

INTRODUCTION TO PROGRESS REPORT

I am very pleased to be able to introduce this latest progress/ highlight report of the Expert Advisory Panel as we approach six months since the publication of the Independent Review report.

The approach to identifying progress has improved considerably here - and now links to the extensive action plan that has been developed following the Culture Review (and as requested by the Fire Authority).

The detailed reporting against each action - including the authority to sign off actions as complete - is now undertaken at the monthly, Expert Advisory Panel Meetings, so this report is very much a "highlights" document.

That monthly meeting also seeks to take account of the Vision 2020 work and consultation that is now in train to respond to the future funding challenges facing the Authority, seeking to place the Service on a sustainable financial footing for the future.

The approach to progress reporting here is also intended to ensure that any future reviews of improvement can identify clear cause and effect activity, and ensure that there is an audit trail of activity for good governance and probity reasons, as well as reasons of openness and transparency. (The first suggested Reassurance Review, it will be noted, is considered in the attached report).

It's fair to say the report identifies that good progress is starting to be made in a number of key areas and, when this considered against the backdrop of a very complex picture of change and challenge (the move of the Fire and Rescue Service to the Home Office, the upcoming local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections, the implementation of a difficult senior management review to name but a few issues) this is encouraging.

But, it's equally fair to identify that many of the actions are really about building the foundations for change, rather than making the change itself - and so it will feel like very little, if anything, has changed yet for personnel on the ground. On the contrary, it's likely to appear to some that the need to make progress with the financial challenges, required by the Autumn Statement and worsening financial picture - and moving through the 2020 Programme Consultation - has knocked the Culture Review on to the "back burner".

In one sense that may be true - it's certainly understandable - as a lot of management time and activity has been taken up with 2020 and, in a way the timing, is unfortunate as there is only so much management resource to deploy. Indeed, those resources are becoming fewer in number as the senior management review takes effect. It's also the case that many people see difficult conversations about changing levels of resources and difficult decisions as being inconsistent with culture change and engagement.

But the work of the Panel and the role of the Panel has to exist in a real world, rather than an abstract setting. So, if we are to get the real commitment of everyone involved we must acknowledge the difficulty and frustration, and not try to sweep potential criticism aside, but we also need to be upfront about the need to work within those constraints and timelines that are outside the control of the Authority yet, nevertheless, drive their activity. In short, of course it must be a priority to establish a solid financial foundation for the next few years within which the Services' change agenda will be set as much as the Authority's political agenda - and staff need as much

certainty as possible about the future sustainability of the Service as well as key decisions taken about “who will lead it”?

But I can also confirm that, as a Panel, we continue to ensure the culture change agenda remains very much alive, and we continue to ensure (and enjoy) the commitment of the Service and the Authority to making the changes necessary to bring about culture change.

It’s simply that the reality and the complexity (the fact that so many aspects of the change are contingent not just on each other but on matters in a wider setting) mean it’s going to take time and will inevitably be frustrating.

That also means it’s vital, therefore, that the role of the Panel remains focused and unswerving – as empathic as possible but still unswerving – and that we have in place effective and tight action planning and monitoring arrangements, as well as good dialogue at all levels of the Service.

I believe that the modified reporting approach outlined here, building as it does on much tighter governance, should offer reassurance that progress is being made and will continue to be made - though, as with so many dimensions facing leaders of public services today - there remains constant challenge and many things that could knock that progress off course.

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