

Wholetime Recruitment Freeze

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report details the implications of the wholetime recruitment freeze, as requested by the Committee at its meeting in April.

2 Recommendations

The Committee is asked to note the report.

3 Background

In 2010, in response to the reduction in Government grant faced by the Service, officers took a decision to implement a recruitment freeze. This was targeted at wholetime and non-uniformed roles, with Retained Duty System vacancies continuing to be filled due to the relative turnover in those roles and, therefore, a continuing need to recruit, balanced against the available budget.

The Committee particularly expressed an interest in hearing about the effects, which that recruitment freeze has had on the wholetime firefighter contingent.

4 Reasons for Utilising a Recruitment Freeze

As of October 2014 it has been nearly 5 years since the Service received its last intake of new wholetime firefighters, the last being in January 2010.

When the freeze was instigated officers knew that they would be considering the structure of the Service in the context of the Public Value work that was starting and that, if changes were to be made, such as ceasing to primary crew the rescue tender, it would be necessary to look at reducing staffing numbers.

Officers also knew that the forecast retirement profile meant that, in conjunction with a recruitment freeze, natural retirements would potentially make it possible to avoid any compulsory job losses into the future. This has always been a key consideration for the Fire Authority and one of its 'red lines', established at the start of the Public Value process, which it did not wish to cross.

The retirement forecast has proved to be accurate and, indeed, the Service has lost staff in this way slightly ahead of time. This presented a key opportunity, which, as Members we will be aware, was seized in May 2014, when 7 staff from Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service were seconded to Shropshire for 12 months. This secondment initiative helped to support Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, which is seeking to shed up to 50 wholetime posts by 2018. At the same time it helped this Service to maintain cover until impact assessments were completed and decisions made about progressing the review of resources and duty systems. This process is ongoing and, furthermore, at the recent meeting of the Fire Authority a decision was made to commission a project.

That work is likely to begin next year and the project will last for 12 months. In light of this, conversations have again been held with Hereford and Worcester. As a result, this Service is pleased to be working with them to introduce a further cohort of secondees to join in December 2014 for 12 months. This second intake allows the filling of gaps arising from continued retirements, whilst officers are still working through what the final needs will be after changes have been made to meet the financial constraints faced by the Service.

5 Considerations and Implications

Since 2010 the Fire Authority has reduced the budget by £3.2 million and Members and officers alike know that further cuts are needed. Changes, which have led to a slightly increased level of income, for example through inclusion of Freeze Grant into the base budget and growing populations, now mean that the budget is forecast to go into deficit slightly later than originally thought, hence the decision to bolster crew numbers with secondees in the short term. This means that it may be necessary to look again at the decision to freeze recruitment in order to sustain the already reduced number of staff in the medium term.

Officers also recognise that, having had a moderate level of promotion activity over the last four years, they have potentially exhausted, or are close to exhausting, the pool of staff, from which to make such promotions. The Management Team is obviously mindful of this in terms of growing.

Given their length of service, all of the Service's firefighters have completed their development programme and are, therefore, competent. Whilst this is exactly as it should be, it does, in itself, mean that the coaching and mentoring skills developed by crews in support of new joiners will start to fade. There is also a risk of losing that fresh perspective, which new entrants bring to the Service.

A further consideration is that, following recruitment, it takes up to three years for a firefighter to complete the necessary development programme and an individual must be competent to be eligible for promotion further supporting the need to plan in advance.

6 Conclusion

Workforce planning activity is constantly revised in light of the changing, financial environment. The Service is pleased to have been able to assist Hereford and Worcester by seconding their staff and, therefore, helping them to manage their financial imperatives, whilst bolstering Shropshire's crewing levels in the short term.

Over the coming months officers will continue to look at staffing profiles and at recruiting or transferring staff, should it become appropriate within the financial constraints.

7 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

8 Legal Comment

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

9 Initial Impact Assessment

This report contains merely statements of fact. An Initial Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required.

10 Equality Impact Assessment

There are no equality or diversity implications arising from this report. An Equality Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required.

11 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

12 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.