



Essex Fire Authority

Report to the Constituent Authorities of the meeting on 2 September 2015

1. Independent Cultural Review

Earlier in 2015, the Authority commissioned Irene Lucas CBE to undertake a wide-ranging review of the historical and current culture within Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECFRS). The purpose of the Review was to look at how the culture of the Service is having a detrimental impact on the organisation, its employees and the communities it serves, and provide a report recommending practical steps to move the organisation forward.

The Review has now been concluded and, at its meeting on 2 September, the Authority welcomed Ms Lucas and invited her to present her report.

Ms Lucas outlined the background to the Review, stating its aims and terms of reference, and the methodology she had followed, including statistical information regarding the scale of the exercise. She described the importance of organisational culture and its impact on effective performance, particularly in terms of managing change and delivering significant improvement.

Ms Lucas set out the key questions addressed, and the associated findings, on each of the following six areas covered by the Review:

- The vision, values, strategies and plans of ECFRS
- Governance and Leadership
- Relationships, roles and responsibilities
- Valuing people and challenging poor performance and behaviour
- Learning, development and promotion
- Communication and engagement

In conclusion, Ms Lucas spoke of her serious concerns regarding the culture of ECFRS and its relationships, highlighting that the issues she had identified pervaded all levels of the organisation. Although she had met passionate and determined people who were keen to move on from the current environment, which only a very small minority wished to continue, there was a significant degree of cynicism as to whether the Authority would embrace the Review's recommendations and make the necessary changes.

The summary of key recommendations contained within the Review report is set out below:

- An external Expert Advisory Panel with a range of skills and backgrounds, and accountable to the FRA, should be appointed as soon as possible to

provide strategic advice to the organisation for the next 24 months. The Panel will comprise senior people, experienced in addressing challenging organisations who will provide strategic advice to the FRA and senior officers on the leadership and change now needed.

- Working with the FRA and colleagues at every level in ECFRS, in conjunction with the external Expert Advisory Panel, needs to develop a concise narrative for change that is well understood and supported at every level of the organisation, respecting the roles of fire fighters, those in prevention work and other colleagues.
- The governance of the service needs to be strengthened with greater clarity and visibility given to the role of FRA who need to focus on the strategic challenges facing the service, with more scrutiny support for elected members.
- The continued absence of the Chief Fire Officer needs to be resolved urgently.
- More needs to be done to recruit leaders from non-fire service backgrounds, bringing fresh perspectives and learning from the wider public sector and beyond.
- All disciplinary action should be independently led by a sub-group of the Expert Panel and subject to statutory constraints over the next 24 months, and all intimidatory behaviour against individuals, equipment or property need to be considered by the Expert Panel working with representatives of Essex Police who will advise on criminal proceedings. The sub-group will have a specific role in ensuring elected members are aware of matters without cutting across the existing process. This approach to take effect in respect of all new cases.
- Whistleblowing arrangements need to be clarified and simplified and overseen in confidence by a sub-group of the Expert Panel.
- Introduce a rapid mediation service as has been adopted by Staffordshire County Fire and Rescue Service.
- Create more opportunities to recognise outstanding performance across the organisation on a regular and consistent basis.
- Make promotion to managerial positions more transparent and based on human relations expertise as well as firefighting specialisms. Involve the Expert Panel in overseeing all appointments for the next 24 months.
- Review existing management and delivery mechanisms to provide implementation ability with clear oversight of progress in implementing and, most importantly, embedding change.

- Extend the suite of managerial skills required from operational to more inclusive leadership training, ensuring that the training is offered to those showing talent, potential and who have a desire to progress. Promotion should only be open to those who have completed and successfully graduated from the programme and demonstrated leadership and coaching skills.
- Ensure an independent, rigorous review in six months' time to check on progress.

Members of the Authority thanked Ms Lucas for her work on the report, and formally received it, emphasising the Authority's commitment to taking action in response to the findings. The Authority believes that the majority of ECFRS staff are keen to move forward, and it is important to work with them, and ensure that they are supported against the minority.

The Authority is due to meet again on 7 October to consider its formal response to the report, together with an action plan. It is hoped it will be possible to dovetail work within the action plan with that already in progress to prepare for the future under Programme 2020.

The Constituent Authorities will be kept informed as to progress.

Councillor Anthony Hedley
Chairman