Item No. 3 (ii)

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority

TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday 22 July 2024 at 10.30am at Fire and Rescue Authority Headquarters

Present:

Councillor Welsh in the Chair.

Councillors Bell, Dodds and Wood.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Blackburn, Hunter and Patterson.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 5 February 2024, Part I, be confirmed as a correct record.

Apprenticeship Provision

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority), the Director of Finance, Estates and Facilities and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report providing a summary of the apprenticeship provision within the Service and an overview of the recent Ofsted monitoring visit.

The Director of People Services reported that the Service had started full delivery of the Level 3 Operational Firefighter apprenticeship in February 2023 following the end of a supporting provider contract with New College Durham. The Service had a full Ofsted inspection in August 2023 and was one of the first fire and rescue services to be inspected and it was unusual for Ofsted as they were used to inspecting purely educational establishments.

During the inspection, the area of Leadership and Management had been found to require improvement, and this had led to an Overall Effectiveness judgement of 'Requires Improvement'. There were a number of positive comments arising from the inspection, including that apprentices benefitted from a positive culture, they enjoyed their learning, valued the knowledge and skills that they acquired and that leaders, managers and instructors placed a high focus on their mental wellbeing.

A Quality Improvement Plan was created to review the actions to be taken to make the required improvements detailed in the inspection as well as other self-identified improvements.

The Service received an Ofsted monitoring visit in May 2024 to review progress against the areas which had been judged to require improvement. The visit had a focus on the following themes: -

- How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices' starting points are assessed accurately and used to plan training?
- What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that they have a thorough oversight of the quality of teaching that apprentices receive?
- How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that instructors are fully supported to carry out their roles effectively?

The Service was judged to be making Reasonable Progress against all three themes and the final report had been published on 10 July 2024 and was available for Members to read.

At this juncture, the Director of People Services introduced Niamh who managed the apprentices and Neil who was part way through his apprenticeship.

Councillor Dodds noted that Ofsted should change their language around inspections as rating Safeguarding as 'effective' did not really give a true reflection of what was happening. He went on to ask Neil how he had found the apprenticeship process and Neil said that it had been a good experience, he had found the shadowing and e-learning useful and a good add-on to his day job.

Councillor Bell asked if there were any particular differences since the change from New College to in-house apprenticeship provision. Niamh said that the changes had been positive; there had been a good working relationship with the college but they had not been able to retain staff for individual recruits and now there was a dedicated member of staff to see a learner through the process.

Councillor Wood expressed surprise that Ofsted did not have anyone with experience in the fire service to be part of an inspection team. He queried if apprentices with aptitude in certain areas would be directed towards those roles.

Niamh highlighted that there were firefighter apprentices moving towards specialisms and career conversations had been introduced to help people move towards the next steps in their career and any development opportunities.

Councillor Dodds commented that there had been a difference in Ofsted's expectations and what the Service did and that if this was to come up as part of an HMI inspection then it would be important to explain these differences in understanding.

The Director of People Services said that it had been difficult to explain the role of watch and crew managers on stations as Ofsted had expected that all people involved in tuition would be teachers. As more services started to grow from the apprenticeship level then there would be more matters like this to be addressed. HMI had not yet linked in to this but that could happen in the future.

ACO McVay explained that the Service had its own Fire Control apprentices and firefighters had gone through New College. The contract with the college had been coming to a natural end and it had been decided to run the apprenticeship process in house. Within a few months of beginning firefighter apprenticeships, the Service was inspected and it was noted that instructors were not being RAG rated and quality and improvement was not being monitored. ACO McVay emphasised that these matters sat entirely with the leadership, not the instructors.

The monitoring visit had observed that learning had been taken from that initial inspection and improvements had been made. Moving forward it was for Ofsted to gain a better understanding of how the Service operated and for leaders to ensure that crew and watch managers were providing instruction. ACO McVay felt that the apprenticeship provision was unlikely to fall within the realms of HMI but as long as the Service could show that the training delivered was of a high standard then this should satisfy inspectors.

Councillor Dodds commented that once a trainee was placed at a station, a watch manager may often delegate instruction to a crew manager. The Director of People Services said that this could also be complicated by the individual learning styles of firefighters. There was a Fire Chiefs Council programme for watch and crew managers to demonstrate that they had the skills to deliver professional training.

Councillor Bell asked if the Service could be assured that there was consistency and that crew managers were getting training at an early stage. The Director of People Services advised that crew managers would undertake the National Fire Chiefs Council Supervisory Leadership Development or Middle Management Programme and cascade this down. ACO McVay added that all managers were on the pathway for leadership and management and took part in training days. Firefighters were still assessed independently in the training centre.

ACO McVay highlighted that apprenticeships were being offered for Control Room, Finance, Prevention and Education, Firefighter and LGV Technicians and the Service was trying to expand the remit as far as it could with support from the apprenticeship levy.

Having thanked Niamh and Neil for coming along to the meeting, it was: -

2. RESOLVED that: -

(i) the contents of the report be endorsed; and

(ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Workforce Planning

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority), the Director of Finance, Estates and Facilities and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report which had arisen from a Workforce Planning meeting which had given consideration to firefighter recruitment and promotion processes for the remainder of 2024/2025 and for the financial year 2025/2026.

ACO McVay advised that previously all recruitment and promotion processes had sat within her role and she had been keen to develop some governance on this and demonstrate that decisions were made based on evidence.

As of June 2024, the overall firefighter establishment was minus 69 and the Service was constantly playing catch up and balancing new firefighter recruitment with the previous cohort achieving certain competencies. Once the September 2024 course was concluded and the predicted 24 firefighters went out to station, together with four competent recruit firefighters brought into the service, this would still result in an establishment of minus 41, however, due to an additional ten predicted retirements, this figure would increase to minus 51.

A further two courses were due to take place in 2024/25 and the resulting 48 recruits would result in an establishment position of minus 27, taking into account the predicted leavers and retirements during this period. ACO McVay stated that transfer requests were always open.

Promotion processes took place every 12 – 18 months and the crew manager process had been the most successful the last time around; people were encouraged to put themselves forward for this and another process would take place in the Autumn. There were not the same volume of vacancies and turnover of staff on the Green Book side of the organisation and different ways of recruiting to these positions were being developed.

Firefighter recruitment was a draw on resources and there were a number of Grey Book vacancies to be recruited to in the near future. The Director of Finance, Estates and Facilities was informed of the recruitment requirements for budget setting processes.

Councillor Dodds asked if employees who came in through an inter-service transfer reverted to a firefighter role and ACO McVay said that individuals were offered all roles available and crew and watch manager positions were opened up, however there had been managers who had come into the Service at firefighter level.

Councillor Bell queried the logic of beginning a firefighter recruits course in December when it would be interrupted by the festive period and potentially bad weather.

ACO McVay explained that courses did usually conclude in December following a September or October start but there was a need to give instructors the opportunity to take leave over the summer period and when the courses were at the same time each year it meant that the 12 month reviews would also happen at the same time as new courses. The Director of People Services added that the Service was trialling different course timings to allow for a break for instructors and trainees.

Councillor Bell commented that he could see the benefit of having a break during the course but if an individual was struggling then a break may not always help and it was important that support was there.

ACO McVay said that there were people who struggled on every course and individual coaching and mentoring came to the fore here. Instructors were very experienced and could spot those who might not be able to complete the course. Instructors did accumulate extra hours which was as result of the additional work which they put in.

Upon consideration of the report it was: -

3. RESOLVED that: -

(i) the contents of the report be endorsed; and

(ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Culture and Values Sessions

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority), the Director of Finance, Estates and Facilities and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report summarising the culture talk process conducted with employees across the entire service.

ACO McVay advised that the report summarised all the work that had taken place since the independent cultural review commissioned by the Service. The outcomes of the staff survey and the report from Jagtar Singh Associates highlighted six areas to celebrate and six to focus on. The Service should celebrate: -

- We are proud to work for Tyne and Wear Rescue Service
- The close relationships we have with our colleagues
- Our strive to deliver continuous improvements
- The pride we take in our work
- We are proud to part of a team
- Our positive relationships

The areas to focus on were: -

- Reviewing how we effectively communicate with each other
- Improving our training and development opportunities
- Increasing our trust and transparency with each other
- Creating a safe and inclusive environment for all
- Reviewing our uniform
- Improving our health and wellbeing

The Service wanted to go to staff and ask them to come up with answers and every single watch and department had been spoken to in relation to their specific feedback and asked ‘what do you think we should do as a Service?’. All feedback had been received and a draft action plan drawn up. As well as staff feedback there were things that the Executive Leadership Team could add; the action plan would be signed off within the next week, published on the intranet and provided to Fire Authority Members.

There had been a lot of work carried out by Kevin from Inclusion and Jane from Organisational Development. They had attended the National Fire Chiefs Council Culture Seminar the previous week where the London Fire Brigade had talked about their culture work and it was clear that Tyne and Wear was further along in their journey. The Director of People Services reiterated that the team had been out to all watches and departments and the feedback had been great and put Tyne and Wear in a really good place.

ACO McVay said that it had seemed like a long time since the Jagtar Singh Associates report and this demonstrated the breadth of work that had been going on since then. It had now got to a point where the Service knew what needed to be done and where it was going.

Accordingly it was: -

4. RESOLVED that the contents of the Culture Talks background and the next steps of the process be noted.

(Signed) J WELSH
In the Chair