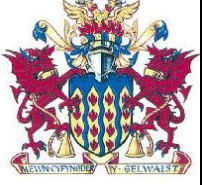


Report to	<b>Executive Panel</b>	
Date	<b>17 March 2025</b>	
Lead Officer	<b>Dawn Docx, Chief Fire Officer</b>	
Contact Officer	<b>Helen MacArthur, Assistant Chief Fire Officer</b>	
Subject	<b>Independent Cultural Review into North Wales Fire and Rescue Service</b>	

## PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 To present to Members of the Executive Panel of North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) the report of the independent cultural review into North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS) and to confirm the next steps on the cultural journey of NWFRS.

## RECOMMENDATION

- 2 It is recommended that Members:
  - i) **Acknowledge receipt of the report of the independent cultural review; and**
  - ii) **endorse the next steps on the cultural journey of NWFRS.**

## BACKGROUND

- 3 On 3 January 2024, an Independent Culture Review into South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS) was published. On 5 February 2024, in response to the findings, the then Deputy Minister for Social Partnership, Hannah Blythyn, announced the removal of South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority and the appointment of four independent Commissioners to ensure that the recommendations from the review and those made by the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser were acted upon.
- 4 Following these Ministerial actions, Cllr Dylan Rees and CFO Dawn Docx met with the then Deputy Minister and her officials on 19 February and 4 March 2024 to discuss the progress made around culture within NWFRS. The Deputy Minister, having had the opportunity to meet with staff and being familiar with NWFRS, acknowledged that both NWFRS and Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MAWWFRS) were at a different place on their cultural journeys compared to SWFRS.

- 5 Nevertheless, NWFRS and MAWWFRS worked together to propose the commissioning of an external review of each Service, to be undertaken by an independent culture specialist. This idea was approved by the Deputy Minister and it formed the basis of her statement on 11 March 2024. The Terms of Reference for the review was agreed based on the Deputy Minister's statement and following a joint procurement exercise the contract was agreed with Crest Advisory on the 4 June 2024.

## INFORMATION

- 6 From July 2024 until November 2024 Crest Advisory carried out the review work. They undertook a literature review, a document and data review, a staff survey, conducted interviews and focus groups and received written and audio submissions.
- 7 Participation in the review was entirely voluntary, and the intention was to capture the views of current employees and staff who worked for NWFRS after June 2021 but who may have subsequently left NWFRS.
- 8 Crest produced a draft report on 23 December 2024 which was provided to a small number of officers to check for factual accuracy and terminology. The publication of the report was scheduled for 5 February 2025 to allow for translation and to coincide with the publication of the report for MAWWFRS.
- 9 Members of the Authority and key stakeholders were notified in advance to the fact that the report was to be published on the Authority's website on 5 February, and Members were invited for an informal briefing by Crest Advisory on 10 February 2025

## NEXT STEPS

- 10 The meeting of the Executive Panel on 17 March 2025 is the first opportunity to formally present the [Crest Independent Culture Review Report](#) to the Executive Panel of the Authority for questions and comment. In addition, an AI generated summary of the report is attached as [Appendix A](#).
- 11 Crest Advisory have made presentations to the Authority Members, to NWFRS Leadership Team, to Middle Leaders and at events open to all employees during February. They also presented their findings to Welsh Government officials on 11 March 2025.

- 12 The report was discussed at length during the Middle Leaders seminar on 12 February 2025 and all Middle leaders have been encouraged to discuss it with their teams, and to feedback on those themes that they thought were the most important to address and practical actions that could be implemented in the short and medium term. A dedicated email address has been set up to receive those suggestions and it will remain open until the end of March.
- 13 In the meantime, a Cultural Board has been set up and it will be chaired by the CFO. It will work closely with the staff networks, the Staff Engagement Forum, the Fire Family Staff Survey Project Group as well as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Committee, which will also be chaired by the CFO. The goal is to ensure this process is as collaborative and inclusive as possible, where everyone has a voice in shaping the future of NWFRS.
- 14 The intention is to produce and present the Action Plan arising from the recommendations of the report to the full Authority at its meeting on 28 April 2025.
- 15 It is expected that progress against the action plan will be regularly reported and performance managed by the Authority.

## IMPLICATIONS

Well-being Objectives	Future service provision could be impacted if the concerns highlighted by the review are not addressed
Budget	The cost of the review was £150,000 and it was fully funded from the Authority's reserves.
Legal	NWFRS is working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure that it complies with its legal duties under the Equality Act 2010
Staffing	An Area Manager was seconded onto this project for 9 months to coordinate, and contract manage the project.
Equalities/Human Rights/ Welsh Language	The project was conducted bilingually, and participation was on a self-selecting, voluntary basis.
Risks	The report identifies both positive improvements and causes for concern. The concerns must be addressed to ensure that NWFRS remains an employer of choice and can attract talent to provide quality services.

## APPENDIX A

### Positive points reflecting progress

1. **Improved culture since 2021:** the culture at NWFRS has improved significantly since June 2021, largely attributed to the appointment of a new Chief Fire Officer (CFO). The new leadership has emphasised open communication, transparency, and proactive engagement, which has positively impacted the culture
2. **Pride and team camaraderie:** NWFRS staff and former staff expressed deep pride in their work and enjoyed working in supportive and inclusive teams. There is a strong sense of unity and shared purpose among colleagues.
3. **Positive impact of new leadership:** the new CFO's emphasis on open communication, transparency, and proactive engagement has led to improved visibility and approachability of senior leaders. This has been reflected in the positive feedback from staff regarding the opportunities to give feedback on NWFRS's values, culture, fairness, and diversity.
4. **Supportive work environment:** the majority of staff identified supportive colleagues and good collaboration and teamwork as major strengths of NWFRS's culture. Many examples of supportive environments and friendships were provided, where colleagues actively encouraged and uplifted one another.
5. **Operational training improvements:** NWFRS has made a conscious effort to improve the delivery of operational training, with positive results. The training department has shifted towards a supportive, person-centred approach, focusing on individual development needs and learning styles.
6. **Efforts to increase diversity:** NWFRS has implemented targeted recruitment strategies under positive action to attract women into operational roles. These efforts have proven effective, with women representing 15% of the operational workforce in 2023-24, compared to 10% in 2020-2021.
7. **Commitment to cultural change:** NWFRS has shown a commitment to cultural change by putting in place various initiatives to improve Service culture. These include the staff cultural engagement forum, the 'Siop Siarad' ('Culture Cafe') scheme, the introduction of Safecall (an anonymous external reporting service), and various training packages focusing on acceptable behaviours, people management, and equality, diversity, and inclusion

## Negative points reflecting ongoing challenges

1. **Negative behaviours among leaders:** despite improvements, negative behaviours among a minority of middle and senior leaders hinder positive cultural change. These individuals often exhibit unprofessional conduct, including abuse of power and intimidation.
2. **Lack of accountability:** there is a perceived absence of accountability for past misconduct, an avoidant leadership style, and poor decision-making in senior leadership. This has eroded trust throughout NWFRS and continues to affect organisational culture.
3. **Tensions in diversity initiatives:** there are clear tensions surrounding NWFRS's actions and initiatives to improve diversity. The approach to positive action in recruitment has led to concerns of positive discrimination and doubts over the competence of female staff.
4. **Strained union relationships:** despite some improvements, relationships between the fire brigades' union (FBU) and relevant corporate staff at NWFRS remain strained. There is an entrenched 'us vs them' culture, with mutual accusations of poor collaboration and hostility.
5. **Entrenched favouritism and bias:** NWFRS is perceived to be entrenched with favouritism and bias, affecting almost all of the Service's processes, including recruitment, promotions, and transfers.
6. **Hierarchical leadership style:** the leadership style at NWFRS is most commonly perceived as hierarchical, controlling, and unapproachable. This has created a visible divide between management and more junior staff.
7. **Inconsistent training and development:** while operational training has improved, non-operational training is often seen as a tick-box exercise. There is insufficient training on person-centred management approaches, leaving managers unprepared and causing minor issues to escalate.
8. **Widespread bullying and harassment:** bullying and harassment are widespread, with over two-fifths of survey respondents reporting personal experiences since June 2021. There is also significant underreporting and inconsistent responses to reports of unacceptable behaviour.

9. **Health and safety concerns:** changes to auditing standards have resulted in concerns among operational staff about health and safety at NWFRS. There is also an insufficient focus on safeguarding.
10. **Inconsistent mental health support:** while there are good pockets of mental health support, the support for employees on long-term mental health leave remains inconsistent.