

CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING OF: CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY
DATE: 23 JUNE 2021
REPORT OF: STAFF ENGAGEMENT FORUM
AUTHOR: GRAEME WORRALL

SUBJECT: 2019-2021 STAFF ENGAGEMENT FORUM

Purpose of Report

1. To provide Members with an overview of the Staff Engagement Forum and update on the subjects considered by the Forum and the outcomes of work undertaken.

Recommended:

That Members note the contents of this report.

Background

2. The Staff Engagement Forum was initially created in 2018 to improve engagement by providing a platform to enable staff to identify and contribute to issues affecting them in the workplace, and to help shape future plans within the Service. The Forum also served as a reference group for the organisation, providing feedback on key policies, proposals and issues that affect staff and their working environment.
3. Expressions of interest for the second cohort were sought from staff during Autumn 2019 and selections were made in November 2019. A total of 16 members were appointed to the Forum, alongside one member of staff to provide secretarial and administrative support.
4. Staff on the Forum were released from their normal duties to attend each meeting, which were scheduled for a full day each month. This provided time for the Forum to discuss and consider subjects in detail. The Chief Fire Officer also attended at the end of each meeting to hear directly the feedback of Forum members. This helped to provide a broad 'ground truth' that has assisted in improving and shaping the organisation in many ways.
5. At its first meeting, the Forum elected their own co-chairs and agreed a terms of reference and subject matters it intended to discuss through the duration of the Forum. Forum members are listed below.

Emilie Salkeld (Co-chair)
Governance Officer
Governance and Commissioning

Paul Leigh (Co-chair)
Firefighter
Crewe Fire Station

Selina Blain
Operations Officer, Safety Central
Prevention

Tracey Carter
Business Safety Manager
Protection

Ryan Cook
Crew Manager
Lymm Fire Station

Sam Gardener
Firefighter
Malpas Fire Station

Georgie Guy
Advocate (Cheshire West and
Chester)
Prevention

Andrew Houston
On-Call Support Crew Manager
Service Delivery

Ian Knott
Crew Manager
Warrington Fire Station

Michael Molyneux
Firefighter
Widnes Fire Station

Ronnie Moore
Watch Manager
Northwich Fire Station

Mark Sopp
Station Manager
Operational Policy and Assurance

Graham Thomas
Station Manager
Operational Policy and Assurance

Robbi Unwin
Creative Media Officer
Corporate Communications

Georgina Warner
Firefighter
Warrington Fire Station

Ben Wood
Station Manager
Operational Policy and Assurance

Graeme Worrall (Secretary)
Policy and Transformation Officer
Transformation

Covid-19

6. The Covid pandemic emerged as this Forum began and it was only its third meeting when the Government announced the first national lockdown in March 2020, as well as the requirement to work from home if it was possible to do so. Therefore the decision was taken to suspend the Forum.
7. As the first lockdown ended, physical meetings were deemed to be an infection risk given that the Forum is a cross-section of the organisation with staff based in different locations. Therefore, meetings moved online, with regular Skype or Zoom meetings while national restrictions were in place.
8. Initially these were shorter meetings to help members keep in contact and discuss and provide feedback on pandemic-related issues. They then progressed to full-length day sessions to cover pre-planned subjects, before physical meetings resumed in April 2021.

9. As a result of the initial suspension of activity, it was decided to extend the tenure of the Forum to ensure it achieved its full complement of meetings. This meant that instead of the planned 12 months the Forum lasted for 19 months in total, from November 2019 to June 2021.

Forum Topics

10. While there were some subjects that the Service asked the Forum to consider and discuss, the Forum was able to determine its own agenda and priorities. The list below outlines the subject matter discussed by the Forum through its tenure:
 - Communications
 - Appraisals
 - Reward and recognition
 - Covid-19
 - Morale, health and wellbeing
 - Learning and development
 - Blue Light Collaboration
 - Sports and welfare
11. Issues discussed by the Forum, including ideas and recommendations for improvement, were captured on a rolling action plan. The action plan is included as Appendix 1 to this report. The following section provides a highlight of some of the recommendations and ideas developed by the Forum.

Communications

12. The first subject discussed was around communications. This centred on the internal publications used within the Service and in particular the design and content of the Intranet from the perspective of the end-user.
13. As a direct result of feedback the Alert newsletter was redesigned to become a monthly electronic newsletter, with a different style of content to better engage with staff. In addition, a Twitter account was created for the Service's Prevention department to enable staff to better communicate and promote the activities being undertaken in the community.
14. While a major redesign of the Intranet is being tied into the launch of Microsoft 365, the Forum was able to help introduce beneficial changes including a mental health tab on the homepage to make accessing information easier and suggesting updating the contact details of Mental Health First Aiders and TRiM practitioners with photographs, so staff can better recognise those who can provide support.

Appraisals

15. The Forum considered the Service's appraisals process and was encouraged to suggest improvements to feed into the launch of a new appraisal system.
16. A revised appraisal form was introduced during May 2021. The new form incorporated feedback from the Forum and introduced a simpler format, with a dedicated section on mental health and wellbeing and a greater focus on career aspirations and personal development. Further recommendations adopted include the roll out of appraisal training and improvements to the coordination of training requests that are identified within appraisals.

Reward and recognition

17. Several different subjects under the reward and recognition theme were discussed. The Forum provided input into the STAR Awards process. As a result of feedback, communications and promotional materials for the awards emphasised the peer-led feature of the scheme. Four Forum members also took part in the judging process to assess the award nominations.
18. The use of salary sacrifice schemes was discussed and it was suggested that as well as the existing cycle to work scheme, such schemes could be introduced for a wider range of products. The Service has enhanced its cycle to work scheme, which the Forum was able to provide input on.

Covid-19

19. Given the developments regarding Covid during the tenure of the Forum, work undertaken by the Service in response to the pandemic was discussed and the views of the Forum were sought in relation to activity planned in response to the pandemic. Suggestions adopted included a review of the frequency and content of Principal Officer briefings and encouraging staff to produce virtual content for events such as Open Days.

Morale, health and wellbeing

20. Morale, health and wellbeing was discussed, often in relation to the Pandemic and how to maintain staff morale during periods of lockdowns and restrictions. Ideas provided by the Forum were included as part of a festive fun campaign during Christmas to engage with staff and maintain positivity.
21. Other suggestions included reviewing arrangements for operational staff booking leave to help staff maintain a work-life balance and plan for holidays or family events. These were progressed through negotiation with representative bodies and as a result, the Service has introduced greater flexibility for operational staff when booking leave.

Learning and Development

22. The Forum provided feedback on the Service's Step-Up leadership and development programme. Ideas taken forward include providing a biographies and a link to the virtual corporate induction with welcome packs, so that those on the Step-Up programme can find out more about their course colleagues and how different parts of the Service function.
23. Following discussion with Forum members, the learning and development team incorporated a wider range of scenarios into an extended role play element of the Step-Up programme; to further enhance the learning and skills development for course participants.

Blue Light Collaboration

24. The Forum met with the Deputy Chief Fire Officer in April 2021 to provide feedback on the Blue Light Collaboration programme to help improve the service provided to CFRS staff. This included suggestions to develop a group to implement solutions to emerging issues or problems, improve the efficiency of stores deliveries and ideas to increase the knowledge of CFRS procedures and cultures amongst joint services' staff.

Sports and Welfare Association

25. The forum also discussed the Service's Sports and Welfare Association and highlighted the physical and mental health benefits of an active sports and welfare section within the organisation. It was suggested that the Association be relaunched so that staff have an opportunity to take part in sports with colleagues and that the remit of the Association be widened so that it can help staff to take part in group leisure activities

Wider Feedback

26. The launch of the new staff suggestion scheme, Ignite, provided the Forum with a role in assessing the suggestions. Since the launch of the scheme in February 2021, the Forum has provided feedback against more than 50 ideas.
27. The Forum has also had a role in providing feedback against wider corporate plans and objectives. This has included participating in the inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services through a specific focus group, providing input into planned changes to dry food provision on fire engines and new corporate branding, including uniform.
28. The Forum dedicated time at each meeting for members to suggest 'quick wins' or bring forward issues that their colleagues had discussed. These issues were separate to the scheduled items for discussion and were fed back to the Chief Fire Officer. A 'quick wins' section is included within the action plan.

Financial Implications

29. The provision for the Staff Engagement Forum is included within existing budgets. Most of the cost associated with the Forum relates to the payment to each member to reflect the extra responsibilities they take on during their time on the Forum. There are also some additional costs to cover the hiring of external venues for meetings.

Legal Implications

30. None.

Equality and Diversity Implications

31. As far as possible, membership of the Forum was selected to capture representation from across all departments within Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service and to ensure participation of traditionally under-represented sections of the workforce.

Environmental Implications

32. None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS: 2019-2021 Staff Engagement Forum Action Plan