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# SHROPSHIRE FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE INDEPENDENT REVIEW

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**Shropshire**  
Fire and Rescue Service



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## Introduction

This report sets out to explore, understand and review organisational culture within Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS).

Although we will use the term 'culture' throughout this document, it's important to be clear about what we mean by culture for the purposes of this report. So, we begin with a note on culture:

Everyone sees and interacts with an organisation in their own way, based on their personal experiences and viewpoints. Because of this, culture is never fixed; it's always moving and changing. It evolves with daily actions, events, and individual experiences.

The purpose of this report is not to investigate specific incidents or support assumptions. Instead, our aim is to capture and present what people believe to be true about SFRS. These perceptions, along with the assumptions they create, influence how people behave and act at work, thereby shaping culture.

## Methodology and Approach

### Approach

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service is supported by a workforce of approximately 583 colleagues. 289 of those are on-call colleagues, 206 are whole-time or fire control colleagues and 108 are uniformed colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

Colleagues from across the various employment groups, locations and specialisms were invited to take part in a series of interviews and focus groups between September 2023 and January 2024 taking place in person or via Microsoft Teams.

Colleagues were invited to share their views on organisational culture and their perceptions of the working environment.

### Methodology

To help make culture feel more tangible, and to make sure we are following a credible process, we adopted the Culture Web model as a framework for this review. The Culture Web, developed by Gerry Johnson and Kevan Scholes in 1992, is renowned for its effectiveness in analysing and describing organisational culture.

The Culture Web identifies six elements that collectively define an organisation's culture:

1. **Stories** – The anecdotes and narratives that circulate within the organisation, shaping its identity and values.
2. **Rituals and Routines** – The daily practices and behaviours that illustrate what is considered normal within the organisation.
3. **Symbols** – The visual and physical representations, such as logos, office designs, and dress codes, that convey the organisation's character.
4. **Organisational Structure** – The hierarchy and power dynamics that define interactions and decision-making processes.

5. **Control Systems** – The mechanisms, such as financial and quality systems, that guide operations and standards.
6. **Power Structures** – The influential individuals and groups who shape the organisation's direction and priorities.

## Key Themes

We've taken the insight from our meetings and put together a series of themes. The key themes which have emerged from our conversations with colleagues are:

- Leadership
- Managing performance and decision-making
- Power dynamics
- Fostering an inclusive culture
- Career pathways and promotion processes
- Gossip and 'banter'

## Leadership

In January 2023, Simon Hardiman stepped into the role of Chief Fire Officer, having been promoted from within the service. Colleagues throughout our interviews have consistently noted Simon's open and engaging leadership approach, and over the last year it's felt that there's a clear shift towards a transparent and open culture at the senior level.

The potential longer-term tenure of Simon in this role presents a significant opportunity for the service to invest long-term in shaping vision and the kind of culture where people feel like they are safe, listened to and supported.

It's clear that approachability in a leadership team, has been valued within the last year and has been seen as a strength. However, colleagues have also fed back that they are prepared for changes to be made now and are looking to the senior team to take tough decisions where and when necessary. They are looking for support *and* challenge.

It was also noted from our conversations that diversity within the senior team is important. Colleagues are clear they do not want to see a return of a perceived 'boys' club' - at any level.

Encouraging a variety of viewpoints and open discussions is important for the organisation's progress. Colleagues offering an alternative perspective should feel valued, and, importantly, we must keep an eye on where and when we might step into 'group think' - where the wanting to get along and maintaining harmony impacts on the quality of decision making.

Where possible and appropriate, decision-making across the organisation must also be encouraged and supported to move from reactive to proactive. As colleagues work towards promotions into more senior roles, it's important they are supported to transition to longer-term, strategic decision-making. As referenced later within this report, many colleagues see the promotion process as a distraction. There's work to be done to not reward short-term decision-making, or decisions which could be seen as influenced by a personal agenda to meet promotion requirements.

Fairness in performance management and promotion is a key area for attention moving forward. It's crucial that leaders demonstrate a commitment to equitable treatment, making sure all colleagues feel they have fair opportunities for recognition and advancement and that the proper processes to support this are followed.

Promoting a fair and respectful workplace is key to the future. To maintain integrity and mutual trust, it's important that everyone, whatever their role, upholds these standards, and that they are consistently challenged when not followed.

#### Recommendations:

- Encourage and support the development of strategic, long-term thinking across the organisation, especially for those in line for future leadership roles
- Review the structure of key leadership and management roles to ensure that there is a clear and consistent approach to providing leadership to the organisation

### **Managing Performance and Decision-Making**

An area that surfaced regularly during our engagement interviews was performance management.

Some examples include:

- There is a perceived lack of challenge when it comes to individual behaviours. References were made to 'blanket' approaches when an individual or team does not meet performance expectations, rather than having difficult conversations with individuals or teams.
- While no recent examples were cited, there is a historical perception of favouritism in performance management. Relationships and political manoeuvring seem to have played a role in the past. The 'power' and 'stories' elements of the Culture Web highlighted concerns about well-known cliques and biased performance assessments, where personal likability or connections influenced recruitment decisions.
- It has been felt that the service struggles to manage behavioural underperformance if someone is technically achieving results. This imbalance suggests a need for a more holistic approach to performance evaluation, one that weighs technical skills and proven behavioural conduct equally.
- There have been times where decisions have been made with seemingly limited rationale, for example, moving someone into a role without a process. This has undermined credibility in organisational processes that should be seen as robust and trustworthy, and instead has indicated a practice where 'deals' are made behind closed doors.
- There have been instances shared where underperforming individuals are 'moved on' to different areas within the organisation. Although well-intentioned – perhaps to give someone the opportunity to develop needed skills – this approach can be perceived as a way to avoid difficult conversations. There is strong support within

the organisation for the need to confront underperformance directly, making tough but necessary decisions for the organisation's overall benefit.

- Colleagues who have been involved in a performance management process, for example a suspension, have shared their experience of the investigation process being unclear, and/or taking a significant time to progress, with little communication throughout.

As highlighted earlier, there is a general workforce consensus supporting the need to take tough decisions to improve performance management.

Many colleagues shared that going forward, they are in support of the leadership team making tough decisions, even if those decisions are unpopular if it's the right thing for the service.

### Decision-Making

Given the nature of the work, it's understandable that an element of reactive decision making may be present within the organisation. However, conversations with colleagues have highlighted that reactive decisions are still be taken in roles where a strategic, long-term focus is needed.

There seems to be an agreement that generally colleagues feel empowered to make decisions at an appropriate level for their role. However, some individual experiences were shared where even low-level decisions needed manager approval. There were also examples of where operational decisions were taken to the executive team for approval or discussion.

Colleagues have noted that there has been a shift to a more collaborative approach to decision making, demonstrated by the senior team, which is valued. There is still, however, work to be done for colleagues to feel that changes happen collaboratively across the organisation, rather than being 'done to' others.

With an executive team credited internally as being approachable, there's a risk that it may be easier to bypass management layers and raise issues this way if a line manager is not seen as approachable. Equally, there were regular instances relating to power, where colleagues have highlighted basic requests for kit and equipment to senior managers due to a lack of response to requests. During our conversations a strong theme emerged that many colleagues feel they must jump through hoops and barriers to obtain basic on-the-job equipment.

### Recommendations:

- Enhance support for managers in delivering feedback and managing critical performance discussions
- In partnership with colleagues, collaboratively review and refine the promotion and talent development process
- Ensure a robust framework is in place for addressing both technical and behavioural performance challenges, applicable uniformly to all team members, irrespective of their tenure or role

## Power Dynamics

One of the elements of the Culture Web is linked to power.

We asked colleagues, 'outside of the formal structure of the organisation, are there any areas you feel hold a disproportionate amount of power?' Throughout our conversations there was a perception that certain areas within the organisation hold a disproportionate amount of power. Examples of this include:

- Colleagues have shared a number of examples of where they feel that the support services, here to enable the frontline nature of the service, hold a disproportionate amount of power. The examples provided share a common theme – where policy and process outweigh the 'people' element of the role. Colleagues have shared that they feel that they have little voice in shaping processes, or they are designed with little knowledge of the role.
- Support services play a critical role in the 'business' element of the service. When colleagues are fulfilling their frontline roles, they need to feel that they have everything they need to do their job well. There are several examples where colleagues have not felt they have the appropriate kit or environment to do their work well, impacting on morale.
- There were also examples shared of where policy or approach has restricted treating people with dignity and respect. For example, colleagues facing disciplinary action were left with little communication and support, colleagues facing significant life-changing events were restricted by rigid policy with no exploration of how discretion could be applied.
- A history of relationships and political manoeuvring has helped people gain power in the past. This is not something that colleagues are keen to experience in the future of the service, that colleagues are treated differently because of the informal relationships they have with others in the service, or that key individuals continue to be seen as the people to align yourself with if you are to succeed in a promotion process.
- Colleagues have shared a frustration with a lack of input when it comes to influencing decisions affecting their day-to-day work. Or when they have been asked for their input, their advice or requests have been ignored and decisions have been made without explanation. Although colleagues are seeing an increasingly collaborative style of decision making demonstrated by the senior leadership team, this is not seen across the organisation and is sometimes in direct contrast to the approach being taken by the senior leadership team.

In summary, a prominent theme from this section is the concern about excessive bureaucratic control and power within support services. There is a strong call for redistributing this power, ensuring that a broader range of colleagues' voices are heard and taken into account, and that individuals are not left to be perceived to hold disproportionate influence or power. We must also ask ourselves, as support functions – *are we here to enable, or enforce?*

Furthermore, the role of managers is crucial. Managers need to lead their teams effectively *and* fully take up their corporate role. This involves actively participating in

decision-making with support teams, backing tough decisions when necessary, and holding the corporate line when needed.

### Recommendations

- Review the approach to corporate support. Assess whether the current approach leans more towards enforcement or empowerment, process or people
- Establish clear and accessible mechanisms for colleagues to report inadequacies in essential equipment and workplace environment quality. Ensure that these reports are transparent and open for review, explaining why certain needs are not being met and the steps being taken to address them
- Explore how a more consistent and uniformed approach could be taken to how the support services are approached, in particular a joined-up strategic direction for the future

### **Fostering an Inclusive Culture**

The March 2023 HMICFRS Values and Culture report indicated a national concern about toxic behaviour and culture within the sector.

In our conversations with colleagues, we did not find an active culture of toxic or discriminatory behaviour within Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service. However, there is always work to be done.

Although there is no indication of malicious, intentional discrimination, there were instances of where language or actions have been 'clumsy' and although not intended to discriminate, could be perceived in this way.

It's also important to note that although no-one reported an active culture of bullying to us, there were many examples from the past of where strong characters within the organisation were left to dominate and wield a disproportionate amount of power over others. Colleagues were very clear that they did not want to return to this style of leadership or for a culture of aggression to creep back in.

The HMIFRS report also, importantly, notes the importance of trust within the service, and that it is trusted to operate within the community. Therefore, work must continue to understand in practice what an inclusive workplace means for SFRS, as well as making sure that boundaries are not crossed when it comes to discriminatory behaviour.

Previous diversity training programmes were described as offering a surface-level overview, but lacking the depth needed to understand the subtleties of decision-making contexts and behavioural norms. This limited scope can result in misunderstandings, as behaviours considered normal in some communities, for example, may be interpreted differently by others. Many of these misunderstandings stem from unconscious biases that are more a product of upbringing and personal experience, rather than intentional offence.

Leaders must also not settle on this and continue to closely monitor any teams/groups reported to have cultural issues, and not just assume complaints are isolated.

The introduction of a new, secure system for raising concerns via an external agency is a positive development, though its effectiveness remains to be seen. Previous reluctance to report issues due to fear of repercussions must be addressed, remembering that for many long-serving colleagues, past experiences may still resonate.

### Recommendations

- Given the feedback on previous diversity 'training', develop a more in-depth programme that delves into the nuances of workplace behaviour and decision-making contexts. This programme should aim to foster a deep understanding of unconscious biases, promoting a truly inclusive workplace culture. Our recommendation is that this should be interactive and scenario-based, allowing for practical application and discussion
- Consider expanding the HR team to include specialised capacity dedicated to organisational development and culture while maintaining the effectiveness of essential, business-as-usual HR activities. This capacity should have a direct link to the executive team to ensure strategic oversight and alignment

### **Career Pathways and Promotion Process**

Throughout our conversations the promotion process was a key talking point. Before we expand on this, it may be helpful to summarise the main themes:

- For many, the promotion process is seen as disruptive. Colleagues are placed in temporary roles, meaning priorities change regularly, long-standing issues are not dealt with, leading to a lack of consistency when it comes to management approach and direction.
- The promotion process appears to be isolated and doesn't take long-term performance into account. There were many instances where colleagues felt that the ability to learn how to pass a test outweighed genuine potential.
- Colleagues in the past who were known to be aggressive and lacking the desire to manage people were given promotions due to their ability to 'pass the test', despite them not being suited at that time to people management roles.
- Colleagues described past discriminatory behaviours if certain people did not get the role they wanted. There were examples, in line with the HMIFRS report, relating to, 'Well, they got this role because' (of a protected characteristic). Although there were no recent examples of this, people who described or witnessed, or even acted in this way may still work in the service.
- Examples were given that colleagues displaying poor behaviours are not dealt with firmly through performance management or disciplinary procedures. Instead, the employee is moved between teams/departments, replicating the same



behaviours but without the underlying performance or conduct issues being resolved.

- There were a number of examples linked to the previous issue of cliques and personal relationships, where some colleagues were treated favourably – or not – because of their relationship with key individuals. The service needs to work hard to break down this perception and move forward from this.
- Colleagues shared that with a finite pool of candidates, there is a perception that if you apply for promotion often enough – or stay in the organisation long enough – you will be promoted. Some colleagues shared that they believe that even if someone isn't ready for promotion, no-one is prepared to have an honest conversation to share this with them.
- In the current process colleagues must express an interest 12 months in advance of applying for promotion. Some see this as a barrier, with personal circumstances changing over time and the promotion process unable to accommodate that. Similarly, colleagues who have not passed the promotion process must also wait a further 12 months before applying again, which can feel demoralising.
- There were several examples of colleagues perceived to have prioritised the promotion process and 'vanity projects' above what is right for the organisation to ensure they pass the relevant stage of the promotion process.

For many there's a perception that promotions are often based on tenure, rather than actual management competency. The suggestion is that there should be a more rigorous selection process to promote only those who will bring the right behaviours, style, and ambition, in line with desired organisational culture.

Colleagues should be able to see rigour in the process, and not feel like it is weighted towards colleagues with the ability to learn how to pass a test.

As well as the examples above that impact colleagues at an individual level, there is a wider, systemic challenge. The promotion process is repeatedly cited as a distraction and disruptive for the organisation.

Equally, there are high profile examples of how the promotion process has disrupted large parts of the organisation. We were given examples of previous leaders making promises about pay and conditions that couldn't be kept, with colleagues left feeling this was only done to help secure a promotion. The impact this has had on a section of the workforce is significant and work needs to be done to rebuild trust.

Interestingly, several colleagues expressed an interest in a two-tier entry system, recognising that in more senior roles, personal experience of the industry may not be needed, and that the ability to lead a business at a strategic level is more important.

Development opportunities outside the promotion process appear to be limited unless they are role specific courses. A recent management course left many feeling underwhelmed and describing it as a tick-box exercise, rather than a genuine opportunity to develop. The theory-based, overly broad syllabus left many struggling to understand how it would apply to their role now and in the future.

In summary, the promotion process is a challenge for many, and is seen to be having a disruptive impact at both an individual and organisational level.

### Recommendations

- Offer more relevant and role-specific development options, including mentorship and project opportunities, with structured paths for developing leadership and management skills
- As well as reviewing the promotion process, as referenced earlier in our recommendations, explore career enhancement opportunities and pathways for non-uniformed colleagues

### **Gossip and 'Banter'**

A key element of the Culture Web is 'rituals and routines'. When we explored this topic, it became clear that a sense of humour is important to many colleagues within the organisation, and they don't want to risk losing that. There is a fear that over time the environment will become sterile and robotic. Many colleagues reported that sometimes the camaraderie shared between colleagues may be what keeps you going through a difficult shift.

It's important to recognise the societal shift that has taken place in recent years, with a move towards more open discussions about inclusivity. There was no evidence from our conversations that colleagues disagreed with that ambition, however, there was a concern that the 'cancel culture' seen playing out in the public arena could play out in real life. What we referenced earlier as clumsy behaviour now has more severe consequences. Colleagues are mindful that multiple generations - with a variety of lengths of service - may have different expectations of the workplace.

There was no evidence of an overwhelming discriminatory banter culture within the organisation, it's crucial to continuously moderate interactions, understanding the audience, and avoiding crossing the line into unprofessional or offensive behaviour. Work needs to continue to challenge and learn from this.

### Gossip

Gossip, however, has been highlighted recently as an increasingly concerning challenge. We appreciate that gossip will exist to a variety of degrees in organisations, and it can be seen as a harmless bonding ritual. However, in recent years this has progressed to a harmful degree for some colleagues at SFRS and it's felt to have personal consequences.

With a culture of (well-meaning) gossip at times, some colleagues don't feel they can raise issues or share personal information without others finding out. For example, one colleague shared:

- 'If I were to need to explore therapy at some point relating to what I've experienced at work on a shout, I don't know if I would do this internally. I would probably pay for this myself because I wouldn't want people to talk about me.'

Other examples linked to more targeted gossip were:

- Colleagues who did not receive a promotion have talked about the successful candidates making assumptions about who they might have relationships with that could influence their chances of promotion.

- Unfounded rumours questioning the competency and qualifications of some employees, based on personal attributes.
- One colleague reported that based on their recent experience, they would question whether they would recommend a family member joining the organisation if such a gossip culture were to continue

Professional boundaries appear to have been blurred and this practice of gossip becoming acceptable may be linked to a sense of overfamiliarity. Greater clarity, led from the top, is needed on addressing this rising culture of harmful gossip. While intentions may not be to harm, gossip is having a serious impact on personal and professional lives.

The goal should be to establish an environment where all colleagues feel empowered and responsible for challenging gossip, rather than indulging in it or simply standing by.

### Recommendations

- Implement strategies to reduce harmful gossip and promote a more supportive work environment. This could involve focused sessions on professional communication, reinforcing policies around confidentiality, and creating a safe space for colleagues to raise concerns without fear of gossip. Leadership should model this behaviour and actively discourage gossip to set a clear standard

### **Summary**

As we conclude this report, it's important to recognise that our conversations revealed a genuine shared sense of opportunity for the future. Many colleagues have felt a significant shift in a positive direction with the recent changes in the executive team.

The positive shift in approachability and 'human' style of leadership is important and many want this to continue, as well as getting the balance right with tough conversations where needed and appropriate boundaries being in place.

While the 'boys club' mentality isn't currently prevalent, it's a recent memory for some. There's a strong consensus on the need to avoid its resurgence, ensuring that processes are transparent, 'closed door deals' are absent, and challenges to behaviours or performance are addressed directly and not moved on.

The sense of a 'family' within the service is valued for its supportiveness. However, there's a risk that this could hinder effective performance management. It's crucial to find a balance where support doesn't compromise accountability.

Concerns about aggressive management styles resurfacing highlight the need for holistic recruitment, ensuring behavioural competencies are a key part of the selection process.

The perception of power imbalances, particularly in support services, contrasts with the organisation's goal of leading with empowerment and trust. This needs further exploration and possibly a reset to align with the organisation's direction.

Although we have not visited every station or building, there is a sense of lack of maintenance in some areas. Many frontline colleagues spend long periods of time in tired areas which have been neglected. This is taking its toll on morale. Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service must ask itself, '*Does our environment say – you matter?*'

The promotion process, particularly its impact at an organisational level needs attention. It's vital to involve colleagues in reshaping this process to be more transparent and inclusive. Non-uniformed colleagues often hit a 'ceiling' despite high performance, feeling their expertise is not fully utilised or valued, impacting morale.

The transition from reactive to strategic decision-making is a challenge that needs addressing, especially in defining roles and responsibilities across management levels.

The senior team's ongoing visibility and commitment to diverse perspectives in decision-making are crucial. They should continue to challenge each other and encourage diverse thoughts, ensuring it's reflected in all decision-making processes.

In conclusion, there is a strong sense of positivity towards the future, and with an eye on some of the themes that have emerged from this report, this is a matter of tweaking and focus rather than an entire overhaul. Colleagues genuinely want to see Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service succeed and are keen to play a key role in shaping the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Figures from August 2023