those groups to progress into those roles. We recommend also that the service more explicitly communicate the benefits of a representative workforce not just in general but at every level of the workforce.

6.5.2 <u>Recommendation – Implement additional training for supervisory managers to support training and development consistently</u>

It is clear that supervisory managers (such as those at Crew and Watch Manager level) play a critical role in supporting their staff to develop and progress within the organisation. However, it appears the training they receive in this area is patchy and therefore an individual's experience can change significantly depending on who their supervisory managers are. Supporting and coaching others is a specific skill and requires training to be delivered effectively, so officers should consider how coaching and people development can form part of the Supervisory and Middle Manager Development Programmes.

6.5.3 <u>Recommendation – Invest additional support in Stakeholder groups, including protected time for those leading them.</u>

The stakeholder groups (Affinity, AFSA, FireOUT, Inspire and Neurodiversity) play an important role in supporting the service's efforts to be a more inclusive and diverse employer that can adapt to the needs of underrepresented groups.

The individuals who run these networks do amazing work in their own time and also act as inspirational leaders within the service. It is clear that this places a particular burden on them on top of their day-to-day roles. There is a risk that this will prove a barrier to the future leaders of this group. The service should consider introducing protected time for those leading the groups, as well as more specific financial support for their work, especially if they are to be expected to play a more formal part in service processes.

6.5.4 <u>Further Consideration – Make better use of exit interview process to understand reasons for leaving.</u>

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Retention of underrepresented groups is as important as recruiting more, particularly as existing staff are often role models for those that may join in future. Staff will leave the service for many reasons, including many that have nothing to do with working conditions or the service's conduct as an employer. However, it will be important for the service to understand the reasons why, and in particular for underrepresented groups. Officers should consider how more comprehensive information can be collected from exit data, and whether this might be reported to the Scrutiny Committee.

6.6 **Ensuring diversity in leadership**

6.6.1 Recommendation – strengthen support for talented individuals including making adjustments

Talent management is key to ensuring high potential individuals are supported to succeed. In particular, strengthening support, and making greater adjustments for those from underrepresented groups would help support greater diversity in all parts of the service. In particular accounting for neurodiversity as a part of talent programmes is recommended.

6.6.2 Recommendation – Collect data on unsuccessful candidates from underrepresented groups

Understanding not only the background of successful but also unsuccessful candidates (both internal and external) for roles at all levels of the service is important to understand whether unconscious bias or other issues may be impacting on the selection process and limiting opportunities for underrepresented groups. Officers are recommended to start collating and scrutinising this data, with a view to reporting on a regular basis to Scrutiny Committee.

6.6.3 Further Consideration – Consider wider use of independent interview panels

Although the service's progression pathway is based on good practice and based on the recognised NFCC Leadership Framework, it is important that this does not limit the breadth of candidates that are considered for roles and

that there is a diversity of thought and leadership styles as well as of ethnicity, gender etc. Officers are asked to consider whether independent interview panels may support the service in identifying a wider diversity of leadership talent for the future.

7.   TIMESCALE FOR FEEDBACK

7.1   The Committee asks that Officers provide a response on the above recommendations for a future Scrutiny Committee meeting in six months' time, including an update on the outcomes of the review of the Distributed Training Model once it has been completed.

8.   EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

In preparing this report an initial Equality Impact Assessment not required and has not been carried out. The matters contained in this report do not currently relate to a policy change. Initial Equality Impact Assessment(s) will be completed for changes to policy, process or practice resulting from the implementation of the recommendations from the review.

9.   LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no known legal implications arising from this report.

10.   FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

11.   ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no environmental implications arising from this report.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 24 April 2023 – Scrutiny Review of Training and Development: Terms of Reference

- 17 July 2023 – Scrutiny Review of Training and Development: Progress Report

- HMICFRS Spotlight Report on Culture and Values

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