

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

17 JANUARY 2019

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Anthony Boyle, Peter Brennan, Roy Gladden, Janet Grace, Andrew Makinson, Lesley Rennie and Paul Tweed

Also Present:

Apologies of absence were received from: Cllr Sharon Connor, Cllr Steff O'Keeffe and Cllr Lisa Preston

1. People Scrutiny Review - Staff Retention and Succession Planning

Members were provided with a detailed presentation, by the Director of People & Organisational Development – Nick Mernock, delivered in response to the following question, raised by Members:

“How does MFRA ensure current and future retention of staff and effective succession planning to avoid other employers recruiting the excellent staff from MFRA?”

Members were advised that the presentation would consider if MFRA have a problem in terms of staff retention; and if so, what are the challenges. It would then look at what can be done; and how we as an organisation, plan for the future.

The presentation started by looking at staff who have left the service over the last 2 years; and their reason for leaving, broken down by uniformed, non-uniformed and control staff. However, it was highlighted to Members that the figures are a snap shot and numbers will fluctuate year on year, dependant on the challenges being faced.

MFRA Leavers:

Uniformed staff: Members were advised that the majority (111) of individuals leaving MFRA, were those that had reached their normal retirement age. Members were informed of the historical mass recruitment, which led to a large proportion of the operational workforce retiring around the same time, which has created a challenge.

They were informed that there had been 3 medical discharges, 5 medical retirements and 11 resignations.

With regards to the resignations, Members were informed that there was an interesting trend emerging, which would be covered in more detail later in the presentation.

Members were advised that there had been 3 individuals transferring to other FRS's. One was to relocate due to family issues, however the other 2 were officers with specific skills and experience, particularly around Protection, which has caused a small degree of concern.

The presentation highlighted that 1 uniformed employee had unfortunately been dismissed, whilst another had left under the classification of "other", which in this case was a generic conversation between employer and employee, regarding a breakdown in the employment relationship.

Non-uniformed staff: Members were informed that the majority of employees leaving (41) were due to resignations. Unfortunately, 1 individual had died during the period. There was 1 early retirement and 3 medical retirements, 1 medical discharge; and 3 voluntary redundancies.

Members were advised that a voluntary redundancy scheme continued to operate and would be granted where the post of the individual applying could be deleted.

In terms of the remainder of non-uniformed staff leaving, 5 were due to normal retirements, 7 were fixed term contract terminations; and 3 came under the classification of "other", as previously described.

In relation to resignations from non-uniformed staff, Members were advised that they operate within different career parameters than uniformed staff, as there is often less opportunity for progression within MFRA. This combined with a re-vitalised and competitive market for certain skills, has created some challenges for MFRA in terms of staff retention within certain fields.

In terms of Fire Control staff, the presentation highlighted that there had been 6 normal retirements, plus an early retirement, a medical discharge and 2 resignations, which were both due to a change in circumstances.

Members were advised that this is a skilled role, which presents a major learning curve for new employees. They were also informed that the trade unions had raised some concerns regarding staffing numbers within Fire Control, and that they were therefore about to run a recruitment process to address this. However, as there is a great deal of training involved for these roles, MFRA are being more creative in the way that they are recruiting, by making it attractive for individuals to transfer in.

A question was raised regarding the percentages of staff leaving, within each area. Members were advised that officers did not have the figures to hand, but confirmed that these could be circulated following the meeting.

They were informed that out of the 624 operational staff, 135 have left MFRA, 111 of which were through normal retirement. This has created a real challenge for the organisation, which will be considered and discussed in more detail at the forthcoming Budget Strategy Day.

With regards to non-uniformed staff, it was noted that the majority have transferable skills. This creates a challenge around having a desire to invest in our people, but realising that in doing so, you increase the likelihood of them leaving for a better paid role within another organisation.

With regards to the gender of leavers, Members were informed that 33 were females, whilst 177 were males. They were advised that 4 female uniformed employees have left, which is a concern.

Members were informed that although positive action can be undertaken with uniformed recruitment, to try to encourage applications from females and BAME individuals, there is little scope to do the same with non-uniformed recruitment, as there is greater potential for it to become positive discrimination.

The presentation also showed the number of leavers per age bracket; and highlighted that the vast majority were retirees. Members were informed of the trend within specific younger groups, which sees a lot of movement between roles and organisations. However they were advised that this is not being seen in MFRA at the moment, but there has been some movement between other FRS's, some of which have been overseas.

Members commented that there have been a number of individuals that they have spoken to during Station Visits, who have chosen to transfer into MFRA. They also commented on the excellent calibre of the recruit firefighters, many of whom are highly educated and who have chosen MFRA to be their employer.

It was confirmed that the quality of individuals joining MFRA is fantastic; and that perceptions of the firefighter role are starting to change. With the enhancements to the firefighter role, it is becoming more appealing for females, who are starting to see it more as a community role. Enhancements to the firefighter role, for example the inclusion of EMR and MTFA, may also make the firefighter role appeal to more people; and potentially increase the diversity of applicants in the future.

Members were also informed that there has been a fundamental shift in attitude, from firefighters undertaking the role alongside other employment, to the firefighter role being seen as a career.

Operational Staff Challenges:

With regards to operational challenges, Members were informed that the main challenge is around the age profile of uniformed staff, however the organisation do have a plan to resolve this challenge.

A further potential operational challenge, is around pay, with national firefighter pay negotiations still ongoing.

Members were informed that although operational staff can aspire to senior roles, which are well paid, the base level entry pay for firefighters, is challenging. For around the first 2 years, firefighters will be in development, which is only paid around £24k per annum. This is particularly low when

compared to the base level entry for train drivers, which is around £40k per annum.

Members were advised that several operational staff (particularly female operational staff) have left MFRA for other roles outside the FRS. Members asked whether they were leaving for specific roles; and were informed that there is major recruitment underway within the railway sector and several of our staff who are relatively new in role, are leaving for better paid roles, such as train driver. It was noted that within FRS', manager level roles are competitive, however the challenges are around entry level roles and retaining staff.

Members were informed that the Day Crewing Whole Time Retained (DCWTR) duty system, to which new recruits are contracted, includes an additional 10% retainer, which enables staff to earn more than the basic level. Also, the contract includes the requirement to respond to MTFA and EMR incidents at a point in the future, but the FBU are restricting their members to working to their role map. MFRA have therefore been asked to withdraw the DCWTR contracts, which we have refused, however we will allow the national dispute to run its course.

Another operational challenge, is around culture; and whether the firefighter role is still considered to be a full career. Members were advised that it would appear to be so, as the vast majority of individuals leaving were due to normal retirements.

Non-Operational Staff Challenges:

With regards to non-operational staff, Members were advised that the main challenge is around career development; and it was noted that for some roles, MFRA just cannot compete with the offer of other organisations and businesses.

Members were advised that MFRA has continued to invest in and re-develop its employees, whilst accepting that some may then leave for a better paid role elsewhere.

A further challenge around non-operational staff, has been around pay rates. An example was provided whereby an employee was offered a role within another organisation for more pay. Given the skills and knowledge of that individual, it would cost MFRA a substantial amount to recruit and train someone else in that role. Therefore the job role was considered and re-aligned, resulting in the individual agreeing to remain an employee of MFRA.

Members were informed that sometimes there is a requirement to be creative, as it is worth retaining skills and experience, for a little extra cost.

Members were shown the matrix utilised for pre-planning, around likelihood of departure verses organisational impact. They were advised that individuals who fall into the low/ low category, tend to be those individuals who are in generic roles. In terms of risk, the greatest area for concern is around individuals who are the main point of knowledge; and who are likely to leave. Therefore, in terms of a long-term strategy, it is prudent to train other individuals who fall into the middle sections, to provide resilience.

Members were informed that work is undertaken on an annual basis with managers and Directors, to ensure that the gap is minimised. Also, they were advised that for both operational and non-operational staff, there are lots of opportunities for development, for example “acting up”, development workshops, coaching and mentoring and the opportunity to gain different experience. This will enable MFRA to build and support individuals, who will then have the potential to provide future continuity.

Members were informed that officers will continually look to revise and re-vitalise roles, to ensure that they continue to provide personal and job satisfaction. They were advised that this sometimes requires a role to be re-graded, and they try not to close options.

Members were advised that in relation to uniformed staff, one of the key issues has been regarding the movement of staff into management roles. Feedback received was that for many people, the step up from Firefighter to Watch Manager, was considered to be too great. As a result, a number of Crew Manager positions have been re-introduced as development roles, allowing individuals to gain some experience before stepping up to Watch Manager. It was clarified to Members that these positions are not an additional level of management, they are solely for short-term development opportunities.

Members were advised that through consultation, a need was identified for the organisation to assist people moving up into manager roles. They were advised that in terms of Watch Manager A and Watch Manager B roles, the division has now gone in terms of 2 pump stations; and MFRA has therefore been pragmatic and revised how the roles are graded. As a result, more opportunities at Watch Manager B and Station Manager B have been created, in an effort to kick-start interest in promotion.

Members were informed that a further way in which the organisation has been developing its staff, is through diversifying workloads for individuals who have shown an interest in other areas, providing them with opportunity to participate in cross – department working groups; and broaden their skills.

A further consideration for the organisation around retention, has been to continue to review the Pay Strategy. Members were advised that for Green Book staff, it is felt that we are close to breaking point in terms of pay and our ability to retain staff. Therefore as an organisation, we may need to be pragmatic and creative in terms of our pay strategy, in order to try and retain staff.

Questions were raised by Members regarding the re-grading of posts and whether the positions were re-evaluated to ensure that the re-grade is justified.

Members were assured that that is the case and posts are fully re-evaluated. They were advised that sometimes, the software that is used to evaluate roles, does not take full account of everything that an individual does. In these cases, the role will be discussed fully and the role re-evaluated on that basis.

Members were further advised that many organisations choose to use two systems together, as no one system is ever 100% accurate.

Further questions were raised by Members regarding specific groups of staff that are highly qualified, trained and experienced; and what we are doing to ensure those staff are retained within MFRA.

Reassurance was provided to Members regarding those roles. They were also informed that there have been a number of “development” operational roles, however we are now in a position where in some roles, there are not enough people who are permanent. They were advised that anyone who has been temporary in a role for over 2 years should be made permanent; and as such, they hope to address some of those issues in the near future.

Operational Recruitment:

With regards to the Firefighter challenge, Members were informed that operational recruitment is a key issue. They were advised that there will be at least 3 recruit courses a year consisting of 20 individuals, and that we will be recruiting on a constant basis.

They were also informed of the “Have a Go” days that are being run, which enable individuals to have a go of the different elements of the process/ role. The “Have a Go” days are open to female and BAME applicants, who have fallen out of previous recruitment processes at some point; and provide them with an opportunity to try different elements and receive additional support. This approach means we are recycling some of those applicants, which have expressed an interest in working for MFRA. Members were informed that on the current recruit course, there are 7 individuals who have previously attended a “Have a Go” day.

Members were informed that we have transferred in a number of staff from other FRS's, in order to meet the challenge around Firefighter numbers.

In addition, MFRA are looking to re-employ as Watch Managers, a few individuals who have recently retired, on a short term basis, providing they still meet the physical requirements.

Members were advised that the individuals will be given a short term contract; and will be utilised to plug-gaps where required.

It was clarified to Members that the individuals combined pension and pay amount will not be able to exceed the amount they earned before they retired; and they will only be used when needed for a short period of time.

They were also advised that during the 12 to 18 month transition period, Station Managers have; and will be riding as Watch Managers where required, to provide support.

It was highlighted to Members that the organisation will continue to commit to diversity and undertake positive action, with regards to recruitment.

Succession Planning/ Promotion:

In relation to the challenges around promotion, particularly of individuals from under-represented groups, Members were advised that it is a challenge that the organisation is on top of; and it has been identified within the People Strategy.

They were informed that managers are looking to identify individuals early on who have the potential to progress, as in the past, we have been hindered by the organisational culture and watch climate which has made people feel that they cannot progress until they have several years of experience.

It was highlighted to Members that the Appraisal mechanism is now much stronger, with managers now having conversations with their staff around aspirations, to break down barriers and identify future leaders early on. Where such individuals are identified, there is a range of support and development opportunities available, such as fast track development programmes, coaching and mentoring; and temporary opportunities.

Members were advised that the issues experienced here around promotion, are the same issues experienced nationally. However we are starting to move in the right direction, with more interest being expressed. They were advised that as an organisation, we have a clear view of where we are heading, with a number of working groups established, in addition to a number of vacancies and opportunities for progression to Watch Manager and Station Manager level.

Members asked whether in some cases, the reason why individuals were reluctant to progress, was due to a lack of confidence and not a lack of ability; and if so, what we could do as an organisation to address that.

Further comments were made suggesting that some individuals, may not have the desire to progress; and wouldn't want to feel pressurised into doing so, whilst others may not have thought about progression until it was discussed with them.

The presentation provided Members with some figures around the number and percentage of individuals who have been promoted within the last 2 years, by ethnicity, gender; and age.

Members were informed that the major challenge in terms of progression is around encouraging those from BAME backgrounds and females to seek promotion. They were informed that officers are wholly aware of the situation, however it is hoped that those individuals recruited over the past few years, may be more likely to seek progression.

Members were advised that MFRA have a strong brand and are considered to be an employer of choice. MFRA also has a People Strategy, which aims to address these challenges.

Challenges – Specific Roles/ Skills:

The presentation also considered if there were any specific roles to which MFRA have had difficulty recruiting into.

Members were advised that difficulties have been experienced around some IT and professional Finance roles, which are likely to be due to a more competitive reward market for these skills.

With regards to uniformed staff, Members were advised that there is still substantial interest, with over 1,400 applicants each time we advertise. They were also informed that there are people who have applied on numerous occasions.

In terms of trends in loss of staff to other organisations, Members were informed that there have been 2 key areas identified. One is the loss of several staff to roles within the railway sector, as discussed previously, the other is the loss of a few Protection staff to other organisations or FRS's, who are prepared to offer a higher grade, or a permanent role.

Comments were made by Members regarding the quality of training provided during the firefighter recruit course; and the different elements and extent of knowledge required to undertake the role.

A further question was raised by Members relating to employees who have chosen to leave the organisation; and if any of those individuals have sought to return to MFRA.

Members were informed that some of those who left to work overseas, requested to return to MFRA once their contracts overseas had been terminated, however they were advised that they would have to go through the recruitment process again.

However, most individuals who leave MFRA, tend to do so for specific reasons; and it is very seldom that people chose to leave as the role is not for them.

Conclusion:

Members considered the content of the presentation provided; and confirmed that it covered all of the questions in detail and provided them with assurance regarding staff retention and succession planning.

Members Resolved that:

The content of the presentation, be noted.

Close

Date of next meeting Date Not Specified