

# CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

**MEETING OF:** PERFORMANCE AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE  
**DATE:** 22<sup>ND</sup> NOVEMBER 2023  
**REPORT OF:** STEPHEN HULSE, HEALTH & SAFETY MANAGER  
**AUTHOR:** LAWRENCE HOWARD, MENTAL HEALTH ADVISOR

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**SUBJECT:** MENTAL HEALTH ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

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## Purpose of Report

1. This report provides an update in respect of the work that has been undertaken over the last 12 months to deliver the objectives and priorities contained within the Service's Mental Health Strategy.

## Recommended: That

[1] Members review and consider the information presented in this report.

## Background

2. The post of Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisor was introduced into the Service in July 2019, following the recommendation of the Staff Engagement Forum and approval by the Fire Authority.
3. The Service's first ever Mental Health Strategy was approved by the Fire Authority in January 2021. This was developed by the Mental Health Steering Group (MHSG) following consultations across the Service. The Strategy provides strategic direction and clear aims for the Service to ensure sufficient emphasis is placed around mental health to give it parity of esteem with physical health. The Strategy also incorporates the wider notion of the Service's values and its links to the wider communities it serves and aims to support the Service's ambition to become an employer of choice and a beacon of excellence in mental health.
4. The Mental Health Strategy comprises of four key elements:

1	<b>Leadership and Responsibility</b>	We believe that mental health is everyone's responsibility and requires visible commitment from all staff across the Service, regardless of role or pay grade.
2	<b>Communication and Education</b>	We believe that the key to maintaining good mental health and wellbeing is through a systematic programme of engagement, promotion, and education.

<b>3</b>	<b>Support and Intervention</b>	We will continue to support and intervene to improve mental health and are committed to increasing organisational confidence, skills and capability in addressing risks and dealing with mental health issues.
<b>4</b>	<b>Culture and Compassion</b>	We believe an open and compassionate culture around mental health is essential to eliminating stigma and promoting a positive environment that reduces the exacerbation of existing mental health problems and concerns.

5. An initial Action Plan was produced by the MHSG and was signed off on the 2 June 2021. The MHSG has been monitoring and supporting the progression of the action plan on a quarterly basis. On the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the Director of Transformation shared a proposal to integrate and streamline a number of meetings with similar agendas across the Service to avoid any duplication of work.
6. As the areas within the MH action plan have been delivered and all remaining items were deemed to now be 'business as usual', it was agreed that the MHSG should transition in to the new StayWell Group. The group has been established to discuss and co-ordinate all physical and mental wellbeing activities.
7. The information contained below provides an update against the key areas contained within the Mental Health Strategy and the corresponding action plan. It is worth noting that this will be the final report under the banner of the MHSG and all future mental health activity will be part of the StayWell Group which will report to the new People Board.

## Information

### Leadership and Responsibility

8. One of the ways in which the Service has normalised mental health is through regular engagement with staff and through maintaining regular dialogue with line managers about stress and the mental wellbeing of staff. Senior officers are also expected to demonstrate a visible, active commitment and to speak openly about mental health in the workplace whilst inviting feedback on how the Service can continue to provide support.
9. One example of this is the priority that the Chief Fire Officer placed on mental health in his first video to staff. He made a direct reference to mental health and pledged his ongoing commitment to improving and supporting the mental health of staff within the workplace.
10. Over the course of the year other senior leaders have also actively supported events and activities relating to mental health such as the World Mental Health Day Event on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2023. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer now chairs the re-established Sports and Wellbeing Committee.

11. The Mental Health Advisor has continued to be visible across the Service making, at least one visit to every watch, section, department, and team across the Service each year. This averages approximately 110 visits. At the beginning of March 2022, the Mental Health Advisor partnered with the Service Fitness Advisor to start offering joint visits. This was also to emphasise the parity of esteem between physical and mental health. Whilst the Fitness Advisor undertakes the fitness testing, staff are also invited to undertake a Mental Health MOT. To date, 25% of staff have accessed the MOT.

## **Communication and Education**

12. It is vital to educate staff about why good mental health is important, to understand trends and to provide access to training to increase knowledge and better equip employees to deal with their own mental health concerns and/or support colleagues.
13. In January 2022 the Service identified that suicide rates were rising within Cheshire communities. The most significant area of increase was in men aged 45 to 55 years and they remain the most vulnerable group. With many of our employees in this demographic and with the ongoing aim to maintain zero suicides within CFRS, the Service developed and launched a Suicide Prevention Toolkit in September 2022. This was also supported by training for staff in accredited Suicide First Aid training. To date, 96 members of staff have voluntarily accessed this training.
14. As part of the “Step Away” element of the People Strategy, the Service has been working towards improving the support offered to staff both before and after retirement. In November 2023, the Service is delivering the new “Step Away” workshop programme. This programme was shaped by retiree and pre-retirement colleagues through a range of focus groups and individual consultations. The programme will be reviewed following the first round of delivery.
15. Over the last year the Mental Health Advisor has continued to support and attend the various staff network groups, Limitless, FirePride, REACH and the new Armed Forces network and Divergence, the Neurodiversity network. The Mental Health Advisor has also facilitated sessions on the possible mental health challenges faced by members of a specific network.
16. In terms of the ongoing education, the Mental Health Advisor has a monthly column in the Service Alert magazine and uses the weekly Green staff newsletter to promote mental health themes, events, and support.
17. One of the most visual reminders that art, craft, exercise and enjoying nature can be positive for our mental health is illustrated by the mosaic of a firefighters helmet (Figure 1) which is mounted on the wall outside the canteen at Sadler Road. This mosaic was created by members of the MHSG and was unveiled on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022 by the Chair of the Fire Authority, Cllr Bob

Rudd in the presence of Cllr Gina Lewis, Mental Health Champion, the Chief Fire Officer and members of the MHSG.

Figure 1.



*The black tiles represent the distress associated with poor mental health and are framed by bright colours and patterns that remind us there are many positive ways to maintain our well-being.*

18. To further promote wider understanding and awareness a mental health awareness e-learning package was launched in December 2022. The package aims to raise awareness of mental health conditions and concerns and describes and signposts staff to the various support offered across the Service. This is a mandatory e-learning package that will also be incorporated into the induction checklist for all new starters.
19. Other Mental Health events and campaigns hosted during the year included:
  - A “Time to Talk” campaign in February 2023.
  - A four week Stress Management Programme running throughout April 2023 to mark National Stress Awareness month.
  - Webinars provided in May 2023 to mark Maternal Mental Health Awareness Week’. During this week the Service also joined with the Perinatal Mental Health Partnership and Motherwell, a Crewe based Charity run by women for women.
  - Support for National Carer’s Week in conjunction with Carers UK
  - Marking World Suicide Prevention Day (Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023) by reminding staff of the Suicide Prevention Toolkit and how to access the Suicide First Aid training.
  - A conference was held at Sadler Road to mark International Men’s Day. 2022

### **Support and Intervention**

20. Significant provision is already in place, but work is continuing to ensure that the Service can offer comprehensive support to staff in a range of ways.
21. The MHSG have continued to explore how to enhance the Trauma Risk Management (TriM) process and have determined that there is a strong case for the proactive deployment of peer TRiM practitioners routinely following a serious or traumatic incident. This is currently being piloted in Cheshire East

to further develop our understanding of what is required and the strength of the proposed solution. The pilot in Cheshire East will conclude in December 2023 followed by an evaluation report for consideration by the StayWell Group.

22. The number of TRiM practitioners currently stands at 42 across the Service. Refresher days have been delivered twice a year to support and sustain TRiM practitioners' competence.
23. In addition to TRiM, the Service has also maintained its appetite to grow the network of Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs). The number of qualified Mental Health First Aiders currently stands at 45. Further work is planned to continue to support and develop our MHFAs. There will be refresher days and the opportunity for others to obtain this qualification.
24. The Wellbeing Community Group continues to offer informal and flexible support. It remains based around a Facebook group that individuals can join and engage with as they please. The Group offers walks, meditation, and a variety of wellbeing activities. There are currently over 70 staff members on this Group.
25. The MHSG also suggested widening the offer of the Sports and Welfare Association. Historically the Association's focus has been around purely physical activities but there is a need to look at a wider range of activities which will be more inclusive.
26. The StayWell Group meets on a quarterly basis and consists of Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service managers and staff from across departments who are engaged in co-ordinating activities which support and promote wellness across the organisation.

### **Culture and Compassion**

27. The achievement and maintenance of a healthy and supportive culture and work environment is reliant on good leadership and a consistent and positive approach to staff wellbeing. It is also dependant on both staff and managers adhering to the Service's core values.
28. Changing culture is a long and challenging process, but through the range of interventions, communications, and ongoing efforts to engage staff in discussions around mental health, we continue to raise awareness and are making progress towards achieving a culture where staff feel it is safe to talk and know that they are being listened to.
29. Part of this approach is incorporating consideration of mental health within every policy and within all change management processes so that there is an absence of discrimination. To facilitate this, wellbeing has now been incorporated into the Equality Impact Assessment process.

30. Providing feedback is another means of achieving a positive and open culture where discussions around mental health are normalised. As already stated, there is a wellbeing section within the appraisal and all managers are expected to check the welfare of both individuals and staff groups during meetings and visits. Wellbeing has also been incorporated as a key theme within the staff engagement framework and will continue to be a topical theme of discussion on staff engagement days and within future staff surveys.
31. The “Who do I turn to” campaign has been refreshed and there is a tab on the new intranet. This campaign reminds staff of our zero tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination and the range of support available to staff.
32. Mental Health and Wellbeing awareness also continues to be promoted through Corporate Inductions, the Step-In programme, the Step-Up programme, and the Apprentice programmes.

## **Financial Implications**

33. By having a dedicated Mental Health Advisor, the Service has made a significant financial investment coupled with the cost of training for staff and hosting of events. This is now considered as business as usual for the organisation and it is anticipated that this investment will generate savings and greater productivity through a reduction in the levels of absence associated directly with mental health concerns.

## **Legal Implications**

34. The Service recognises the need to tackle workplace stress and anxiety which could lead to mental ill health. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) expects the Service to carry out suitable and sufficient risk assessments and to take appropriate action to tackle any problems identified.
35. The HSE risk management standards have also been incorporated into the new appraisal process to facilitate discussions on an individual basis and to help identify any risks.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

36. Equality and diversity are closely aligned with mental health. This includes making reasonable adjustments for staff with a mental health condition, protecting the privacy of a staff member who has a mental health condition, and ensuring that we do not take any adverse action against a staff member because of a mental health condition. Mental Health is now included as a factor for consideration within the Service’s Equality Impact Assessment process.

37. More recently there has been an emphasis on the ageing workforce due to greater life expectancy. Based on workforce planning predictions it is inevitable that there will be an increase of staff in older age groups. This places more emphasis on the need to create a healthy workforce to sustain an older population of staff who may have greater health needs in the workplace.

## **Environmental Implications**

38. There are no environmental implications associated with the contents of this report.

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**BACKGROUND PAPERS: NONE**