

Update from the Chairman of the Expert Advisory Panel, Steve McGuirk – June 2017

The last update to Members in March 2017 informed them of the upcoming visit to the Service by the Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) to undertake a short progress review. This was a precursor to the second milestone review to be undertaken by Sir Ken Knight and as part of concluding the work of EAP (now scheduled for early August 2017 and discussed below).

The March EAP visit was also part of continuing to support and enable the Service to advance the issues and recommendations made by Irene Lucas and subsequently Sir Ken in his first milestone review reported to the Authority in September 2016.

PROGRESS REVIEW

An outline programme for the two days at the end of March was agreed in advance, and this entailed presentations and meetings with key stakeholders, focus groups and personnel including, of course, Elected Members as well as engaging with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

In support of this, the EAP developed a simple 'self-assessment' tool for the Service to undertake in advance of the two-day visit, which focussed on the following key areas:

- ✓ ***Reflect on all relevant actions taken to date to address the Irene Lucas Report's concerns,***
- ✓ ***Identify what advice from the EAP had been helpful and been acted upon,***
- ✓ ***Identify quantifiable outcomes from such actions that have improved the culture of the organisation (e.g. staff survey feedback),***
- ✓ ***Consider next steps to improve culture.***

The intention of the self-assessment approach was to form the basis of debate and discussion and to underscore the staff survey, rather than to be a tick box exercise; and this intention was achieved as the exercise prompted a full and frank debate. It is fair to say, though, that the EAP would have preferred greater engagement of the wider service in the production of the self-assessment, but there is also recognition that there were some time constraints around this. And notwithstanding, it was encouraging from the perspective of openness that the document was made widely available to staff in advance of the progress review and could form the basis of discussions with people face to face.

The only other thing to say about the progress review visit is that whilst there were several focus groups held, some were poorly attended in terms of numbers. In one sense this was disappointing, though not altogether unexpected. In another sense, though, the people who did attend were authentic and fully engaged and provided what we believe to be a very honest assessment of change. And the panel engaged with over one hundred people during their visit which this is felt to be a reasonable sample of the organisation.

PROGRESS

Following the review visit the EAP produced a feedback presentation, that was given to members of the SLT in April. SLT have subsequently started to consider how this will translate practically and be rolled out to the wider organisation.

There is little doubt that a great deal has been achieved, although as we keep reiterating more needs to be done and so summarised below are some of those achievements as well as a summary of the other comments that formed the basis of the feedback:

- There is a sense that several factors have come, or are coming, together to create a window of opportunity that could re-cast the future for Essex, and potentially foster different relationships that will impact on culture.
- These include:
 - *The publication of a new strategy,*
 - *Closure of several significant legacy issues, including the signing of the dispute resolution agreement with the FBU (a member of staff in a workshop commented to the Panel that this was the longest period he had gone without industrial action since joining the Service twenty years ago),*
 - *The possibility/ likelihood of a move of governance to the Police and Crime Commissioner and the completion of a Business case with an associated a public consultation exercise around the options for change¹,*
 - *New personnel in several key roles –for example HR/ OD.*
 - *The closure of the long standing disciplinary situation with the Chief Fire Officer².*

There is also an impressive amount of activity taking place, and a huge number of projects are in train with a great deal of energy behind them.

- But this ambition presents additional challenges in several ways:
 - *There is a risk of a lack of coherence and clear linkages between different activities/ projects and the extent to which they cluster together and align to make a difference on the ground in real and tangible ways.*
 - *There is still a need for clarity about the ‘big picture’ in terms of where the organisation is going and, crucially, why – without this clarity it is difficult to prioritise; there is a real need for prioritisation. (It is also fair to indicate part of this uncertainty arises because of the General Election and the potential shift of governance).*

¹ The Consultation has now concluded and the Business Case submitted, though the impact of the General Election may affect the timescales for consideration and agreement or otherwise.

² There has been significant local publicity surrounding the circumstances of the recent dismissal of the Chief Fire Officer, with much of this publicity arising from the perspective of the Officer concerned and initiated by going directly to the media. The need to resolve this long standing and complex situation was highlighted as urgent in the original culture review report in 2015, and successive updates from the EAP have reinforced the imperative of the Authority getting to a resolution. Indeed, the last EAP update placed great emphasis on the impact of this matter. Notwithstanding the public comments of the Officer concerned, I am satisfied, as Chair of EAP and in the outline role ascribed in the report of Irene Lucas, that the Authority have exercised due diligence in the extensive discipline process followed. I am also satisfied that the seriousness of the matters concerned – gross misconduct – merited the approach taken, albeit I consider there are lessons to be learned for other fire and rescue services as well as the Home Office for future investigations of this nature. The only other point I would add, is that the consequence of the need to follow a disciplinary process prescribed have – ironically- militated against any extensive consideration of the leadership role played by the tenure of the CFO over the many years leading up to circumstances of the Culture Review in 2015. It is not proposed to say any more on this matter as, whilst it is now concluded, there remains the possibility of further legal action.

- *There is a risk that local managers can feel overwhelmed by project work and their corporate roles, to the extent that they feel they have little time left 'to lead' locally.*
- *There is a need, therefore, for clarity around the objectives of the organisation and that emanate from the new strategy, their translation to local activity and the practical measurement of success or otherwise; but especially, in this context, how will culture change be measured or evaluated going forward.*
- *There is also an issue of pace – and sustainable pace.*
- *The feedback from many people engaged – and this is reinforced by the staff survey – is that projects and work are started and deadlines/ milestones are set with the best of intention – but these deadlines are sometimes missed; and sometimes with significant implications for people.*
- *The consequence is diminished confidence and trust that the organisation has a coherent plan or that the linkages between activities are understood.*
- *It would be better to have fewer but clearer priorities and realistic deadlines that are stretching but deliverable - and people in the organisation can recognise how the work they are doing contributes to the strategy and the direction of the organisation.*
- *It is also worth saying something here about communications and engagement. There is a good communications team in Essex and high quality material is produced. There is a need, however, just to reflect on the different audiences and their needs and ensure that the style and approach deployed is appropriate to have the desired impact.*

The Panel's observations here – very much like the self-assessment – have more been to encourage debate and discussion as they are intended to be definitive, and the commentary of the challenges that remain should not detract from what has been achieved.

It is pleasing to report that the response of the SLT has been positive and constructive and the Acting CFO comments on this in the covering paper to this update.

In short, the first phases of the work of EAP over eighteen months have involved clearing the ground for change, starting the groundworks and starting to put some foundations in place. But many of the foundations are still in the ground and not yet visible to a wider organisation. And there remain several big environmental challenges – not least the outcome of the General Election and the PCC Business Case – that will have a major impact on culture change going forward. And, in this context of a rapidly changing and complex environment, it is likely that there will be an impact arising from the tragic events of the last few weeks, including the two attacks in Manchester and London. But most especially the tragedy at Grenfell Tower for which there now will be a public enquiry (though at the stage of drafting this update the parameters and terms of reference are not known).

So, in summary, it is now about getting a focus on direction and priority, and using the emerging window described to build and reset the future, as well as increase the visibility of change for the whole organisation.

In support of this, it is also important now that the Authority acknowledges the state of uncertainty organisationally as well as individually around senior roles, and moves to make substantive arrangements to fill key positions and enable the Rank to Role process to be concluded.

Next steps

September 2017 marks the two-year anniversary since the publication of the Culture Review, and the period ascribed by Irene Lucas for the Panel to exist.

From an EAP perspective, therefore, we now propose to reflect on what has happened and compile a closure report of our views about where Essex now is, in terms of its culture change journey.

It was always going to be the case that, when the EAP concluded, it would only mark a point in time rather than being a signal that anything finished. Nevertheless, it's important to record the view of EAP to describe that point in time.

To test that view, it is proposed to invite Sir Ken Knight to return to Essex in early August to examine the commentary of EAP, with the intention of then taking a final closure report to the September Fire Authority.

(It is possible as matters unfold over the next few weeks, especially considering the increasingly level of complexity in the working environment, that the Fire Authority or PCC considers there is merit in continuing some form of relationship with members of the Panel, or a modified version of the Panel to support any transition. But that would be outside the parameters and boundaries of the Culture Review recommendations and the role anticipated by the original reviewer.)

By the time of Sir Ken's visit there should also be greater clarity around the direction of the Service, post General Election and against the backdrop of the submitted Business Case of the Police and Crime Commissioner; and there should hopefully be a better sense of the impact of the tragic and seismic events of the last few weeks.

Could I conclude this update by offering my thanks to Members of the Authority and Officers of the Service for the authentic way they have engaged with the work of the EAP over an extended period but especially during the progress review visit in March.

But, most importantly, could I conclude by offering the sympathy and condolences of all the EAP Members to those who have lost loved ones in the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and could I commend the response of emergency services and, particularly in this context, members of the fire and rescue service.

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CHAIRMAN – EXPERT ADVISORY PANEL