

Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee

13 November 2017 at 10:30 p.m.
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham

Present: Councillor Tranter (Chair),
Councillors Barlow (substitute), Barrie, Brackenridge,
Male, Miks, Spence and Young

Apologies:

Councillor Hogarth

Observer:

Nil

32/17 Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

33/17 Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 09 October 2017

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 09 October 2017, be approved as a correct record.

34/17 Scrutiny of Positive Action and Firefighter Recruitment

Sarah Warnes, Strategic Enabler People Support Services, and Wayne Roe, Crew Commander Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion, Equality (DICE) provided an overview of the report:

It was noted that the workforce profile of the Service and the working population of the West Midlands did not match. There was an opportunity to change the workforce profile due to

approximately 29% of the workforce due to retire over the next four years.

Ambitious recruitment targets had been set as follows:

2017/2018 - 20% of new starters will be women
- 35% of new starters will be Black Minority Ethnic (BME)

2018/2019 - 40% of new starters will be women
- 35% of new starters will be BME

2019/2020 - 50% of new starters will be women
- 35% of new starters will be BME

2020/2021 - 60% of new starters will be women
- 35% of new starters will be women

An intelligence gathering exercise had been undertaken, focussing on the Community Members, with specific regard to understanding the potential barriers faced by underrepresented groups. It found that many women did not believe they were fit / strong enough to undertake the role of a firefighter, and people from Black Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds cited the lack of positive role models within the Fire Service as a reason to not apply.

The Service had developed a new approach to its recruitment, based on three phases; attraction, selection, and onboarding.

All recruitment marketing was now targeted at specific groups. A series of taster days had been developed (these were targeted by holding them in the most diverse areas of the West Midlands which naturally led to more diverse attendance). A pre-recruitment course specifically for women had also been run which allowed some of the attendees' areas of concern to be addressed. It was noted that following this course, all attendees had applied and the success rate was high. Fitness sessions had also been held to help address areas of concern, where delegates were offered advice on fitness and nutrition.

The Service was also working in partnership with a number of organisations to help reach underrepresented groups such as Airwaves Media which features bespoke taster sessions targeted at the South Asian communities.

The Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion, Equality (DICE) station initiative had been designed to embed equality objectives across the organisation, helping to drive cultural change and to capture evidence and good practice (providing real measurables around the DICE objectives).

Assessment and selection criteria previously featured a requirement for GCSE grades A - C in English and Maths. This requirement had been removed and changed to an online assessment which would remove a barrier that had been identified. In liaison with the Fire Service College, the Service had developed a new set of tests which would enable a new way of sifting candidates to ensure that they were likely to pass the tests and be successful in the process.

The online assessment would be followed by a newly developed assessment day which involves group discussion and roleplay enabling behavioural assessment. The interview had now been changed so that it was based around a candidate's personal statement.

To date, 50 people had progressed to the assessment day, of which 48% were female and 29% were from a BME background.

In answer to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- 22 new recruits were due to start in January 2018, of which ten were female and seven were from a BME background, which was a large improvement on previous recruitment processes.
- The nurturing pool was an important addition to the process particularly as a number of candidates may not have engaged with the Fire Service previously.
- The removal of the requirement for GCSE grades A – C in Maths and English was applicable to all candidates.

- There were no national entry requirements for new recruits. Fire Services could set their own requirements for new recruits.
- All applicants and new recruits were expected to meet the same standard, however how applicants got to that standard could differ, for example a lot of the issues raised were often confidence related and hence support provided by the Service could help applicants who would have potentially exited the process previously.
- It was acknowledged that positive action initiatives could alienate some groups, however there had been no evidence of this to date. Indeed, the pre-recruitment courses and fitness sessions were supported by stations and staff, providing them with a greater understanding of the process.
- A 'buddying' approach to training would be developed and introduced to the recruitment process.
- It was acknowledged that the previous recruitment process had resulted in only two women joining, out of a total of 27 recruits. However, it was noted that the recruitment process had been based on the previous approach. The most recent recruitment process which had resulted in ten women and seven people from BME backgrounds (out of a total of 22 recruits), was based on the new approach and represented a positive improvement.

35/17 Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion, Equality (DICE) Update

Sarah Warnes, Strategic Enabler People, provided an overview of the report:

The Community Members initiative continued to be successful and represented a good cross section of people. Working with Community Members helped the Service to break down barriers. Engagement had been sought on a number of issues including recruitment, consultation around the Integrated Risk Management Plan, and other key consultations.

The DICE Station initiative was designed to embed the approach to DICE in the organisation and was currently being piloted across 11 stations, before being rolled out across the wider organisation.

A new Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender support forum, 'FireOut', had been launched through the commitment of staff. A Crew Commander had featured in a video promoting the support forum.

The Service had joined the Disability Confidence Scheme, a national scheme which provided external assessment of the Service. The Service was currently at level one and aspired to be at level two. The Service had also reapplied for the top 50 employers list again, after attaining 31st on the list last year. The process had been completed and the Service were now waiting for feedback.

Declaration rates amongst staff in the Service regarding protected characteristics was high, reflecting that staff felt they could declare. It also allowed the Service to better understand its workforce.

The Service was working in partnership with the Fire Service College regarding recruitment. Very stringent targets had been set by the Service which were aspirational and pushing the boundaries.

In answer to Members questions, the following points were raised:

- It was agreed that a link to the FireOut promotional video would be circulated to Members of the Committee.
- It was noted that the recruitment questionnaire sent to Community Members had resulted in only 270 responses (out of a possible 3000). This reflected a learning curve for the Service and the questionnaire was a starting point regarding engagement about recruitment. Focus groups were being considered as an alternative means of engagement in addition to striving for a larger number of responses to future questionnaires.

36/17 Analysis of Progress of Quarterly Performance against The Plan Quarter Two 2017/18

Gary Taylor, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, provided an overview of the report:

Performance Indicator (PI) 1 'Risk Based Attendance Standard' recorded a median average of 4 minutes 38 seconds for category one type incidents during quarter two. Over performance was recorded for category two, three and four incident types, protecting the category one response.

PI 2 'The number of accidental dwelling fires' were within the tolerance levels and therefore on target. It was noted that performance was bucking the national trend, however the figures were tight and close to the upper tolerance level.

There had been four fatalities during quarter two. Although the number was relatively low compared to previous years, every one fatality was one too many.

PI 5 'The percentage of Safe and Well referrals' although the target had not been met (having been raised to 50% for this year), progress had been made. Reasons for missing the target had been examined and a few changes to processes had been made to help improve performance and as a result, the direction of travel was positive.

PI 7 'Number of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions': the national trend was observing an increase in the numbers. The Service was looking at hotspots differently, including the use of technology and the implementation of legislation. The number of killed and seriously injured remained significant and the Service continued to work hard to reduce the figures but recognised that the actions of the Fire Service were only part of the solution.

Arson related incidents had been a problem over the last two years. PI 8 'The number of arson fires in dwellings' remained over target and above the upper tolerance level but the direction of travel had slowed down. An arson plan had been developed and all domestic arson incidents were fully investigated as the stance of the Service was that such incidents were an attempt on life.

PI 9 'The number of arson fires in non-domestic premises': performance was over target and above tolerance. The Service continued to liaise with HMP Birmingham. The number of incidents were significantly less than they were previously, however issues continued.

PI 10 'The number of arson vehicle fires' was a priority within the arson plan. The number of incidents had reduced significantly and performance was rated as within the tolerance levels and therefore green. This was a success story and the aim would be to maintain this performance and then to focus on other areas.

PI 11 'The number of arson rubbish fires': performance was above target and the upper tolerance level and therefore red. This was largely attributed to a warm summer.

PI 12 'The number of arson fires in derelict buildings': performance had moved back to within the tolerance levels and therefore rated as green. The Local Authority model had proved successful and continued to be rolled out.

PI 13 'The number of accidental fires in non-domestic premises': performance remained below target and within the tolerance levels. The Service was focussing on the most vulnerable.

PI 14 'The number of false alarm calls due to fire alarm equipment in dwellings and non-domestic premises': performance remained below target and within the tolerance levels. 99% of incidents were false alarms. The Business Support Vehicles continued to attend automatic fire alarms to provide fire safety advice and to protect PRLs (ensuring those appliances were available to respond to category one incidents).

Sarah Warnes, Strategic Enabler People Support Services, provided an overview of the performance indicators for People Support Services and Facilities Management:

PI 15 'The percentage of employees that have disclosed their disability': performance was within the tolerance levels and therefore rated green. A declaration rate of 93% was high, and the Service continued to target individuals advising them of the importance of declaring their status.

PI 16 'The number of female uniformed staff': performance remained within the tolerance levels with two female new recruits joining in July, with more due to join the Service over the coming months / quarters. In terms of progression, 28% of female uniformed staff were in management roles, compared to 14% in 2012/13, representing a positive direction of travel.

PI 17 'The percentage of all staff from BME communities': performance remained on target with a slight increase in the percentage observed during quarter two.

PI 17a 'The percentage of uniformed staff from BME communities': performance remained on target. In terms of progression 29% of uniformed BME staff were in management roles, compared to 20% in 2012/13.

PI 18 'The average number of working days / shifts lost due to sickness – all staff': performance was above target and above the upper tolerance level, and therefore rated red.

It was noted that the Service had set challenging targets for both uniformed and non-uniformed staff.

PI 19 'The average number of working days / shifts lost due to sickness – uniformed and Fire Control staff': performance was above target but within the tolerance levels and therefore rated as green. It was noted that the National Fire Chiefs Council published a report every six months which provided a breakdown of sickness levels across the sector. The report indicated that the Service had the best attendance levels of all metropolitan fire services and was rated eighth across the whole sector. It was important that the Service was compared against other metropolitan fire services as it was noted that different fire services experienced different drivers, particularly those with higher percentages of on call firefighters.

The number of individuals on restricted duties had increased in quarter two, however the number of days had decreased.

PI 20 'The average number of working days / shifts lost due to sickness – non-uniformed staff': performance was above target and above the upper tolerance level and therefore rated red.

PI 21 'The total number of injuries': performance was above target but within the tolerance levels and therefore green. An issue with ten reports of skin reddening / burns being experienced during tactical ventilation training had been reported during the previous quarter. The Health and Safety Committee had assessed the tactical ventilation training and guidance had been issued reaffirming firefighting skills and how they are applied, reminding staff to take two lots of fire kit with them when attending the training, and to undertake regular kit resizing to ensure kit fitted correctly.

PI 22 'The total number of RIDDOR injuries': with four injuries, performance remained below target and below the lower tolerance level.

PI 23 'To reduce the Fire Authority's carbon emissions' was reported on annually.

PI 24 'To reduce gas use of Fire Authority premises' and PI 25 'To reduce electricity use of Fire Authority premises': the performance of both PIs were below target and below the lower tolerance level, reflecting the high standards achieved to date.

In answer to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- The pre-alert system worked on the same principle as the system used by organisations such as the AA which enabled call handlers to determine almost immediately which resource would be going to a call 99% of the time. The system used telephone signals to locate the nearest resource to the origin of the call. This would enable Fire Control to pre-mobilise whilst a call was being taken (calls were handled in approximately 80 seconds). The pre-mobilisation would allow the relevant crew to get ready, knowing that a call was incoming, and be in the appliance in preparation for Fire Control to state where the incident was. This could save up to one minute in the response time. In terms of progress, the pre-alert system would be trialled following the go-live of the Vision 4 mobilising system.
- The Service used the median figure for measuring the response times as it was the accepted standard across Fire

Services and the methodology was consistent with the Home Office returns provided by the Service. In answer to a question regarding the total number of category one incidents, it was noted that it was an average risk based attendance that was recorded and that the exact numbers would be reported back to the Committee as part of the next quarterly performance update.

- The total number of Safe and Well points achieved broken down by Command showed that the amount achieved by Coventry and Solihull was lower than other Commands, although an increase had been observed compared to the previous quarter. However, this did not necessarily reflect the differences between the Commands, in that Coventry was comparatively unique compared to others due to the commissioned work carried out within the area such as falls response and hospital discharge services. These took longer than 'regular' safe and well checks but did score very high in terms of vulnerability.
- Safe and Well checks took approximately one hour and require regular maintenance.
- Services such as falls response were helping to build relations with other organisations which was resulting in high quality referrals.
- Food banks provided an opportunity to engage with vulnerable individuals and it was important that referral mechanisms were in place at such facilities. Fire stations were also available to be used as neutral locations for food banks. Members were encouraged to promote what the Service could offer to organisers and users of food banks.
- The number of arson incidents could be higher than the number of accidental dwelling fires, however accidental dwelling fires often posed a higher risk and therefore were a focus of the Service. The most significant impact on public areas were arson vehicle fires and arson rubbish fires and a variety of approaches were taken by Commands to tackle these types of incidents including target hardening, engaging with communities, and multi-agency working. With regard to abandoned vehicles, pump priming funding used to be

available but not anymore, and the responsibility for dealing with such a vehicle was often unclear but the Service's approach was to remove the vehicle first and then ascertain responsibility, thereby removing the problem and ensuring it did not escalate. A breakdown of the percentage of incidents that were accidental or arson related would be provided in the next quarterly performance update.

- The Service was committed in its approach to wellbeing and was actively raising awareness of mental health and other issues. The Service had linked in to Mind and had a plan to increase its support to promote mental wellbeing. Additionally, mental health first aiders had recently been introduced in the Service which provided individuals the opportunity to speak with peers who could be seen as more approachable than more formal contacts such as line managers. Occupational Health also continued to offer a variety of support to individuals. The Service would continue to build upon and develop the support available to staff.
- Display Screen Equipment user would be a classification for a firefighter (having previously not been) and this would allow firefighters to claim for eye tests, etc.
- In reference to the injuries sustained during tactical ventilation training, it was acknowledged that situations where firefighters received injuries whilst training was a very serious issue. The training facilities featured temperature monitors and alarms would trigger if a maximum temperature was reached. However, burns could be negated via the application of an individual, for example applying water cooling in the correct manner to reduce the amount of steam generated, and acknowledging positioning in the room and maintaining an awareness of any hotspots developing on their fire kit.

37/17 Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2017/18 – November 2017

Progress against the work programme was noted by the Committee.

Councillor Tranter advised that following his attendance at the Service's Quarterly Performance Review meeting as Chair of Scrutiny Committee, he wished to recognise the excellent work undertaken by the Service. The Members of the Committee all agreed and wished to express their appreciation as well.

Meeting ended at 12.20 hours

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