Independent Culture Review into Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service

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About Crest Advisory

We are crime and justice specialists - equal parts research, strategy and communication. From police forces to public inquiries, from tech companies to devolved authorities, we believe all these organisations (and more) have their own part to play in building a safer, more secure society. As the UK's only consultancy with this focus, we are as much of a blend as the crime and justice sector itself.

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Acknowledgements

We have been struck by the willingness of so many people to speak to us, honestly, candidly and bravely about the issues contained in this review. We record here our sincere thanks to all of those who have spoken to us, and so generously given their time.

We would also like to thank staff at Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service for their support with arranging logistics for the review.

Context: Fire and Rescue Services in Wales

Governance

There are three fire and rescue services (FRSs) in Wales: South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS), Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MAWWFRS) and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS). Each FRS is governed by a Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) consisting of councillors from the constituent local authorities. FRA members must set a budget to deliver the strategic aims of the Fire and Rescue National Framework, and scrutinise performance against desired outcomes. FRA members also appoint senior officers, including the Chief Fire Officer (CFO). However, in SWFRS, the functions of the FRA were transferred to four Commissioners appointed in February 2024 as a result of Welsh Government intervention following an independent culture review of SWFRS (see below for more information).

The FRAs are answerable to Welsh Government Ministers, who set priorities and guidance, and report on the compliance of the FRAs.

Welsh FRSs are inspected by the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor and Inspector for Wales (Dan Stephens QFSM at the time of writing), an independent advisor who reports to the Welsh Government.

Legislative context

Legislation is in place to hold Welsh FRSs and FRAs to high standards and to ensure they hold due regard for equality and diversity. Relevant legislation includes:
- Under the **Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004**, the **Wales Fire and Rescue National Framework** must set out the priorities and objectives for FRAs. Under this Act, Welsh Ministers must report, at least every two years, on the extent to which FRAs have acted in accordance with the framework.[1]
- The **Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009** provides a regime for improvement, inspection and audit of FRAs. Under section 1 and 2 of the measure, a FRA must make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions. Among other things, they must function in terms of fairness.
- The **Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015** imposes duties on public bodies (including FRSs) to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales.
- The **Equality Act 2010** imposes a duty on public bodies (including FRSs) to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation within their services; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

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[1] Unlike in England, there is no requirement to report before the Senedd — in England, the Secretary of State must report to the UK parliament.

- The **Social Partnerships and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023** provides a framework to promote the well-being of the people of Wales by enhancing sustainable development (including by improving public services) through social partnership working, promoting fair work and socially responsible procurement.
- The **Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011** sets out a legal framework which imposes a duty on public bodies (including FRSs) to comply with a set of standards relating to the promotion, growth, development, and equitable treatment of the Welsh language internally and externally.

Operational context

Part 2 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 specifies the core functions of FRAs, which are: promoting fire safety; firefighting; responding to road traffic accidents; and dealing with other prescribed emergencies (defined as events or situations that could cause death, serious injury, illness or serious harm to the environment).

However, since 2004, the operational context of FRSs has changed significantly. Since 2001-02, the number of fires in Wales has fallen by over 70%, with the lowest number on record seen in 2023-24, a 12% decrease compared to 2022-23.[2] Associated with this decline has been an increase in the diversification of the responsibilities of fire services. While fires have decreased considerably, the number of special service incidents (SSIs) has increased by 18% since 2001-02, with attendance at SSIs outnumbering attendances at fires in 2023-24 as well as two other previous years. SSIs include road traffic collisions, flooding incidents, medical incidents and so on.

This change to the operational context of working at a FRS bears implications for ensuring continued operational effectiveness, and workplace culture more broadly.

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[2] Welsh Government. (2024). Fire and rescue incident statistics: April 2023 to March 2024.

Background to the independent culture review

Independent culture reviews of other Fire and Rescue Services

The focus on culture in public services in Wales and the UK has increased over the past ten years, driven in part by high-profile reviews, such as the Casey Review into the Metropolitan Police[3] and NHS England's culture review of ambulance trusts,[4] which have highlighted widespread cultural issues in public services. These have spurred efforts to examine and reform organisational culture.

In the context of fire and rescue services (FRSs), troubling findings have been reported in multiple independent reviews of FRS culture. These have included:
- an independent review of conditions for **fire and rescue staff in England in 2015** which highlighted a toxic culture resistant to change;[5]
- the independent review of the **London Fire Brigade** in 2022 which found that the service was institutionally racist and homophobic;[6] and
- an independent review of **Dorset and Wiltshire FRS** in 2023 which concluded that the workplace culture was inadequate, with several examples found of discrimination, inappropriate language, and an overall lack of disciplinary action.[7]

In February 2023, Fenella Morris KC was appointed to lead an independent culture review of **South Wales Fire and Rescue Service** (SWFRS) after being commissioned by SWFRS's Chief Fire Officer (CFO). The review followed media reports around abusive behaviour from current and ex-colleagues of SWFRS. The review's final report was published in January 2024,[8] in which it detailed 'serious deficiencies' in SWFRS, including:
- a lack of transparency in recruitment and promotion procedures, making it difficult to ascertain if they are fair and free from nepotism;
- the toleration of 'problematic behaviours' including sexual harassment, negative assumptions about women, domestic abuse and physical aggression outside of work;
- bullying including in relation to protected characteristics; and
- a lack of encouragement and support for people to speak up, and insufficient action in response.

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[3] Casey, L. (2023). An independent review into the standards and behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service.

[4] NHS England. (2024). Culture review of ambulance trusts.

[5] Thomas, A. (2015). Independent review of conditions of service for fire and rescue staff in England February 2015. UK Government.

[6] Afzal, N. (2022). Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade.

[7] Johnson, A., et al. (2023). Independent review into the workplace culture of Dorset & Wiltshire fire and rescue service: March-September 2023.

[8] Morris, F. (2024). SWFRS culture review report.

Recommendations made in SWFRS's review included:
- setting clear behavioural standards, including examples of what is not tolerated;
- arranging an independent review of Executive Leadership Team (ELT) performance;
- involving an independent body in all Senior Management Team (SMT) and ELT appointments, disciplinary and grievance processes, and promotion and recruitment processes, for a minimum of 18 months following the review's publication;
- instructing specialist employment lawyers to review policies and procedures;
- pausing the use of temporary promotion for any period in excess of 6 months;
- reviewing the statutory functions of the Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs);
- ensuring complainants are regularly updated on the progress of their grievance/complaint;
- ensuring there is a full written grievance outcome and written findings or fact and reasons for sanction in each disciplinary case; and
- providing written feedback to all candidates for promotion and recruitment.

As a consequence of the review, the Welsh Government took direct control of SWFRS, with four commissioners appointed to oversee the service, and the CFO of SWFRS announced he would retire, and was put on administrative leave by the commissioners pending his retirement.

At the request of the commissioners put in place by the Welsh Government, an inspection by the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor and Inspector was carried out to assess the operational effectiveness of SWFRS when responding to domestic dwelling fire incidents. Published in October 2024, the inspection highlighted concerns that operational tactics employed by SWFRS have placed firefighters at unnecessary risk and/or resulted in avoidable damage to properties.[9] These were issues 'not limited to South Wales' that had been raised along with recommendations in previous inspections, but SWFRS had failed to respond to the warnings.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services reports

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) 2023 report, *Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services*,[10] raised concerns about the culture in England's 44 FRSs (defined as '*ideas, customs and behaviours*'), citing evidence of bullying, harassment and discrimination. Thirty-five recommendations were made to assist FRSs to improve their values, culture, fairness and diversity, which were formally adopted by the Welsh Government and have started to be put in place by Mid and West Fire and Rescue Service (MAWWFRS) and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS). Recommendations included:

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[9] Stephens, D., and Osborne, M. (2024). Inspection of the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service to consider the effectiveness of its response to domestic dwelling fires. Welsh Government.
[10] HMICFRS. (2023). Values and culture in fire and rescue services.

- 6 recommendations on raising concerns, including CFOs ensuring their services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns;
- 9 recommendations on misconduct handling, including CFOs providing assurances that they have implemented the standards on misconduct allegations and outcomes handling, which include conducting and completing investigations, providing training for staff who are carrying out investigations and ensuring the diversity/neutrality of the investigating panel/person;
- 5 recommendations on leadership, including CFOs implementing plans to monitor watch and team cultures and take prompt remedial action to address any issues identified; and
- 2 recommendations on improving diversity including offering increased direct-entry opportunities, developing plans to promote progression paths for existing staff in non-operational roles and putting plans in place to reduce any inequalities of opportunity.

Further reports published by HMICFRS in August 2024 found that while the culture in FRSs in England have shown some signs of improvement, progress is slow with significant issues remaining with unacceptable behaviour.[11,12]

Welsh Government and Welsh Parliament scrutiny

The Welsh Parliament's Equality and Social Justice Committee launched an inquiry into the governance of FRSs, prompted by SWFRS's review and ITV Wales investigations into the culture of SWFRS and NWFRS.[13] The committee published its report, *Sound the Alarm: The Governance of Fire and Rescue Services*, in June 2024.[14] The inquiry identified serious failings from FRA members, including their lack of accountability and capability to provide the level of strategic oversight, scrutiny and challenge that is necessary for their role. For example, the Fire and Rescue Services Association's (FRSA) submission to the inquiry highlighted FRA members' lack of experience in 'driving through cultural change in any organisation, let alone an emergency service'. The committee concluded that the Welsh Government should reform how Fire and Rescue Authorities work, including reducing their size and including members with better knowledge and expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion.[15]

The inquiry also highlighted repeated concerns about the appointment of an Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) at NWFRS as interim CFO of SWFRS in February 2024, following SWFRS's CFO being put on administrative leave, when there were ongoing employment tribunal proceedings of which the ACFO was a named respondent. The report stated that the 'lack of clarity and the defensive, bordering on dismissive, tone' in response to these concerns were 'troubling'.

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[11] HMICFRS. (2024). Misconduct in fire and rescue services in England: Research commissioned by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services.

[12] HMICFRS. (2024). Standards of behaviour: The handling of misconduct in fire and rescue services.

[13] ITV Wales News. (2024). North Wales Fire staff describe 'toxic culture'. 29 February 2024.

[14] Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee. Sound the Alarm: The Governance of Fire and Rescue Services. June 2024.

[15] Welsh Parliament. (2024). Plenary - 09/10/2024. 6. Debate on the Equality and Social Justice Committee Report, 'Sound the Alarm: The Governance of Fire and Rescue Services'.

Crest Advisory's appointment

In March 2024, MAWWFRS and NWFRS agreed with the Welsh Government with the need to better understand the progress of improvements to organisational culture in each service. The proposal formed the basis of a written statement by the then Deputy Minister for Social Partnership, Hannah Blythyn MS.[16]

In accordance with the public procurement route for Welsh FRSs, MAWWFRS and NWFRS procured the services of a specialist and independent provider to undertake a review of each organisation's culture. Crest Advisory was the successful applicant of this process.[17]

Crest Advisory is a consultancy and research organisation based in London. We work on projects related to justice, policing, and public safety. We've also supported several inquiries and reviews, such as the Casey Review into culture and standards at the Metropolitan Police,[18] undertaken research into misconduct in fire and rescue services in England for HMICFRS,[19] and provided communications support for the Grenfell Inquiry and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

Scope of the review

Crest was commissioned to undertake an assessment of MAWWFRS and NWFRS's current positions in relation to Fenella Morris KC's findings and other relevant studies regarding workplace culture; staff satisfaction and motivation; staff engagement; promotion arrangements; grievance arrangements; and workforce diversity.

The review set out to consider the outcomes of work already commissioned by both organisations in these areas, such as staff engagement surveys and focus groups, and the next steps proposed in response. It also aimed to identify and prioritise opportunities for improvement based on the findings obtained from full and open engagement with current and former staff and other interested parties such as trade unions. A critical part of the review was therefore to seek out and listen to the views and lived experiences of current and former MAWWFRS and NWFRS staff (see below for eligibility criteria).

See Appendix A for the full terms of reference.

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[16] Blythyn, H. (2024). Written Statement: Culture and values in Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service. Welsh Government.

[17] Via the YPO framework for Managing Consultancy and Professional Services

[18] Casey, L. (2023). An independent review into the standards and behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service.

[19] HMICFRS. (2023). Standards of behaviour: The handling of misconduct in fire and rescue services.

This review was commissioned by MAWWFRS and NWFRS as a key element in their respective culture journeys.

We recognise that commissioning an independent review of the culture of an organisation is not an easy step to take. Throughout, both services showed their commitment to ensuring that the review was independent, that Crest could ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and that the review reached as inclusive a group as possible.

Crest kept MAWWFRS and NWFRS updated on the review's progress at regular meetings but no updates on engagement or findings were provided before the submission of the final draft.

MAWWFRS should be commended for their courage in commissioning this report.

Methodology

<u>Engagement phases</u>

The methodology for this review was made up of the following parts, which took place between July 2024-November 2024:

1. A literature review
2. A document and data review
3. A survey
4. Interviews (online and face to face)
5. Focus groups (online and face to face)
6. On-site visits to each fire and rescue service (FRS)
7. Written and audio submissions

The **literature review** was carried out to provide an up-to-date picture of culture within Welsh FRSs and to guide the development of research questions and engagement materials. Literature that was reviewed included reviews of UK fire and rescue services, reviews and reports on culture in other uniformed services, Senedd and UK Parliament evidence on FRS culture and governance, and other relevant grey literature.

The **document and data review** involved a desk review of existing FRS documents, policies and processes that provided insights into workplace culture at Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MAWWFRS) and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS), and a review of current data at each FRS, including demographic data, sickness and absence, disciplinary and grievances, training and promotion.

The **online survey** included a mix of multiple choice and free text questions, and covered the following topics:
- Organisational culture and values
- Leadership and management
- Experiences of prejudicial and/or unacceptable behaviour and attitudes
- Reporting/speaking up about misconduct
- Training
- Promotion and recruitment
- Organisational development and change

Online and face to face interviews were offered to staff and former staff at on-site locations (e.g. community rooms of fire stations) and off-site locations. Multiple **focus groups (online and face to face)** were also carried out with staff, staff networks and trade union representatives. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured — rather than having a set list of questions, the interviews and focus groups were guided by the participant and what they felt they wanted to share or was important for the review team to know.

Crest Advisory also undertook **on-site visits** to each FRS. These included visiting fire stations, headquarters and attending meetings and forums as observers. Crest observed a meeting of the Culture and Inclusion Working Group at MAWWFRS.

We also offered the opportunity for staff and former staff to contribute to the review through **written or audio submissions**, via a dedicated email address or by post.

All methods of contributing to the review and all communications about the review were offered in Welsh and English.

Rationale for the methodological approach

A mixed methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of survey data and qualitative engagement with current and previous FRS staff, allowed for a thorough and inclusive review of the progress both FRSs have made against the criteria set out by the Deputy Minister for Social Partnership.

Each research phase built on the last, ensuring a holistic view of organisational culture at each FRS. A mixed methods approach allowed perceptions of culture to be studied from different perspectives.[20] The survey provided a broad, generalisable picture of collective views and key differences, while interviews offered a space for more detailed and subjective personal reflection, and focus groups provided a platform for dynamic interactions, revealing collective and conflicting understandings.

Offering the opportunity to contribute via all the different methods listed above (with staff/former staff able to contribute via more than one method if preferred), helped ensure that the review was inclusive and that everyone who wanted to contribute could do so in a format most comfortable to them, taking into account factors such as neurodiversity, caring responsibilities and concerns about keeping their involvement confidential.

Box 1: How to read and interpret the findings of the review

The methodology for this review was carefully designed to gather as broad and comprehensive a spectrum of views as possible within the given timeframe, while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity for participants and ensuring that participation in the review through any method was entirely voluntary.

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[20] Regnault, A., Willgoss, T., Barbic, S., & International Society for Quality of Life Research (ISOQOL) Mixed Methods Special Interest Group (SIG). (2018). Towards the use of mixed methods inquiry as best practice in health outcomes research. *Journal of patient-reported outcomes, 2*(1), 19.

This review focuses on organisational culture — the ideas, customs, and behaviours that are pervasive and dominant. In this respect, it is not about assessing policies or procedures but instead is about understanding staff and former staff's experiences of what happens in practice or on the ground. Similarly, it is not an investigation into specific incidents or a determination of right or wrong in any given situation. That is, the review did not seek out alternative views or seek to corroborate evidence in response to what participants shared with us, as this would have exceeded the scope of the review.

However, all research methods have limitations. For example, while the survey achieved a strong response rate, providing high levels of confidence that the findings reflect the views of current staff, the views of every individual at MAWWFRS and NWFRS are not included. Furthermore, participation in the review was entirely voluntary, which means there is a risk of self-selection bias. We wish to emphasise that retained firefighters were under-represented among participants in this review, which may result in their perspectives being insufficiently captured.

Interviews, focus groups, and written submissions add valuable context and depth to the survey findings, but these insights may reflect context-specific nuances that are not universally applicable. As such, some opinions and perceptions expressed may be contentious or controversial and should not be interpreted as representing the full picture. Readers will notice frequent references to 'perceptions,' 'views,' and 'opinions,' reflecting the subjective nature of the findings from the interviews, focus groups and written submissions.

To preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, it has not always been possible to provide full details of the experiences and situations that were described to us.

Participant recruitment

All current staff at MAWWFRS and NWFRS were eligible to take part. Former staff could also take part if they had been employed by either FRS either at or after 1 June 2021 (see Appendix A for the review's terms of reference).

Crest Advisory set up a dedicated web page which included key information about the review including live updates on when and how to take part, and a more detailed FAQ section which covered topics such as how Crest would ensure participant confidentiality. A dedicated email address was also set up for the submission of written/audio submissions and any general queries or concerns.

The review, including information on how staff and former staff could engage, was promoted on Crest and each FRS's social media channels via written posts and videos. Both FRSs also promoted key updates internally e.g. via weekly newsletters and Chief Fire Officer (CFO) briefs.

The review was also promoted via relevant national stakeholder groups (e.g. Women in the Fire Service and the Fire Officers' Association) and by trade union representatives and groups.

All communications were provided bilingually. All those who expressed an interest in taking part in the review were offered an opportunity to engage via an interview or focus group — that is, nobody was told they could not take part.

Engagement numbers

Engagement method	Engagement numbers

Survey	x429 completed responses
	  x405 current staff
	  x24 former staff
	
	Comparing the number of survey responses from current staff to the total number of current employees, the survey achieved a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of 3%. This means that, statistically, the survey responses are estimated to reflect the views of all current staff 95% of the time, with a possible variation of up to 3%.

Interviews	x26 in-person interviews
	x15 online interviews
	  x39 current staff
	  x2 former staff

Focus groups	x4 in-person focus groups *(n=15 current staff)* x4 online trade union sessions (n=8)
Written/audio submissions	x27 submissions Respondents did not have to state any personal information when submitting written submissions so a breakdown of current vs former staff cannot be provided.

<u>Analysis</u>

The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded (where participants consented) and transcribed. The transcripts, along with the written submission and transcripts of audio submissions, were analysed using inductive thematic analysis i.e. a data-driven approach that does not depend on any pre-existing assumptions of the themes, based on the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).[21]

Each survey question (multiple choice and free text) was analysed, and were also broken down by relevant groups, where the number of responses allowed. For example, we looked at how responses differed by seniority, operational vs non-operational staff, gender, and disability. However, to protect confidentiality and further reduce the risk of identification of individuals, small numbers are not reported. Due to the high proportion of those who preferred not to provide demographic information (rates are outlined below) and small numbers of responses from certain demographic groups, we were often unable to report on demographic breakdowns of survey responses.

The findings from all methods of engagement were triangulated. Triangulation involves combining different types of evidence and data from multiple sources or methods to gain a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of a topic. For this review, this process involved:

1. **Gathering evidence from different sources and methods**: in this case, a document and literature reviews, survey, interviews, focus groups and written submissions.
2. **Identifying patterns or inconsistencies**: for example, a policy might suggest that a specific process is followed for recruitment, yet survey data might indicate low trust in or understanding of this process. Interview and focus group findings could either validate these insights or provide alternative explanations.
3. **Integrating the insights to draw a nuanced and balanced conclusion**: this approach ensures reliability and validity by reducing the risk of relying on a single, potentially biased source, while leveraging the strengths of each evidence type.

The triangulated findings are presented below with relevant quotes and survey statistics. Where quotes are taken from survey free text responses, we have presented these verbatim (i.e. without any changes to spelling, grammar or punctuation), apart from when identifying information has been removed to protect confidentiality, and when contextual information is added in square brackets to aid understanding.

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[21] Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3,* 77-101.

Executive summary

Key findings

- Overall, Crest's engagement with Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MAWWFRS) staff and former staff suggests there is no clear consensus about whether the service's culture has improved or not since June 2021
- A large majority of staff and former staff described MAWWFRS as an 'operational boys club,' where personal connections with senior leaders fostered favouritism and nepotism
- Senior staff were significantly more positive than junior staff about MAWWFRS's current culture and prospects for future cultural improvements
- The aspects of culture most frequently reported by current and former staff as having deteriorated related to the transparency, conduct and communication of senior leaders
- A lack of accountability was prevalent throughout MAWWFRS, leading to a sense of betrayal and resentment, though trade union relationships had shown improvement

Drivers and characteristics of MAWWFRS's culture

- Most staff were proud of their jobs, and displayed a strong 'service mindset' and desire to help others
- Survey respondents were most likely to describe the leadership style at MAWWFRS as hierarchical, followed by controlling and unapproachable, with communication highlighted as a significant cultural weakness
- Staff and former staff described a culture of avoidance that was viewed as blocking positive change
- A widespread resistance to change was seen as a significant barrier to cultural improvement
- MAWWFRS's workforce is not diverse and does not reflect the diversity of the local populations it serves
- Most staff and former staff highlighted a perceived divide between green book (support and corporate) and grey book (operational) staff, with both groups acknowledging the divide

Promotions, transfers and progression

- Transfer and promotion processes for grey book (operational) staff were perceived to not follow official processes, and to be heavily influenced by nepotism and favouritism
- Most green book (support and corporate) staff felt there were limited opportunities for progression in corporate departments
- There were widespread concerns about the overuse of temporary contracts at MAWWFRS, particularly for green book (support and corporate) staff

Training and skills development

- Staff and former staff reported an insufficient emphasis on developing people management skills, particularly among grey book (operational) staff, causing a lack of professionalism, inefficiencies, and inequalities

Experiences of prejudicial and unacceptable behaviours, reporting and investigation

- Bullying and harassment are widespread in MAWWFRS, with nearly half (47%) of survey respondents reporting personal experiences since June 2021, and over half (54%) having witnessed such behaviours
- One in five (20%) survey respondents had experienced discrimination, and 10% of female survey respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment
- Disciplinary procedures were perceived as unprofessional, not impartial, not confidential, unfair and ineffective
- The vast majority of survey respondents (85%) thought they would speak up about unacceptable behaviour in theory, but a much smaller proportion (17%) consistently reported in practice

Internal processes

- Inefficiencies and challenges in some corporate processes and practices negatively impacted inter-departmental working and damaged staff morale
- Many staff and former staff reported feeling overworked and overwhelmed, and did not think MAWWFRS offered adequate wellbeing support

Conclusion

- Our findings revealed that MAWWFRS is divided along grey book (operational) vs green book (support and corporate), gender, and rank, with a formal hierarchy fostering mistrust, disconnection, and a culture of fear and conformity, stifling open dialogue and innovation
- Staff raised cultural issues including leadership failures, outdated management practices, and inadequate staff support across our engagement
- These issues perpetuated inefficiencies, lowered staff morale and increased inequalities
- High levels of bullying and harassment, a fear of retaliation and ostracisation hampering confidence in reporting, and a lack of confidence in action from senior leaders, reflect a bullying culture at MAWWFRS
- A resistance to change, particularly at the executive level, and rooted in a structure that prioritises operational firefighting over broader public safety roles, hindered attempts at positive cultural change
- Staff perceptions of ineffective governance and limited oversight by Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority raised questions about the authority's effectiveness and ability to hold senior leadership to account
- Gender disparity and a male-dominated culture undermined inclusivity, despite EDI efforts
- MAWWFRS must undergo transformative reforms, modernising its culture and structure to align with contemporary public safety priorities, addressing systemic issues, and rebuilding trust through decisive, bold and inclusive action

Findings

Context

Geography and demand

Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MAWWFRS) covers a mainly rural area of 12,000 square kilometres, which is almost two-thirds of Wales, making it the third largest in the United Kingdom, behind the Scottish and Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Services. It serves around 40,000 non-domestic properties, 430,000 households, and over 900,000 people (not including tourists and visitors).

In 2023-24, MAWWFRS attended 2,583 fires, 5,932 false alarms, 786 road traffic collisions and 3,813 special service calls.

Workforce

MAWWFRS employed 1,157 members of staff in 2023-24. 938 were male (81%) and 219 were female (19%). 98% of employees (1,133) were White.

MAWWFRS's workforce is split into four 'books': grey book (operational staff), green book (support and corporate staff), gold book (the Chief Fire Officer, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Assistant Chief Officer), and blue book (Clerk and Monitoring Officer, and Section 151 Officer). The majority (941, 81% of workforce) of staff are grey book (operational), and either work as whole-time (419, 36% of workforce), retained/on-call firefighters (495, 43% of workforce), or control staff (27, 2% of workforce).[22] There are 216 green book (support and corporate) staff (19% of workforce), who occupy departmental roles.

The level of gender diversity varies between different areas of the organisation. Overall, 9% (89/941) of grey book (operational) staff are female compared to 60% (130/216) of green book (support and corporate) staff. Only 6% (25/390) of grey book (operational) staff above firefighter rank are female. Nearly nine in ten (441/497, 89%) of those in the top salary quartile are male.

Structure and governance

MAWWFRS is accountable to its Fire and Rescue Authority (MAWWFRA), which comprises 25 councillors from the following councils: Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, City and County of Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire and Powys.

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[22] Whole-time firefighters are contracted to work in the fire service as their primary employment serving at whole-time fire stations. Retained firefighters usually respond from home or their primary employment on an on-call basis to their local fire station. Control staff are responsible for managing emergency situations by ensuring that the correct resources are sent to the right place as quickly as possible.

The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) is made up of the Chief Fire Officer (CFO), one Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO), one Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO), one Assistant Chief Officer, one Section 151 Officer, and five Corporate Heads. The wider Service Leadership Team (SLT) is made up of 20 officers who are Heads of Departments or Divisions, reporting to the Corporate Heads.

Where references to 'senior staff' are made in the findings, this refers to station manager or above for operational staff and grade 8 or above for support and corporate staff. 'Junior staff' refers to watch manager or below for operational staff and grade 7 or below for support and corporate staff. 'Middle management' or 'middle leadership' refers to station managers and group managers. 'Senior leadership' refers to staff within ELT (CFO, DCFO, ACFO, ACO, Corporate Heads and Section 151 Officer) and wider SLT (Heads of Departments or Divisions).

Cultural progress up until Crest's review

Following culture reviews of other fire services, MAWWFRS commissioned an externally-delivered 'Cultural Audit' (henceforth 'internal cultural audit') in 2023, following a previous audit conducted nearly a decade previously in 2014. The internal cultural audit consisted of a staff survey, which revealed key improvements in staff perceptions of MAWWFRS since the previous 2014 audit, but also identified a number of areas of improvement. Relevant findings included:
- A lack of trust and confidence in senior staff, particularly ELT
- Managers and senior leaders not setting positive standards in terms of a blame-free culture, dealing with poor performers and professional standards
- High rates of personal experiences of misconduct, with one in four survey respondents reporting at least one experience of either bullying, discrimination, or harassment in the last two years
- A lack of confidence in reporting unacceptable behaviour due to fear of negative consequences and a lack of trust in the process
- Perceptions of favouritism and discrimination, particularly in relation to accessing training and promotion

A number of initiatives and actions have been put in place since MAWWFRS's internal cultural audit with the aim of improving organisational culture. Cultural improvement arrangements are highlighted in MAWWFRS's Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2040, published in April 2024.[23] This long-term plan aims to address the 'risks, threats and challenges' facing local communities until 2040, developed through workshops with staff, elected members and representative bodies. Actions relevant to organisational culture included in the CRMP 2040 included:
- Embedding a **Culture and Inclusion Working Group** and **Culture and Inclusion Board** within MAWWFRS to support and address the themes raised in the cultural audit, implement recommendations and requirements from the Welsh Government and the HMICFRS Spotlight Report, and drive cultural improvement

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[23] Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service. (2024). Community Risk Management Plan 2040.

- ○ The main purpose of the Culture and Inclusion Working Group is to develop a Culture and Inclusion Action Plan, with additional areas of focus on 'communications and engagement' and 'vision, values and behaviours'
- Evaluating and improving the **Speak Up helpline**, an anonymous and confidential reporting line set up in September 2023. This is in response to HMICFRS's recommendation that CFOs should make sure their services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns and that staff are aware of whistleblowing processes[24]
- Developing a **wellbeing strategy** to support the health and wellbeing of staff
- Embedding the use of **staff appraisals** to support staff performance and progression
- **Implementing the recommendations from the cultural audit survey** and evaluating progress
- Introducing **new training opportunities** for staff that wish to progress
- Actions to **involve on-call staff in cultural improvement work**

The process of developing CRMP 2040 also involved a review of MAWWFRS's previous vision, mission and values, which, after consultation with staff, were removed in favour of a new set of behaviours: Be Accountable, Demonstrate Integrity, Be Ethical, Be Respectful, Be Impartial, underpinned by six 'enablers' (our people; leadership and management; financial resilience; corporate social responsibility; and digital and information communication technologies strategy; partnerships and collaboration).

Also relevant to MAWWFRS's cultural improvement journey are actions outlined in their Annual Equality Plan and Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028. These plans include work to improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training, create safe environments for staff to address worries, increase equality and diversity in recruitment and working arrangements, and improve the accessibility of services and staff participation. Linked to this, MAWWFRS has developed an EDI training package, which includes active bystander training, as well as training in emotional intelligence, unconscious bias, and violence against women and girls. MAWWFRS also attends the All Wales FRS Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Group, which is a platform for Welsh Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs) to review and collaborate on matters of organisation culture and inclusion.

MAWWFRS produced a report on the gender pay gap in MAWWFRS in 2023. The report found, using the mean (average), women were paid 8.8% less than men, equating to female employees earning £1.44 an hour less than male employees. The report states that this is primarily due to larger numbers of men being employed by MAWWFRS and occupying senior management positions. These gaps are below the public sector pay gap figure reported by the Office For National Statistics in 2022 (mean of 13.6% and median of 15.9%). Work already done by MAWWFRS to promote gender diversity includes support and flexible working arrangements for parents and carers, the use of mixed gender interview panels where possible, and a job evaluation process undertaken by green book (support and corporate) staff to ensure all roles are paid fairly.

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[24] HMICFRS. (2023). Values and culture in fire and rescue services.

Work to close the gender pay gap includes positive action[25] and community engagement to target under-represented groups, ongoing culture improvement and EDI work, and a review of MAWWFRS recruitment processes.

In April 2024, the National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services published a maternity pay award for grey book (operational) staff, increasing the maternity pay provision to 26 weeks of full pay, followed by 13 weeks of statutory maternity pay. MAWWFRS applied this NJC circular requirement and matched this offer for green book (support and corporate) staff. Previously, no period of maternity leave at MAWWFRS offered full pay. The Fire Brigades' Union have campaigned for all UK fire and rescue services to introduce a maternity pay provision of 52 weeks of full pay. SWFRS have recently expanded their maternity pay policy to offer firefighters 52 weeks' full pay.

A Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer was appointed in June 2023, and leads disciplinary investigations within MAWWFRS. The Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer reports to the Professional Standards Board (formally convened in September 2024). While the DCFO has overall responsibility for the service's discipline portfolio, decisions on progressing cases are undertaken in conjunction with advice from the human resources (HR) department and external legal advisors, where relevant.

Findings of Crest's engagement

Key findings

Overall, Crest's engagement with MAWWFRS staff and former staff suggests there is no clear consensus about whether the service's culture has improved or not since June 2021

Two in five (40%) of survey respondents said that MAWWFRS's culture had improved, just under a third (31%) said it had got worse, and a quarter (24%) felt it had stayed the same (see Figure 1). While many believed the service is taking steps in the right direction, it was clear that there remains a need for greater transparency and accountability, and for those in positions of leadership to make consistent efforts to foster trust and make tangible cultural improvements.
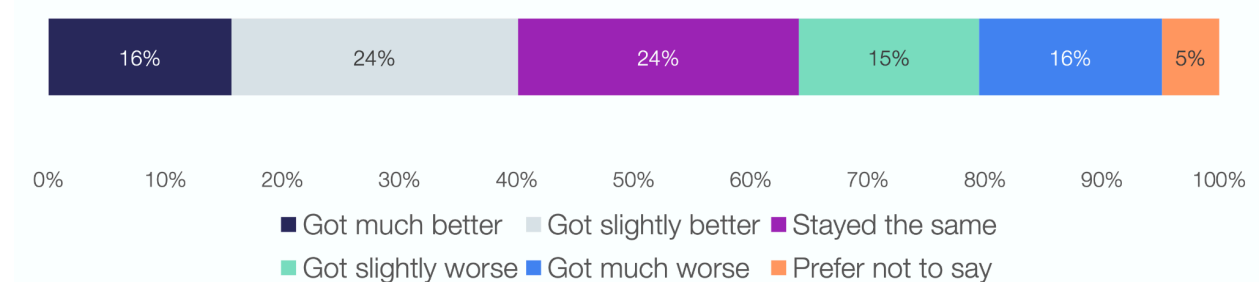
Figure 1. Views on cultural change at MAWWFRS

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[25] Positive action allows additional help to be provided for groups of people who share a 'protected characteristic' (for example, race, sex, or sexual orientation) in order to level the playing field (see here).

> "I think it's changed, changing now. I think a certain element of it's still there, but it's certainly got better than it was."

> "I feel the journey towards cultural change is a slow one, with positive changes not noticed for many years down the line. I do feel however, the service and the executive team have shown their commitment to making these changes."

> "The service has conducted its own culture reviews and has a culture committee but it doesn't appear to know what to do with it and at the moment, doesn't show any defined outcome expected."

> "I believe it will take many years to establish positive culture change and I feel that with the work that is on going we are currently in a transitional stage, where positive changes are certainly developing."

Overall, findings from Crest's engagement reflected many of the themes that emerged from MAWWFRS's internal cultural audit. Key findings included low staff morale, poor behaviour including bullying and discrimination, a lack of confidence in reporting or dealing with poor conduct, perceptions of nepotism and inequality in relation to promotion and development opportunities, widespread dissatisfaction with senior and middle management, a lack of transparency and poor-decision making. These themes will be explored in detail throughout the report.

A large majority of staff and former staff described MAWWFRS as an 'operational boys club,' where personal connections with senior leaders fostered favouritism and nepotism

A significant and recurring theme was what staff and former staff described as an 'operational boys club', where friendships with senior leaders are formed and leveraged for career advancement at MAWWFRS. The operational boys club was also described as a 'triathlon club', 'cycling club' and 'caravan club', which fostered a culture of favouritism and nepotism. Four-fifths (80%) of survey respondents cited 'favouritism and bias' as a significant or partial cultural weakness — the most highly rated cultural weakness — at MAWWFRS (see Figure 2).

> "It has unfortunately been slightly too obvious to note the trend in those who partake in activities such as triathlon and cycling advancing within the service. These clubs have provided an opportunity for people to show that they are a 'good egg'."

> "I have observed that individuals who are part of specific groups, such as the triathlon club, often receive preferential treatment."

> "I think the closer to Carmarthen, the closer to headquarters you get, the more obvious it becomes, the more these boys clubs are sort of evident."

> "During the culture review of South Wales FRS things like ski clubs and boys clubs whre [were] raised and concerns uncovered, I believe the very same things occur within MAWWFRS with what is loosley [sic] known as the cycle / triathlon club. These are places where personnel have access to area man[a]gers and friendships are formed which later transfer into reward and personal gain in the workplace."
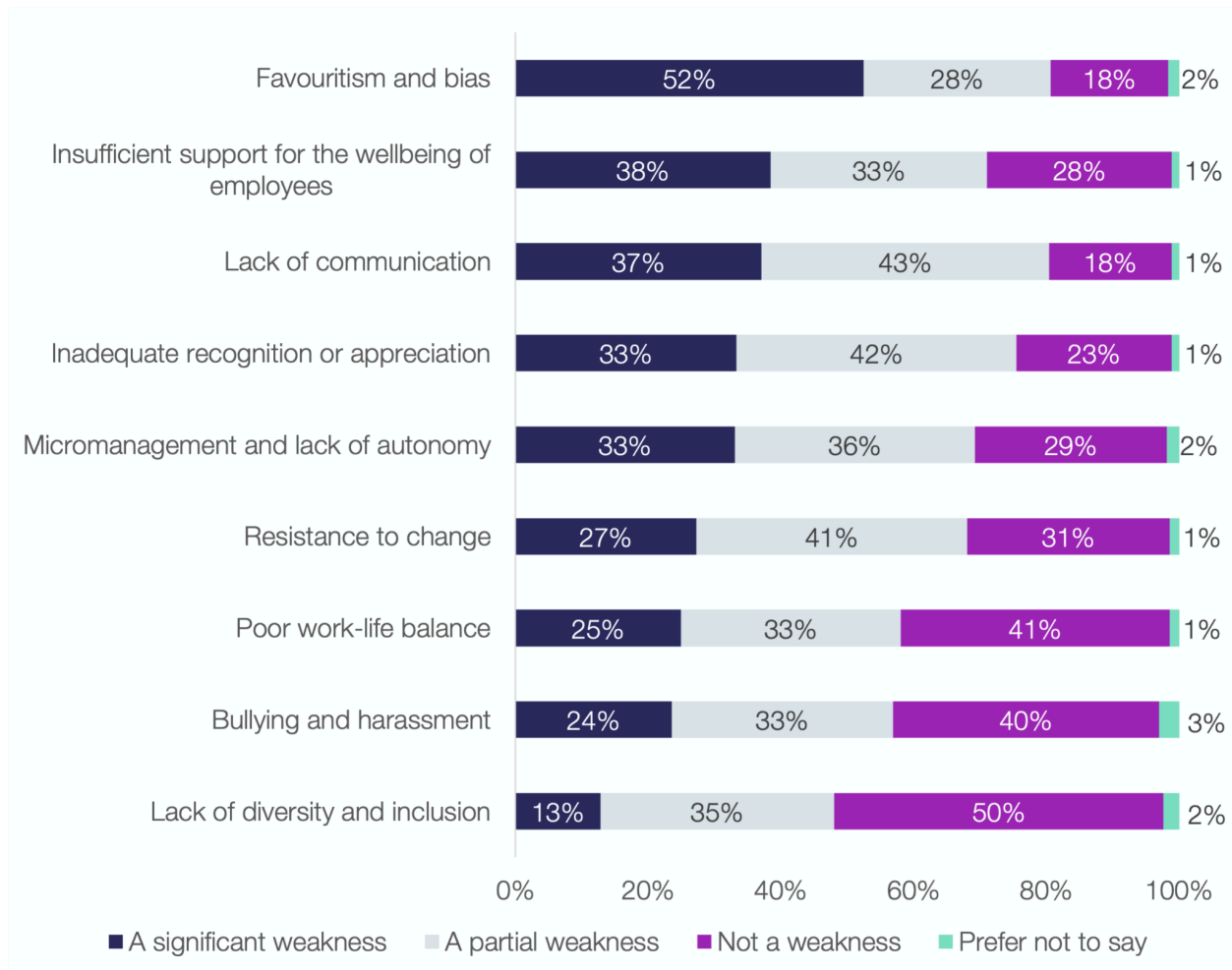
Figure 2. Views on the weaknesses of MAWWFRS culture

Staff across engagement methods commonly believed that favouritism or nepotism influenced decisions, and gave examples of protection or leniency for certain individuals in disciplinary matters; of preferential treatment for certain individuals in promotions, transfers, and development opportunities; and the use of informal mentoring relationships to strategically position favoured individuals in key roles. This approach was seen to map out career paths for specific individuals, allowing them to rise through the ranks based on pre-existing relationships (with many staff citing

as an example that four of ten current ELT members joined in the same recruits course). Those who described this element of MAWWFRS culture commonly believed it encouraged conformity, homogeneity, and a lack of accountability, with harmful consequences for MAWWFRS.

> "A major weakness within Mid and West Wales is the way senior officers play the favorites game, there is a strong culture of sponsorship within MAWWFRS where the chosen few are looked after and the rest are treated like we should be grateful for even having a job."

> "Help from the old boys club, means promotion for many operational personnel."

This 'operational boys' club' environment was perceived as fostering a sense of untouchability among its members, discouraging transparency and undermining trust in organisational processes. This was linked to a commonly held view that conformity is essential for personal progression. When combined with a commonly held fear of reprisal for speaking out or offering differing opinions, the 'boys club' culture created a hostile environment for many.

> "There is a pernicious cliquey culture within the organisation. Favouritism and nepotism thrive, it's hard to nail down or pinpoint but if you are friends with the right people it makes you untouchable. It's a boys club."

> "My personal opinion is that we have a deep rooted, ingrained culture of nepotism within the organisation, and that there is a failure to either acknowledge it or even open our eyes to it. I feel that decisions are made based on personal relationships rather than professional ability. No one's got a right to be promoted."

Senior staff were significantly more positive than junior staff about MAWWFRS's current culture and prospects for future cultural improvements

Over half (55%) of senior operational whole-time staff (i.e. station manager or above) responding to the survey stated that culture had got much better or slightly better since June 2021, compared with 36% of junior operational whole-time staff (i.e. watch manager or below). Senior corporate staff (i.e. grade 8 or above) were also more likely to believe that the culture had got much better or slightly better compared to junior corporate staff (i.e. grade 7 or below), at 52% and 38% respectively.

Members of the Service Leadership Team (SLT) and Executive Leadership Team (ELT) reflected positively about MAWWFRS's move to 'crack down' on inappropriate behaviour through the use of harsh sanctions, where appropriate, and improvements in the opportunities for staff to engage in the culture journey, for example through the Culture and Inclusion Working Group.

> "In my opinion, we've already changed."

> "A positive is the set-up of the C&I WG [Culture & Inclusion Working Group] [which] has brought many people together from across the service to discuss difficult topics and to try to find actions to address these."

Staff responding to the survey believed that the following areas of culture had improved the most:
- opportunities to raise concerns confidentially (54% thought it had got much or slightly better);
- opportunities to raise concerns independently of the fire service (53%);
- training and support for staff in leadership and management positions (42%);
- the culture within my watch or team (42%).

Reasons staff gave for these positive changes mainly centred around the organic evolution of MAWWFRS rather than specific initiatives. That is, staff and former staff largely attributed positive changes in the service culture to staff turnover, with changes to organisational culture reflecting broader societal changes, particularly in attitudes towards diversity and inclusion and challenging outdated behaviours and biases. While staff changes had impacted on individual experiences, HMICFRS highlighted that relying on staff turnover cannot and should not be relied upon to change organisational culture. For example, they found that the cultures of some watches (rota groups) were 'so strong that they survive beyond the retirement of staff members who behaved inappropriately'.[26] In addition, MAWWFRS data suggests turnover of operational staff is very low, with whole-time staff turnover in the year ending September 2024 at less than 1%, though a number of whole-time firefighter recruitment courses have been carried out during this period.

> "There has been no real change. The biggest change has come from retirements and new blood coming in."

> "Looking back over the last three or four years, [there has been] a massive change in the workforce. So there is that massive change in culture. So the change from what I would class as acceptable back then towards now has massively changed."

The aspects of culture most frequently reported by current and former staff as having deteriorated related to the transparency, conduct and communication of senior leaders

Linked to the finding that cultural change was generally seen to be incidental rather than due to deliberate efforts or commitments was a prevailing belief amongst the vast majority of those engaged that the culture of MAWWFRS is tied to the beliefs and characteristics of individuals. While some believed that the culture at MAWWFRS will improve gradually as society and the workforce changes, others were pessimistic about the likelihood of seeing meaningful cultural change within

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[26] HMICFRS. (2023). Values and culture in fire and rescue services.

their time there without deliberate and concerted efforts from senior leadership (i.e. SLT and ELT). Survey results showed that the areas of culture most commonly reported to have worsened since June 2021 were the transparency and conduct of senior leaders (37% believed it had got much or slightly worse, compared to 23% who believed it had got much or slightly better) and communication and transparency from senior leadership (35%).

> "Everyone in the service knows there is an underlying cultural issue, but with pockets of bad managers, people in senior roles that do not act with integrity and fairness, these will continue. There is a real need now to get rid of 'the dead wood', weed out and address poor leadership and management with individuals, to be able to build and develop trust again. This must come from leadership in ELT down rather than a bottom up approach. People want to see strong leaders who take responsibility AND accountability. I know many of my team would rather see ELT try something new and fail rather than being passive and hoping the problems will disappear."

> "I don't think we're going to make it with the current ELT structure."

> "I don't think there has been change, or that it is likely, because leadership and longstanding staff do not know what change looks like. There is a genuine wish for positive culture, but because leaders are brought up through the service, they don't know any different."

A lack of accountability was prevalent throughout MAWWFRS, leading to a sense of betrayal and resentment, though trade union relationships had shown improvement

A prominent theme which ran through Crest's engagement was a lack of accountability within MAWWFRS, particularly at SLT and ELT level. A lack of accountability and follow-through on cultural issues was highlighted by many current and former staff members, with some perceiving a gap between stated values and actual practices at higher leadership levels.

For a significant proportion of the workforce, these issues have led to a loss of trust and respect for colleagues and senior management, as well as feelings of betrayal and resentment. Witnessing favouritism, nepotism, unaddressed misconduct, and concerns regarding the service's commitment to safeguarding had contributed to a culture of disillusionment among many, with some individuals feeling unsupported, undervalued, and mistrustful of leadership as a result. Staff and former staff also described how this has created an environment perceived as unsafe for expressing diverse views and backgrounds. Doing so was viewed as a potential barrier to career progression, resulting in feelings of exclusion or unworthiness.

Some of the concerns around accountability related to perceptions of the role of MAWWFRA, with many staff and former staff members questioning MAWWFRA's knowledge and capability to provide sufficient oversight and challenge to the CFO. This echoes issues raised as part of the

inquiry conducted by the Welsh Parliament into Fire and Rescue Authorities,[27] including concerns about the extent of meaningful engagement from Authority members, and their ability to act.

This lack of accountability was also thought to apply to managers and middle managers. The lack of accountability, particularly at senior levels, led to a sense of betrayal and resentment.

> "Since [current CFO] took over as Chief Fire Officer, there has being [sic] a noticeable improvement in communications and he has been a driver for positive change, but his values are not displayed across ELT. I believe the biggest challenge we have culturally is the lack of accountability, which in turn causes a great deal of frustration and a sense of 'it's not worth it because nothing will happen'."

> "There are a handful of individuals who are genuinely trying to improve the culture and they have gained trust from a vast amount of staff - however, as there are more people who are making culture change a tick box exercise, this is lowering staff trust in the service as a whole."

> "The endless line of management means that no one takes responsibility or accountability. The buck is passed continuously and nothing is productive or effective due to the time required to go through the endless red tape of rank."

> "We mark our own homework as a service, SLT and ELT stick together."

> "I filed a grievance over an issue with a transfer and the outcome was basically 'it's our decision and we've used our discretion'. If this is the attitude then why even bother having a transfer policy, along with no oversight on that policy being implemented."

A small number of staff we spoke to perceived a failure among middle and senior leaders to take safeguarding-related issues seriously, citing a lack of urgency and a failure to act, including on issues relating to both staff and the general public. Misinformation and poor communication was perceived to have hindered the coordination of safeguarding processes and procedures.

In particular, staff highlighted a lack of understanding and acknowledgement among individuals at MAWWFRS of the scale and seriousness of violence against women, as well as its pertinence to MAWWFRS's public safety role and relevant legal framework, despite training being provided at a senior level. These shortcomings were attributed to a wider tendency to 'brush things under the carpet' which seemed difficult or challenging (see here), and were linked to a perception held by

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[27] Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee. Sound the Alarm: The Governance of Fire and Rescue Services. June 2024.

some staff that training on violence against women is less important than operational firefighting skills (see here).

> "...people not taking things serious[ly] within the service, no accountability."

Trade union representatives generally described positive relationships with the MAWWFRS staff, and vice versa, marking a significant improvement compared to previous years. Senior leaders acknowledged that challenge from trade unions contributed positively to organisational improvement. Positive aspects of the relationship that were highlighted included trade unions being invited to attend meetings and proactively being asked for their input, leaders being open to dialogue, and staff being provided the opportunity to adjust their contracts to dedicate time to union representation through secondments. There was also a collaborative spirit between different trade unions, evidenced by joint work on certain issues.

However, remnants of a divide persisted, such as fears that union involvement might hinder career progression. There is some indication that MAWWFRS has an inconsistent approach to allowing trade union representatives access to different processes. For example, representatives have previously been allowed to observe elements of the disciplinary process, but not the transfer and promotion process— despite South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS) allowing union representation on the latter.

Drivers and characteristics of MAWWFRS's culture

Most staff were proud of their jobs, and displayed a strong 'service mindset' and desire to help others

Current and former staff expressed immense pride in their roles across all methods of engagement, Nearly two-fifths (39%) of survey respondents always agreed with the statement, 'I am proud to say I work for the service', and 23% often agreed. Many described working for the fire service as 'the best job in the world' in interviews and focus groups, emphasising the privilege of serving their communities, protecting people, and making a positive impact. Personal fulfilment, team camaraderie, and the service's strong community reputation were highlighted as key cultural strengths, with 81% of survey respondents agreeing that 'supportive colleagues' is a strength, and 64% for 'good collaboration and teamwork' (see Figure 3). Despite concerns about behaviour and support at higher management levels, the bond among colleagues was often cited positively.

> "I think the high esteem held by the public for the Fire Service is a strength because generally the public trust the Fire Service. It is a very privileged position to be in."

> "I like the impact that we can have as a fire service, helping communities."

"I feel humbled and grateful for the job."

"I'm proud to be part of this. I'm really proud to be part of this."

"People in the organisation are genuinely caring and care for one another. They need to be the type of person who wants to help people, and I think that's reflected in the workplace in general."

"The team, at a local level. Firefighters are a great team who rightfully look after each other."
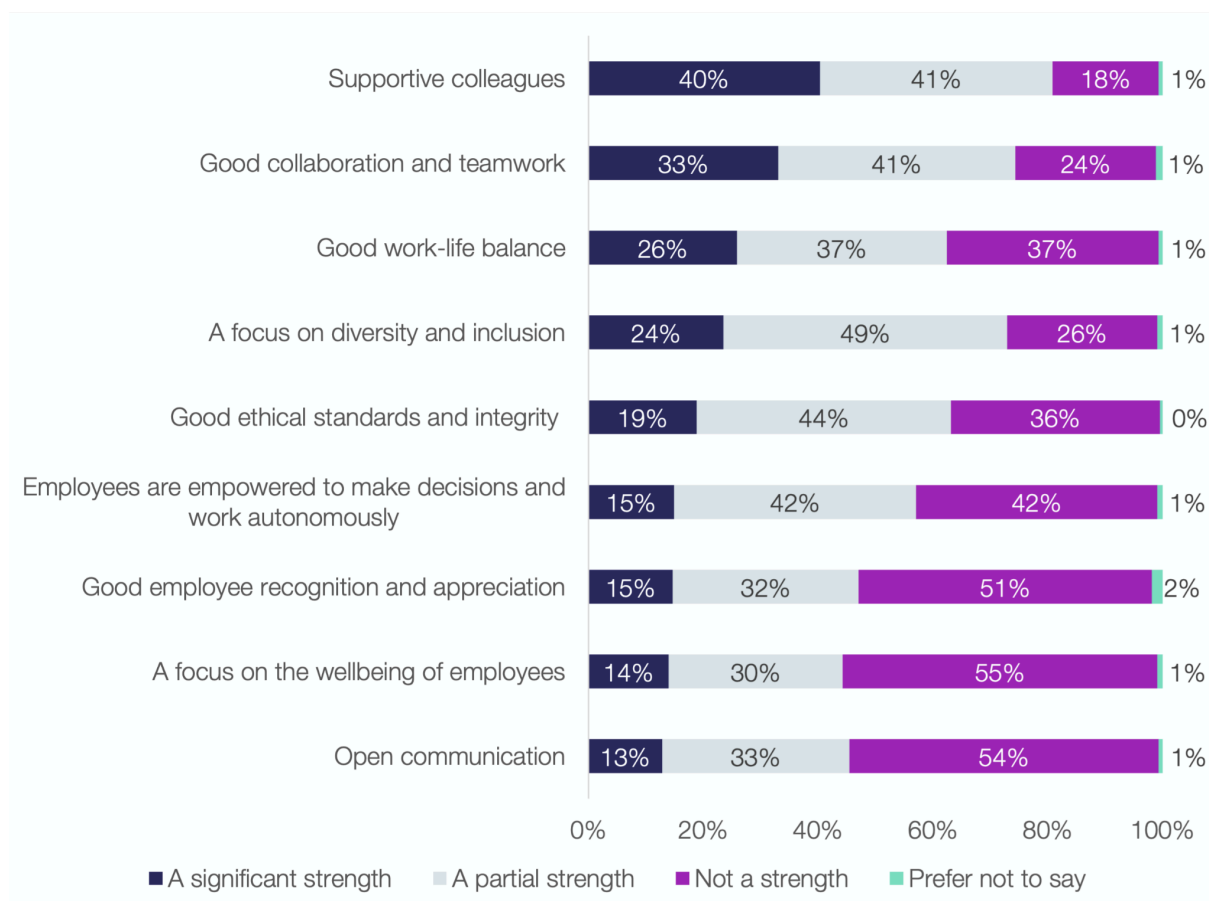
Figure 3. Views on the strengths of MAWWFRS's culture

A product of this pride and passion was a palpable investment in the future of MAWWFRS. Staff across all ranks and areas of the organisation expressed genuine hope that the service will continue to evolve and improve.

However, pride in the work was tempered by mixed views about recommending MAWWFRS as an employer. Just over half (53%) of survey respondents were likely or very likely to recommend

working at the service, while 29% were unlikely or very unlikely, and 15% were unsure (see Figure 4). Interviewees who cited negative personal experiences were less likely to recommend working at the service.
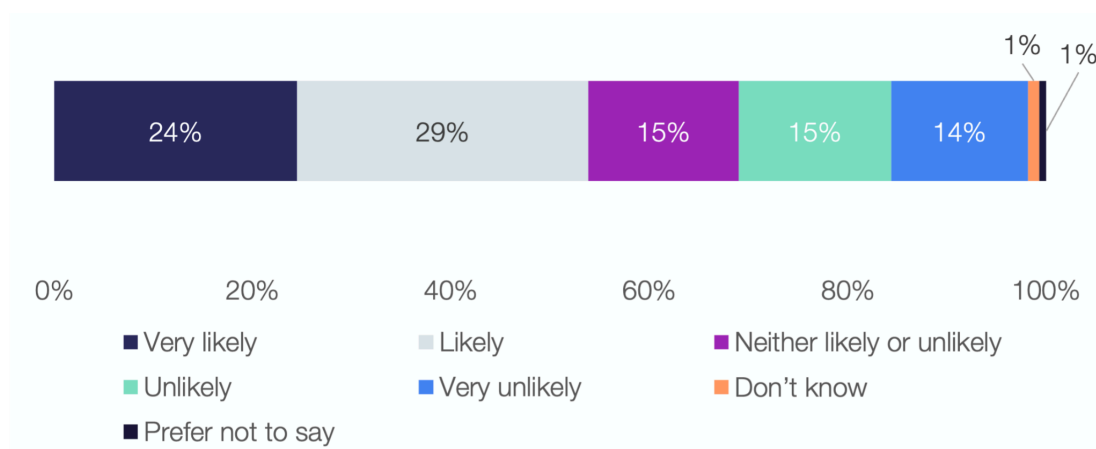
Figure 4. Proportion of respondents who would recommend working at MAWWFRS

Survey respondents were most likely to describe the leadership style at MAWWFRS as hierarchical, followed by controlling and unapproachable, with communication highlighted as a significant cultural weakness

When asked to describe the leadership style in MAWWFRS, survey respondents most commonly described it as hierarchical and top-down, with 57% selecting this option, followed by controlling (28%) and unapproachable (27%). Only 10% described the leadership style as open and transparent.

Corporate staff were particularly likely to describe the leadership as hierarchical and top-down, with 72% of senior corporate staff and 67% of junior corporate staff choosing this descriptor. Similarly, women across all roles were more likely than men to view the leadership style as hierarchical and top-down (61% vs 50%). Senior corporate staff were also more likely to describe the leadership as controlling (41%), while senior operational whole-time staff were most likely to describe it as collaborative (31%). These differences highlighted a broader divide in how operational and non-operational staff, as well as men and women, perceive MAWWFRS's culture, reflecting the gender composition of non-operational roles and contrasting attitudes across the organisation.

Some staff valued the clarity and accountability provided by a hierarchical structure in operational contexts. However, many felt that a command and control management style and an overemphasis on discipline were counterproductive outside these contexts. This tension within MAWWFRS revealed perceived challenges of balancing strict adherence to hierarchy during emergencies with a more adaptable and inclusive culture in non-emergency roles. This was particularly relevant for SLT and ELT, whose primary responsibilities involve strategy, oversight, and decision-making rather than frontline firefighting.

> "I think then senior leaders and managers struggle to take off the operational hat when they come into the office nine to five, and they stay still leading with and managing with that autocracy."

> "We're not asking for nuclear launch codes, just more transparency in areas that are going to affect me and are going to affect my team, and it can be like getting blood out of a stone."

The dominant focus on fire-response preparedness reinforced perceptions of a culture where traditional operational priorities overshadowed broader organisational needs. This dynamic allowed outdated practices to persist and justified a lack of flexibility in management approaches. For example, this was seen in the tension between some senior operational staff's preferences for disciplinarian and aggressive approaches to management and conflict resolution, and the interpretation of this behaviour from junior staff. Junior staff often acknowledged the need for disciplinarian styles in emergency or high risk situations while also describing how an overemphasis on hierarchy led to those of lower rank often being dismissed and ignored by their seniors, micromanaged, or in more serious cases, subjected to bullying and abuses of power by managers. This was echoed in the survey responses, where over two-thirds (69%) of survey respondents saw micromanagement and lack of autonomy as cultural weaknesses, as did 57% for bullying and harassment (see Figure 2). See Box 2 for a case study on alleged severe bullying and abuse of power by a manager and MAWWFRS's perceived failure to respond. Our engagement revealed examples of this more combative approach based on issuing orders and confrontation.

> "We have a blowout. You'll have a week, two weeks, where it's frosty, but then it's all good, we're all singing, all dancing."

> "Sometimes you've got to be quite strong and you've just got to go, 'no', and you might have to have an argument over it […] And when you do it, then it's nipped in the bud, it's done."

> "If we say 'jump', you jump…There's no negotiation."

> "If you engage, he's great. But if you've done something wrong, you're going to get it both barrels. You sort of know where you are, and we need that element, but are we sort of missing sometimes our soft skills?"

> "He [senior manager] was very black and white [...] it's either this or this, there's no in between. [...] But is that what's needed in 2024?"

> "[They're] still disciplined, which is crucial, obviously, for elements of the job."

The hierarchy at MAWWFRS created a visible divide between managers and junior staff, which was often described in terms of an 'us and them' mentality. Many current and former staff members expressed the view that physical rank indicators, such as uniform distinctions (e.g. 'white shirts' for senior staff) and epaulettes, reinforce this divide. The uniform also created a visible distinction between operational and non-operational staff. Only 13% of survey respondents described leadership as inclusive, and junior staff engaging in the review frequently described feeling unheard, believing senior leaders are disengaged from their views. Many reported senior leaders evading questions, failing to provide genuine responses, and not acting on staff suggestions.

> "Communication from ELT and below is extremely poor. Passing information to boots on the ground is terrible."

> "There's this couple of issues that seem to come up time and time again. I mentioned it to my line manager, nothing's happened. I'm mentioning things, nothing is changing."

> "You can't come in with that authoritarian approach with people, especially with [...] green book [support and corporate] members of staff that aren't used to that militant style of being managed. And it doesn't always work, and it causes conflict and [...] a bad vibe."

Communication was cited by 80% of survey respondents as a significant cultural weakness (see Figure 2). Many staff members described communication as predominantly top-down, with information often lost, selectively shared, or inadequately passed between middle managers and senior leaders. Double the proportion of survey respondents disagreed that communication from senior leaders is open and transparent compared to the proportion who agreed (52% vs 26%). Senior managers, mostly based at headquarters, were perceived as distant and rarely visible, and their infrequent engagement fostered feelings of unease and suspicion.

> "I feel like the service are just forcing things forward and not listening to the ground."

> "With management in the fire service, because we don't see them that often, when they do turn up it's a bit like 'What are you doing here? What are you looking for? Is there something wrong?'"

> "We see them [senior leaders] so infrequently that it enforces that 'them and us'."

Some of those we engaged with also noted selective communication and transfer of information from ELT to the CFO, stating that the CFO was not always aware of what 'really goes on' in the service.

> "He's [the CFO] got to rely on the people directly below him to give him the correct information, and they're not doing it. He's a brilliant chief, it's just the people in the middle".

Other challenges to effective communication raised by staff included frequent managerial rotation, the organisation's size and spread, and structural changes creating larger command units. These factors can be expected to generate communication challenges and require significant and sustained focus to improve. For example, we heard examples from different departments of when poor communication had reportedly hindered the sharing of critical information and project updates.

> "I find things out about my department from people outside of my department."

Despite general dissatisfaction, many staff members praised the efforts of the current CFO for being visible, approachable, and communicative, in contrast to his predecessor, including via station and watch visits. However, less than half (41%) of survey respondents believed managers encourage open communication, and junior staff described how sporadic interactions with line managers led to further disenfranchisement.

> "[The CFO] will walk into a room and he will engage with as many people as he can."

Box 2: Alleged severe bullying and abuse of power by a manager and MAWWFRS's perceived failure to respond (2020-2024)

Between 2020 and 2023, 'Manager X' allegedly engaged in sustained bullying and abuses of power at one MAWWFRS station, as reported by numerous current and former staff. This behaviour, and what staff perceived as an inadequate and protracted organisational response, caused significant psychological impacts, including mental health deterioration and absences from work.

Manager X's behaviour

Manager X's alleged conduct reported by staff included:
- Singling out and subjecting certain firefighters to constant negative critique under the guise of 'management'.
- Creating an atmosphere of fear through aggressive and intimidating behaviour.
- A 'do as I say, not as I do' attitude that contradicted expectations of conduct at stations.
- Threatening staff with career repercussions for speaking out, using personal connections with senior leaders as leverage.

Most staff felt unable to challenge Manager X's behaviour due to fear of victimisation.

> "[Manager X] threatened me that [they] could have my job tomorrow, that [they've] got friends in high places."

Reporting and investigations

Staff stated that they first reported Manager X's behaviour in 2022. An internal investigation ensued, but staff raised concerns about its integrity, citing:
- Investigators' personal ties to Manager X.
- Lack of recording during interviews.
- A senior leader dismissing complaints as unimportant.
- Breaches of confidentiality, resulting in further victimisation.
- Witnesses not being offered representation.

> "Manager [Y] was then finding out the findings of these interviews, and [Manager X] was then making individuals' lives [...] hell."

> "[A manager] came down and told all the people to stop complaining about [Manager X]. So of course, when you get somebody of high rank in the brigade to say that, what's the point? We all knew [Manager X] was being protected, and that went and proved the point."

The investigation cleared Manager X, leading many staff to believe the findings were manipulated. Staff reported that Manager X was subsequently promoted, believing that this enabled further misconduct.

> "If someone's ruining people's lives, why is promoting them the best way to solve it?"

In 2023, a collective complaint prompted a second investigation. Staff regarded this process as more thorough and professional, but described persistent issues, including poor communication, confidentiality breaches, and the burden placed on complainants to seek updates. The investigation concluded after roughly 18 months, resulting in Manager X's dismissal.

Impact on organisational culture

Staff reflected that Manager X's actions and MAWWFRS's handling of reports eroded trust in MAWWFRS's disciplinary processes, both among directly affected staff and in broader circles. Affected staff criticised the service's approach to support as inadequate and tokenistic. Delays in counselling, poor communication, and inflexibility in addressing staff needs were common grievances.

Though this case is extreme, it provides a case study of how staff and former staff perceive cultural issues within MAWWFRS. Staff felt the service failed to listen and to acknowledge the severity of the behaviour or its impact on employees' mental health, providing inadequate support during and after the investigation and its outcome.

Service-wide statements from leadership about staff welfare were seen as inconsistent with practice.

> "The welfare of people on this station hasn't been considered. At the start they did a token effort. Since then, it's dropped right off."

> "The current management [...] maybe they're a different generation, they're a different mindset. They didn't go through what we went through. They downplay how serious it was."

Staff and former staff described a culture of avoidance that was viewed as blocking positive change

Senior leaders and managers were often characterised as unwilling to confront mistakes, address difficult situations, or acknowledge legitimate concerns, instead 'burying their heads in the sand' or 'brushing things under the carpet'.

A significant number of staff viewed MAWWFRS as reluctant to admit errors or engage with challenges, both internally and externally. This was often linked to a perceived 'toxic positivity' in leadership, where an emphasis on positive messaging overshadows genuine efforts to tackle issues. While MAWWFRS outwardly promotes openness, some staff questioned the sincerity of this commitment, citing a prioritisation of public image over meaningful change. For example, staff perceived actions taken after incidents like a fatal incident at a training event (see Box 3) and the handling of Speak Up complaints (see Box 4) as emblematic of the lack of accountability and transparency. Others mentioned the failings of Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (MAWWFRA) to hold MAWWFRS's ELT to account.

MAWWFRS placed significant emphasis during Crest's review on ensuring that we acquired a balance of perspectives from the engagement, and focused on progress made and good practice. However, those who shared more negative views emphasised that their intention was not malicious but rather rooted in the lasting impact of their experiences. Their aim in engaging with the review was to provide a realistic portrayal of MAWWFRS's culture and to help identify areas where positive cultural changes are still needed. MAWWFRS's concern about achieving a 'balance of views' underscored participants' broader criticisms regarding MAWWFRS's lack of accountability and failure to address cultural issues (see here).

Protectionism was seen by many staff members as a key driver of this avoidance, believing that MAWWFRS often acts in the interest of its reputation or senior leaders rather than individual staff or ethical responsibility. Multiple staff members also reported instances of senior leaders discouraging the pursuit of serious issues to 'protect the brand'. This approach, conflating loyalty with not addressing problems, was said to undermine trust and perpetuate systemic issues.

Managers were perceived as reluctant to escalate behavioral or misconduct issues, often favouring informal resolutions. While resolving issues early is an important feature of effective management, some staff were of the view that this approach sometimes amounted to dismissing legitimate concerns and discouraging more junior staff from speaking up, perpetuating a culture of 'keeping your head down'. This avoidance may also stem from a reported fear of negative repercussions, contributing to a widespread belief — supported by survey findings — that raising concerns could harm career prospects.

Overall, this contributed to what some staff perceived as a general reluctance to address 'difficult' issues. Leaders were often described as resistant to self-examination, focusing on solutions without fully acknowledging underlying problems. This mindset was seen as a barrier to meaningful progress, leaving significant challenges unresolved.

> "They're just worried about protecting the fire service, not about doing the right thing."

> "Our job is to be loyal to the fire service."

> "[They] just don't want to sort of deal with anything that's problematic."

Box 3: Staff perceptions of MAWWFRS's response to a fatal incident at a training event

On 17 September 2019, a firefighter was killed in a collision between two inflatable boats during a training exercise. In 2024, an inquest jury ruled the death as an accident, following a report by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB). Investigations by the Health and Safety Executive and the Marine and Coastguard Agency remain ongoing.

Staff perceptions of MAWWFRS's response were widely negative, citing a culture of avoidance and protectionism among senior leaders. Staff felt that concerns raised about training and competency gaps raised before the incident were ignored or dismissed, and described being labelled troublemakers for voicing concerns.

> "We were labelled the bad boys […] causing trouble, trying to create problems."

Perceptions of the internal investigation added to the mistrust. Staff believed processes were manipulated to shield senior leaders, and that some colleagues were unfairly scapegoated through dismissals or demotions to give the appearance of action. While mandatory health and safety training were introduced, staff felt that MAWWFRS prioritised its public image and reputation over employee safety, citing feeling discouraged from undertaking an annual memorial parade as an example. Staff also felt unsupported in the aftermath, describing a lack of meaningful welfare provision and acknowledgement of the ongoing impact of the incident on staff wellbeing.

> "All the wrong people got blamed for it."

> "The station was left floundering for a very long time."

Though this case study represents a unique set of circumstances, it demonstrates how individual incidents have a long tail in terms of organisational culture, and also the importance of ensuring staff receive adequate acknowledgement or resolution — particularly when there are broader perceived barriers to transparency and communication.

A widespread resistance to change was seen as a significant barrier to cultural improvement

MAWWFRS's culture was widely described by staff and former staff across engagement methods as resistant to change, with senior leadership often prioritising tradition and 'the way we've always done things'. This emphasis on established practices was seen as stemming from comfort with familiarity, a glorification of the past, and sometimes wilful inertia. Over two-thirds (68%) of survey respondents viewed resistance to change as a cultural weakness (see Figure 2).

Most current and former staff who engaged in interviews or focus groups described MAWWFRS as outdated compared to other public and private sector organisations. It was perceived as 'behind the times' in various areas, including attitudes towards diversity, reliance on command and control management styles, macho behaviours and outdated processes (e.g. an over-reliance on paper-based working and manual processing for employment applications), limited technological adoption, and inadequate or outdated training. This cultural stagnation was attributed to long-serving leaders, often referred to as 'the old guard', many of whom had spent their entire careers within MAWWFRS. This created an echo chamber which lacked external perspectives and innovation and risks institutionalising others into the same ways of thinking and working.

A majority of staff expressed concerns that this resistance to change reflected either a belief that current systems were adequate or an unwillingness to acknowledge the need for improvement. A divide between management and junior staff further exacerbated the issue, with leaders perceived as dismissive of ideas from frontline staff, preferring to only champion their own initiatives. This approach was seen as fostering disengagement and inefficiency while maintaining ineffective or harmful practices.

> "It was like stepping back into the 80s. I thought I'd gone back in time."

> "We still do things, I don't even know whether we know why we do that. Sometimes it's probably something that we've been doing for the last 10 years."

> "They're [ELT, SLT] not scared of change… if it's their change."

MAWWFRS's workforce is not diverse and does not reflect the diversity of the local populations it serves

In 2023-24, just under one in five (19%) of MAWWFRS's workforce was female, an increase from 14% since 2012-13. The population covered by MAWWFRS is 95% white, slightly lower than the 98% of the workforce who identify as white. At a senior level, only 2 out of 11 staff ranked as area manager or above (or green book equivalent) are women, and there are no female grey book (operational) staff ranked higher than group manager. Women in the service are predominantly employed in green book (support and corporate) roles, with 59% (130) working in these positions. In contrast, grey book (operational) staff, who make up 81% of the workforce, include only 9% (89) women.

Discussions remain ongoing within MAWWFRS about how best to respond to recommendation 32 in the HMICFRS's Spotlight Report on improving diversity across all levels of the service.[28] Many staff acknowledged improvements in MAWWFRS's diversity, particularly regarding the number of female employees. However, the numbers of female firefighters continues to increase at a very low rate: 10 female operational staff were recruited in 2023/24 (two whole-time and eight retained) out of a total of 80 firefighters. By comparison, out of 18 non-operational staff recruited, 14 were women, thus making a much greater contribution to the increase in overall diversity.

Concerns persisted about the lack of diversity in senior roles, widely characterised as predominantly white, middle-aged, and male, fostering a homogenous environment that reinforced outdated stereotypes, such as women primarily occupying administrative roles rather than operational positions. Linked to these perceptions were concerns about the impact of this

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[28] Recommendation 32: "By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should, as a priority, specify in succession plans how they intend to improve diversity across all levels of the service. This should include offering increased direct-entry opportunities." HMICFRS. (2023). Values and culture in fire and rescue services.

homogeneity, including isolation of minority groups, unconscious bias, and limited diversity of thought, particularly within senior leadership and disciplinary processes.

> "I've sat in different meetings, and it's all white males, middle aged white males."

> "We're very much the same sort of people."

Our engagement highlighted mixed levels of understanding about the benefits and purpose of investing in a diverse workforce. Some staff were critical of efforts to improve diversity at MAWWFRS, citing challenges and limitations in recruiting a diverse workforce from the area MAWWFRS covers, and concerns about positive action leading to lower standards. A notable minority felt initiatives targeting women overlooked and excluded men, while others doubted whether increasing diversity among entry-level recruits would lead to meaningful change in senior leadership roles. These views seem to be at odds with the reality of female operational recruitment figures, which do not show a significant shift in the gender balance in favour of women. Survey responses reflected this discomfort with diversity efforts, with 38% believing MAWWFRS did too much to recruit people from a diverse range of backgrounds, compared to 14% who believed it did too little.

> "I understand the need for the service to have a diverse workforce but I feel that recruitment in relation to this has been wrong. I believe that the service has chosen certain individuals for roles purely on the basis of their race, gender or sexuality and overlooked the best people for the job."

> "There's certainly some aspects where some female colleagues have been protected and myself in this case have been disadvantaged or treated less favourably as a result of [male] gender."

> "I think they're going too far in some ways, like they've lost the identification of their core demographic. You've got the core demographic in West Wales, whether they like that or not, and they've almost excluded them to try and force other inclusion."

> "We need to work harder [at] attracting more [women], absolutely. But there needs to be a recognition as well that we're not going to be the career choice for all females."

At the same time, 48% of survey respondents felt the effort MAWWFRS puts into recruiting people from a diverse range of backgrounds was appropriate, and 73% saw a focus on diversity and inclusion as a strength of the service.

> "I personally feel that it is fair the way they do it now. The right person for the job, regardless of their background, sex or diverse nature."

> "I feel our recruitment campaigns are diverse and offer an equal opportunity to those who we represent."

MAWWFRS's traditional structure, as well as a lack of external hires, contributed to its homogeneity. Firefighting was often seen by staff as a lifelong career, with staff joining young and advancing through the ranks. Furthermore, staff turnover is low, with only 13 whole-time operational positions advertised externally over the past three financial years until March 2024. These factors have led to the replication of behaviours over generations, reinforcing institutionalisation. Family legacies in the service further entrenched this cycle, as many staff followed in the footsteps of relatives.

> "The whole system, the whole institution lends itself to not changing, because people are institutionalised from when they come in, or before they come in."

> "Many of the officers that are coming up through the ranks were trained by some of these officers that have retired out that didn't necessarily portray the kind of behaviours and culture that we want today. They're behaving the way they've been trained to behave, and they don't necessarily know how else to be."

Homogeneity at senior levels also fostered insularity and groupthink (i.e. where non-optimal decisions are made spurred on by a need for conformity). Few leaders had experience outside the fire service, and staff highlighted a lack of debate and challenge within senior leadership. The current ELT was cited as an example, with many having shared similar career trajectories within the service.

> "They're in such a bubble and have been for so many years."

> "They're not bringing in any new ways of doing things."

> "But you won't have a new leader, you'll just have a cardboard cutout. It's a new name, but they've all been brought up in the same system."

Staff often described MAWWFRS as close-knit and family-like. While most who used this terminology described it in positive terms, a smaller number highlighted negative elements of this characterisation. Strong interrelationships sometimes discouraged staff from challenging behaviours or views, and encouraged conformity, while others criticised a 'gossipy' culture that spread personal information widely. Close working in small teams for long periods has been found to be

associated with poor behaviour, as teams develop their own ways of working and form their own 'microcultures'.[29]

> "They're intrinsically wired to be a team [...] They're living together, they're sleeping together, they're eating together. They're like a family. So they find it very difficult then to speak out then, if they did witness something."

Conformity was seen as essential for personal progression in MAWWFRS, with most staff believing that fitting a specific mould, both demographically and behaviourally, was necessary for progression. Many felt this culture encouraged leaders to prioritise hierarchical, change-resistant behaviours over doing what was right, further perpetuating systemic issues.

> "If your face fits, then you'll get on. Well, if your face doesn't fit, you will not progress."

> "It is plain to see, yet difficult to prove, that nepotism is common in the service. It's plain to see, that if people agree with ELT view's, and don't openly challenge views and opinions, then they progress quickly. However peers have no faith in these individuals capabilities, values or ethics. They are basically 'yes' people, it's obvious to the majority of peers, as its openly spoken about in most forums."

Over one in ten (11%) of MAWWFRS's workforce is neurodiverse. A minority of staff noted the efforts of individual managers to support those with identified needs as well as positive changes made to recruitment, transfer and promotion processes, such as reducing the volume of written examinations required and increasing the availability of reasonable adjustments. At the same time, a similar number highlighted inconsistent understanding and appreciation of accessible processes and ways of working. A small number of staff described instances of discriminatory language and actions from colleagues, as well as difficulties in accessing tools and software. Some current and former staff members reflected that slow progress in relation to the approach to neurodiversity was indicative of the wider culture of avoidance and resistance to change at MAWWFRS (see here).

> "I have challenged behaviour where derogatory remarks have been made about a person's potential to do the job, calling them stupid. I have been a victim of passive aggressive behaviour questioning my skills. I regularly encounter prejudice against neurodiversity and questioning [of their] ability to be an operational member of staff."

> "The service do[es] not consider neurodiversity, simple measures have been put forward to implement and these are ignored or seen as too difficult. However, without them we are never to going to get the diversity of thought into the gervice"

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[29] PwC. (2024). Insider challenge: How to stop microcultures from taking over an organisation.

Most staff and former staff highlighted a perceived divide between green book (support and corporate) and grey book (operational) staff, with both groups acknowledging the divide

Operational and support staff largely work in separate locations — stations and headquarters (HQ), respectively — leading to minimal interaction and a limited understanding of each other's roles. Operational staff often regarded their firefighting work as the organisation's core purpose, while support staff highlighted their essential behind-the-scenes contributions. This lack of visibility and mutual recognition deepened the perceived divide.

> "I know I'm going to be unconsciously biased towards ops [operational]."

> "Green book [support and corporate] staff, particularly in headquarters, rarely go on stations. A lot of them have no idea what we do."

> "You don't see anybody from outside the station. I think they do very much work in silo, and that's where maybe that disparity comes from, because they don't see us, they don't know what we do, they've never really been to HQ."

A number of staff and former staff reflected that the organisation's historical focus on operational resilience reinforced the division between those with firefighting responsibilities and other departments. MAWWFRS's structure, rooted in firefighting functions, has struggled to adapt to its increasingly diverse public safety responsibilities. This systemic emphasis on operational roles contributed to a perception that grey book (operational) staff were more valued than green book (support and corporate) staff. The hierarchical culture within operational settings, combined with the larger number of grey book (operational) staff, contributed towards an imbalance in status and influence.

> "[There are a] lot of vanity projects, I would say, at the expense of things I would say [are] important, like the people that ride the red trucks and that sort of thing."

> "Some people just aren't interested [in the evolution of the service as a whole]. They just want to come and ride the red fire engine."

> "Our core business is emergency response, prevention and protection. I'm very passionate about that, in that if the red trucks don't go out the door, we don't have a fire service. So everything else that happens is important. One hundred percent, every single person that plays a part in our fire service is important, because everything we do gets the truck out the door."

> "When I joined the Fire and Rescue Service, as far as I was concerned it was jumping on a big red thing and going in and out of doors all day rescuing cats. [...] All I understood was response, response, response."

An important example of this was how grey book (operational) staff at station manager rank were often assigned to senior roles in corporate departments, some of which were not open to green book (support and corporate) staff. In 2023-24, there were seven grey book (operational) staff in head of department positions (out of 15 corporate departments).

Many green book (support and corporate) staff expressed frustration with this approach, citing frequent turnover, skill gaps, and inconsistency in leadership. Grey book (operational) managers were said to lack subject-specific expertise or people skills leading to strained departmental relationships, and inconsistent ability and knowledge of management-related tasks. These issues also were reported to hinder long-term planning and increased pressure on support staff.

> "They're [grey book/operational staff] put into positions where they have no idea about the role that they're taking on, and they're there to get the exams done, the paper done, to get to the next level."

The perceived prioritisation of grey book (operational) staff over green book (support and corporate) staff exacerbated tensions. A large majority of green book (support and corporate) employees expressed frustration over limited progression opportunities, questioning why certain roles seemed to be reserved for grey book (operational) staff instead of being filled through open, merit-based processes. On the other hand, some grey book (operational) staff expressed scepticism of green book (support and corporate) staff's commitment to roles made available to them, and assumed they would leave for better opportunities.

There is no specific policy defining which roles must be filled by grey book (operational) or green book (support and corporate) staff. Staffing structures have traditionally centred on operational resilience, with a 2006 evaluation establishing baseline operational competence requirements for each whole-time post, subject to occasional review. MAWWFRS plan to develop a Strategic Workforce Plan, including consideration of which roles must be filled by operational staff, support staff, or staff from either book. This will be an important exercise and should be based on which skills, knowledge and competencies are required for each role. Currently there is a perception that operational staff rank more highly irrespective of their competence for a specific role.

> "This belief that they have, they can just move station managers into any role. They're putting them into specialist fields, and it's not even open for anyone with that expertise to apply for."

> "You get frustrated because they're phoning you and asking you how to do their job, and it's like, you're double my salary."

A small number of examples were raised in which green book (support and corporate) and grey book (operational) staff integrated into departments without issue. This created a positive working environment, including the addition of green book (support and corporate) roles in the Business Fire Safety department, leading to a mutual benefit for the team.

> "Community Safety is another example. So we've got community safety practitioners who are green book [support and corporate] team members working alongside grey book [operational] team members [...] It's absolutely seamless. You know, it's just people in different contracts working together.

Promotions, transfers and progression

Transfer and promotion processes for grey book (operational) staff were perceived to not follow official processes, and to be heavily influenced by nepotism and favouritism

There is a clear process to follow for transfer and promotion for grey book (operational) staff up to group manager rank at MAWWFRS. However, our engagement highlighted extensive and significant concerns with how the transfer and promotion process works in practice. While 50% of survey respondents believed everyone had equal access to promotion, only 30% agreed that promotions were decided fairly, while 28% strongly disagreed (see Figure 5). Among those eligible for or awarded promotions since June 2021, 53% felt treated fairly, while 29% felt unfairly treated. Those with first hand experiences of promotion processes were overall more positive about their equality and fairness, suggesting that pervasive ideas may exist which do not necessarily align with the reality.
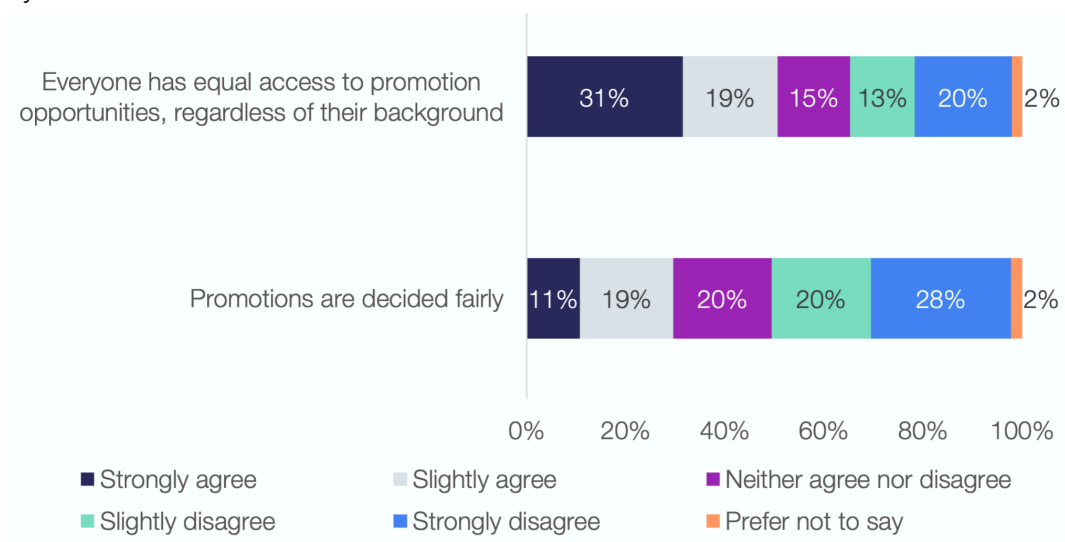

Figure 5. Ratings of access to and fairness of promotions in MAWWFRS

Concerns about the transfer and promotion panel's (TPP's) conduct were widespread. The TPP decides which grey book (operational) staff get which roles up to group manager role after they become vacant. Examples included roles being offered to ineligible candidates, informal contact about vacancies, premature role assignments before interviews concluded, and leaks of promotion outcomes. The vast majority of staff who discussed promotions expressed a belief that decisions were affected by personal relationships or subjective factors over performance, contributing to perceptions of nepotism and favouritism. Survey data supported this view: 77% of respondents who stated that they felt unfairly treated cited favouritism, and 45% cited nepotism (see Figure 6).

> "Everyone knows who's getting promoted."

> "I'm eligible for promotion, but I've missed out on opportunities where I've been more qualified than other people who haven't gone as far as me through the process. I believe it's because I haven't fallen in line with certain things and I challenge things."

> "My sort of perception on the way that transfer and promotion works tends to be the area managers and group managers already know who they want in what positions, and then they use the transfer and promotion panel just to justify or solidify what they want."
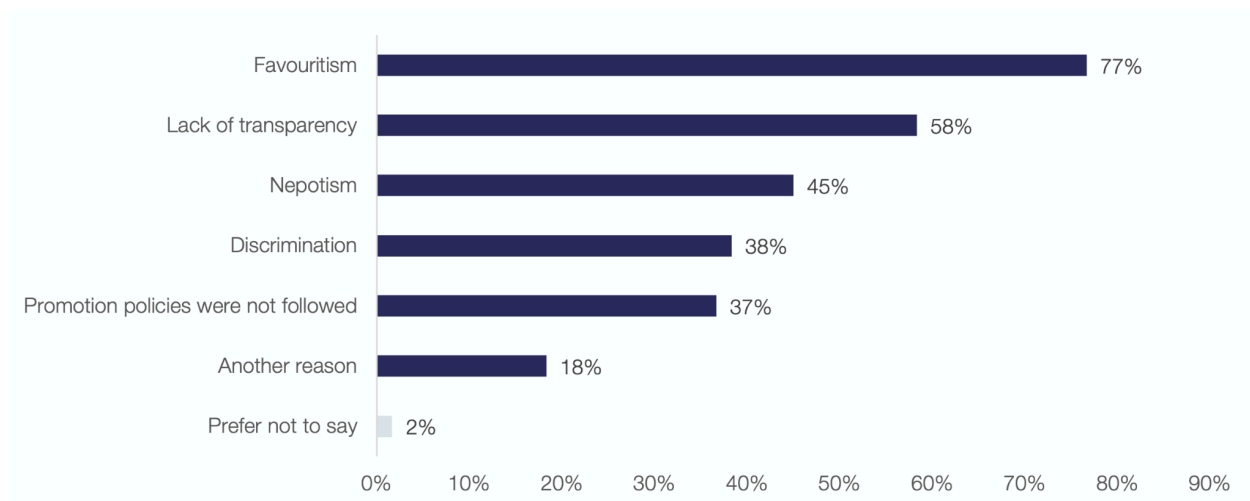
Figure 6. Reasons why respondents felt their promotion process was not fair at MAWWFRS

Senior staff were more likely to view promotions as fair, while junior staff and those with disabilities expressed greater dissatisfaction. For example, a third (33%) of disabled respondents strongly disagreed that promotions were fair, compared to 16% without disabilities.

The lack of transparency in transfer and promotion processes and decisions was a significant issue. Many felt the reasoning behind decisions was poorly communicated, leading to mistrust. It was also believed by some that eligibility criteria and conditions were changed ad hoc to suit the desired outcomes of those determining the promotions or transfers. The use of vague reasons for decisions

like 'organisational needs', without any clarification of what these needs were, was seen as a catch-all excuse.[30] A significant minority of staff reported not receiving feedback after unsuccessful applications, with poor record-keeping and unwillingness to disclose information cited as perceived barriers.

While there was general agreement that feedback *should* be provided to all candidates, this is not explicitly stipulated in the policies and procedural documents governing transfers and promotions. Crest found no guidance on recording outcomes or feedback for the purpose of communicating with candidates. However, policies do emphasise maintaining strict confidentiality for all materials related to promotions and transfers within the human resources (HR) department or ELT.[31] This focus on confidentiality risks being applied as a 'blanket rule', potentially hindering constructive communication as information is kept confidential unnecessarily. Additionally, union requests to observe TPP meetings were reportedly declined, reinforcing perceptions of secrecy, even though policies allow for 'any other invited members' to attend alongside named panellists.

"I don't get what the purpose of a process is if you're going to rip that process up."

"It just breeds nepotism. I'm not saying that's what's happened, but it puts doubt in everyone's mind. There's no notes taken, there's no union representative… basically just this bubble."

"They change the goal posts on promotion. They change the goal posts for interviews, the way that we promote people, the way that we assess people, it's all the time."

"All that seems to have gone away in favour of this operational needs statement, which I think just justifies whatever. You can cover all manner of sins."

The selection of group managers and more senior roles is primarily managed by the ELT, with TPP involvement only 'where appropriate'. Service policies governing TPP activities and decision-making do not explicitly apply to ELT decisions for these roles. This creates a risk that senior promotion and transfer processes may lack clear procedures or principles which would ensure equality, fairness, and transparency. In May 2024, a 'stakeholder panel' made up of leaders from external (non-fire service) organisations was introduced for the appointment of area managers, receiving positive

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[30] The relevant part of Procedural Guidance Document 4.5 Transfer & Promotion Procedure policy states: "It is important that employees recognise that the organisational needs of the Service will always take precedence, particularly in cases of ensuring the continuity of operational service delivery. This will be the foremost focus of the Transfer and Promotion Panel, (or Executive Leadership Team in liaison with the panel where appropriate, and required, in the case of Group Manager selection), whilst taking account of other factors, where possible to do so."

[31] PGD 4.5 Transfer and Promotion policy: "All individuals involved in the Selection Panel process will be expected to maintain the confidentiality of all materials. The resulting lists will be retained by the Human Resources Department for consideration at Transfer & Promotion Panel meetings or Executive Leadership Team in the case of Group Manager selection."

feedback. As a result, MAWWFRS plans to incorporate stakeholder panels in substantive recruitment processes at the ELT level and is considering their use for middle management positions.

Some members of SLT and ELT believed the existing process was fair and that negative perceptions stemmed from poor communication and disgruntled candidates. However, the overall lack of transparency and perceived bias undermined staff confidence in the promotion system.

> "It's a terrible, very complicated jigsaw puzzle. And I accept that, but I think the processes within that are my biggest question mark about how things are resolved and how things are sort of allocated fairly or on merit, rather than on other factors."

> "Very cloak and dagger behind closed doors, and it's so opaque."

Most green book (support and corporate) staff felt there were limited opportunities for progression in corporate departments

Most green book (support and corporate) staff expressed frustration over limited career progression opportunities. Progression was felt to be constrained by departmental structures, low staffing, and reliance on vacancies. Many reported cases of roles being filled without open competition and informal 'turn-taking' policies within departments due to scarce opportunities. MAWWFRS has developed progression pathways across the organisation, yet staff expressed a lack of awareness about pathways for green book (support and corporate) staff compared to progression pathways for grey book (operational) staff. In 2023-24, there was one promotion or transfer for every six grey book (operational) employees, compared with one in ten for green book (support and corporate) staff. Given the gender disparity between green book (support and corporate) and grey book (operational) staff, these more limited opportunities also represent an equality issue.

A review of green book (support and corporate) progression pathways is an area of work prioritised by the Culture and Inclusion Working Group, alongside the development of guidance to support green book (support and corporate) staff progression.

> "The white shirts do tend to move around a lot, and the support staff just vegetate basically."

> "If you're a green book [support and corporate] member of staff, you have to be comfortable with sitting tight and not climbing the ranks, because the opportunities are just not there."

Specialised departmental skills also limited mobility, with minimal training or development to support progression or interdepartmental transfers. While some gained experience through temporary roles, the process for returning from temporary to permanent posts varied by department, creating inequalities. MAWWFRS recruitment and selection policies imply that the temporary transfer or promotion of permanently employed green book (support and corporate) staff into alternative roles can happen 'based on existing skills or experience' when 'the work is required for a specific purpose for no longer than 3 months'.[32] No procedures relating to the return of staff to previous roles, nor the use of this strategy for staff development, are spelled out.

> "I can't get through the glass door that gets to the glass ceiling, because in support staff, we don't have a progression path. There are no stepping stone roles. The departments aren't structured in such a way that you can develop and because each department is quite specialised, you have to pick a specialism, and then you just sort of get railroaded into a particular area. But when the jobs go out to advert, if you haven't got the qualifications, you don't get an interview."

This lack of progression, coupled with limited investment in training, led to resentment and concerns over non-operational staff retention. High turnover in some departments was partly attributed to these issues. The lack of progression for green book (support and corporate) staff also contributed to a perceived insularity in senior leadership, which remained heavily dominated by grey book (operational) staff, narrowing diversity in thought and experience at the top.

There were widespread concerns about the overuse of temporary contracts at MAWWFRS, particularly for green book (support and corporate) staff

In 2023-24, 61 members of staff were employed on temporary contracts. Staff reported examples of short-term contracts being repeatedly extended for years or roles being filled temporarily despite being well-established. This practice limited career progression and disproportionately affected green book (support and corporate) staff. In 2023-24, 5% of grey book (operational) staff were employed on temporary contracts compared to 8% of green book (support and corporate) staff.

Temporary contracts were criticised for creating financial insecurity, daily stress, and limited access to training, development, and benefits compared to permanent staff. These issues deterred potential applicants, hindered workforce diversity, and left staff feeling undervalued and disposable, even after years of service.

> "There's a huge proportion of staff that are temporary, and there's almost this belief like well, as long as we keep them on a temporary contract, if we run out of funding, we can just get rid of them, even if they've been here for nine years."

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[32] HR 6.1 Recruitment, Selection & Pre-employment Check Procedure

"I've never worked anywhere with so many temporary contracts."

Training and skills development

Staff and former staff reported an insufficient emphasis on developing people management skills, particularly among grey book (operational) staff, causing a lack of professionalism, inefficiencies, and inequalities

Many staff were of the view that topics such as line management, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and departmental processes were sidelined in favour of maintaining operational competencies. A culture of 'throwing people in the deep end' without adequate preparation was frequently described.

A majority of staff felt that a significant skills gap existed among operational staff in areas such as people management, welfare support, conflict resolution, leadership, and administrative tasks. Command and control management styles were common, leading to conflict and uncomfortable working environments in some corporate departments. Watch and station managers often struggled to adapt their leadership approach between emergency scenarios and routine tasks.

"We're not HR, you know, you put a white shirt on, they give you a car and a pager, but we're not HR professionals. We're fire professionals who are managing in the HR capacity […] my training 20, 30, years ago was all ops [...] you'll pick the people stuff up as you go along."

"When you go from supervisory to middle to strategic, it's more about personal qualities and attributes, not how well you tie a knot on the fire ground."

"In this service, we don't upskill our people."

The culture within each station or department was often seen to be strongly influenced by its leader's attitudes, behaviours, and management style. Some staff suggested that a lack of training on positive management practices led to inconsistencies in how each watch or station operated and allowed the development of sub-cultures driven by the person in charge.

"If you get a line manager who's been in for 30 years and still got 30 year old values and beliefs, that influences a station, doesn't it?"

"Dealing with incidents, as a manager, that's 5% of my role. The other 95% of my role, I've had no direct training other than hand me downs."

Many operational managers expressed frustration at the lack of guidance or training for administrative and management responsibilities, despite MAWWFRS offering leadership and management training from the Institute for Leadership and Management (ILM), as well as other courses including on developing resilience in the workplace, conflict management and emotional intelligence. Though the achievement of ILM qualifications is required for operational staff to progress to certain ranks,[33] survey responses indicate that the uptake for regular leadership and management training was inconsistent: 62% of those with management responsibilities had received training since June 2021, with 80% of senior operational staff participating, compared to 46% of senior corporate staff. Although survey respondents who had received this training rated it positively (83% found it 'useful' or 'very useful'), concerns remained about its practical impact and accessibility.

A significant proportion of green book (support and corporate) staff felt overlooked, with fewer opportunities to develop skills or access formal training, shadowing, or career progression. A small number of staff expressed the view that the remit of the people and organisational development (POD) department focused almost exclusively on operational staff. Capacity constraints further restricted upskilling opportunities among green book (support and corporate) staff, perpetuating inefficiencies and siloed skills. This further underlined the divide between operational staff and support and corporate staff.

> "I don't feel like I picked up any skills that helped me be more capable."

> "Lack of people skills — they tend to be very operationally focused, and that is ideal out in the operational world, but it doesn't always reflect back into an office environment."

Some recent training initiatives, such as active bystander training, emotional resilience workshops, and Colour Works training, were widely praised for their positive impact. On the other hand, the service's recent introduction of mandatory violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) training and engagement was described by a significant minority as a 'tick box exercise'. This was due to it being a legislative requirement and lacking genuine investment and commitment, particularly among senior leaders. A small number of other contributors felt such training was unnecessary for firefighters, reflecting a lack of understanding about the wider public safety role increasingly being undertaken in the service and the requirements of legislation.

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[33] PGD 4.5 Appendix B Progression Process V8

Experiences of prejudicial and unacceptable behaviours, reporting and investigation

Bullying and harassment are widespread in MAWWFRS, with nearly half (47%) of survey respondents reporting personal experiences since June 2021, and over half (54%) having witnessed such behaviours

Nearly half (47%) of survey respondents had experienced one or more of the following types of bullying or harassment at MAWWFRS since June 2021: abuse of power, intimidation, sexual harassment, discrimination, inappropriate use of social media, and bullying or harassment of any other form. Abuse of power (34%), bullying or harassment not otherwise listed (29%), and intimidation (21%) were the most commonly reported behaviours experienced by staff and former staff. Over half (54%) of survey respondents had witnessed one or more of the types of bullying and harassment listed, with two-fifths (40%) reporting witnessing abuse of power, a third (33%) reporting witnessing bullying and harassment not otherwise listed, and a quarter (25%) reporting witnessing intimidation. See Box 2 for a case study.

MAWWFRS's internal cultural audit in 2023 found that a quarter (25%) of employees had at least one experience of either bullying, discrimination or harassment in the previous two years. While the results of the surveys are not directly comparable, this suggests that bullying and harassment remains a significant problem at MAWWFRS.

Staff and former staff described experiences of rude, arrogant, and aggressive behaviour in interviews and focus groups, including shouting, threats through 'pulling rank', confrontational actions, and intentional humiliation. While a few incidents of sustained bullying by individuals were reported, many more accounts highlighted frequent, 'low-level' bullying on stations or within teams, often regarded as 'normal' behaviour. This was corroborated by the survey results which showed that over one in five (22%) staff and former staff who had witnessed abuses of power witnessed it daily, or almost daily.

Reports of bullying were more commonly discussed by grey book (operational) staff during our engagement than green book (support and corporate) staff. Many linked these behaviours to hierarchical and autocratic management styles, especially on operational watches or stations. Survey responses revealed that prejudicial and unacceptable behaviours were most frequently attributed to senior leadership (i.e. SLT and ELT), with 58% of respondents who witnessed abuses of power reporting that they had observed senior leadership perpetrating it, as did 55% for discrimination and 53% for intimidation.

> "I've worked with difficult characters. I've worked with people that I would say were bullies and they were arseholes, but he was next level."

> "An individual in the department was routinely targeted with bullying and belittling behaviour in front of others."

> "I feel I have been degraded by a member of the Executive Leadership Team just for questioning processes such as promotions and how they are awarded. I feel my career progression is over and am worried now that if I put a foot wrong I will be a target to be dragged through to discipline procedures and sacked. The senior leader responsible for this goes out of his way to be rude towards me by personally blanking me and rubbishing any comment or suggestion I made during meetings."

One in five (20%) survey respondents had experienced discrimination, and 10% of female survey respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment

Current and former staff frequently reported discriminatory behaviour (as either direct experiences or witnessed), particularly towards minority groups, with sexism and misogyny being the most common issue raised. Reports of racism and homophobia were less frequent, likely reflecting the smaller number of LGBTQIA+ and Black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals involved in the review and employed by MAWWFRS.

Misogyny and sexism appeared normalised, often dismissed as 'banter' but frequently crossing professional boundaries and escalating into increasingly harmful comments, creating hostile environments for women. Fear of conflict or repercussions deterred staff from challenging such behaviours, perpetuating a culture of silence. Key themes of sexism at MAWWFRS included:

Stereotypes and biases: Women were perceived as less important or capable, often assumed to be suited for administrative roles. This was particularly prevalent among corporate and support staff. Some male colleagues viewed women as more emotional or less physically capable, while others made insensitive comments about childcare responsibilities.

> "I think they believe that women are more likely to be affected by serious incidents than men are. They tend to have that unconscious bias that, 'Oh, she'll be a bit weaker in that situation, because she's a girl'."

> "And he's like, 'Well, I've got kids, and I've not had a day off in 31 years'. And I literally just thought [...] well done. Like, good for you. [...] Probably because your partner's at home sorting it out."

> "Women are admin, tea makers, and the men will make the decisions."

> "He was still referring to people as girls. He'd asked, 'Oh, what do you girls think?'."

Lack of empowerment: Women felt their contributions were undervalued, their authority dismissed, and their concerns overlooked. Strong, assertive women were often perceived as overly emotional or aggressive, reinforcing systemic biases. This dynamic should be understood in light of the over-representation of women in green book (support and corporate) roles, which are often seen by operational staff as holding less importance compared to the grey book (operational) roles. The systemic divide between these roles (see above) perpetuates a hierarchy in which the contributions of green book (support and corporate) staff are frequently seen as less important or authoritative. Consequently, the prevalence of women in these positions serves to reinforce stereotypes about their capabilities, further marginalising their voices and limiting their progression into leadership roles within operational or decision-making domains.

> "I don't feel comfortable speaking in open environments. I don't feel empowered as a female within the service right now."

> "If all the men agree, all the men agree. It doesn't matter what your viewpoint is."

> "Sexism within meetings and decision making — women are seen as admin, regardless of seniority in the room, it has been assumed I, or my female colleagues, would take notes or share our screens for the men in the room who have not come prepared. I have sat in meetings where it is my role to make a decision or provide information as a subject matter expert and the Chair has looked to the men in the room for responses and not even asked the females if we have anything we wish to add. These actions come from individuals who are pushing the cultural message and believe they are one of the ones fighting for the change, yet they seem unaware of their behaviours and how small actions such as deferring to 'women are admin' can have such a huge impact on someone's confidence."

Sexual harassment: 10% of female survey respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment, and 11% had witnessed it. Accounts included inappropriate messages, sexual comments, and invitations for dates. Male firefighters were also reported to make sexual remarks about female members of the public.

Crest analysed 150 incidents of misconduct from MAWWFRS official misconduct data, but this offered limited insight into the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment. Much of the data was ambiguously labelled with terms like 'inappropriate behaviour'. Only ten incidents since 2021 (7%) could be clearly categorised as sexual assault or harassment. This indicates that incidents had gone unreported or had been categorised in broad terms. The lack of clear and detailed misconduct data severely limits MAWWFRS's ability to effectively monitor and address trends in discriminatory behaviour.

> "Sexual harressmnent/bulling [sic] on stations, unconscious bias. People don't always know they are doing it as it [is] a norm."

Reports of discrimination based on race were very limited. The very low numbers of people from ethnic minority backgrounds both in MAWWFRS and the community it serves suggest that incidents of racism are likely to be low, but Crest heard of derogatory language and insensitive 'jokes'. Such behaviours were reported to go unchallenged by leadership. Generational and cultural factors, including entrenched norms, were cited as barriers to addressing racism.

> "There does seem to be [a] generational difference in how people navigate the conversation around the topic [of racism] [...] This makes certain individuals uncomfortable to even broach the subject."

In contrast to the very limited experiences and witnessing of overt racism, a significantly higher number of survey responses focused on perceived inequalities arising *because of* diversity initiatives. Many criticised efforts to increase inclusivity, claiming they resulted in discrimination against majority groups, reflecting discomfort with how such initiatives were implemented.

Disciplinary procedures were perceived as unprofessional, not impartial, not confidential, unfair and ineffective

MAWWFRS's disciplinary policy states that the process will be fair, impartial, and follow the principles of natural justice.[34] However, in practice, disciplinary procedures were widely described as unprofessional, biased, arbitrary and inconsistent.

> "I don't think people understand what our processes are. I don't know that I could say what our processes are, because I feel like some of those goal posts move."

> "They haven't followed policy. That's not what the policy states."

> "That policy has been manipulated to fit people's agendas and what they want."

As noted above, senior staff members reflected positively on MAWWFRS's move to 'crack down' on inappropriate behaviour through the use of harsh sanctions where appropriate. However, survey data supported widespread dissatisfaction with both informal and formal disciplinary processes. Over half (51%) of survey respondents who reported misconduct that was subsequently dealt with informally were very dissatisfied with the experience, with only 8% feeling satisfied. Two-fifths (40%) of those whose reports resulted in a formal procedure expressed similar dissatisfaction when

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[34] HR 6.19 Discipline Procedure V7 — this policy covers disciplinary procedures for all employees other than gold book (support and corporate) employees, for whom there is a separate policy

speaking up/reporting, and 49% were very dissatisfied with the investigation procedure and outcome (see Figure 7).
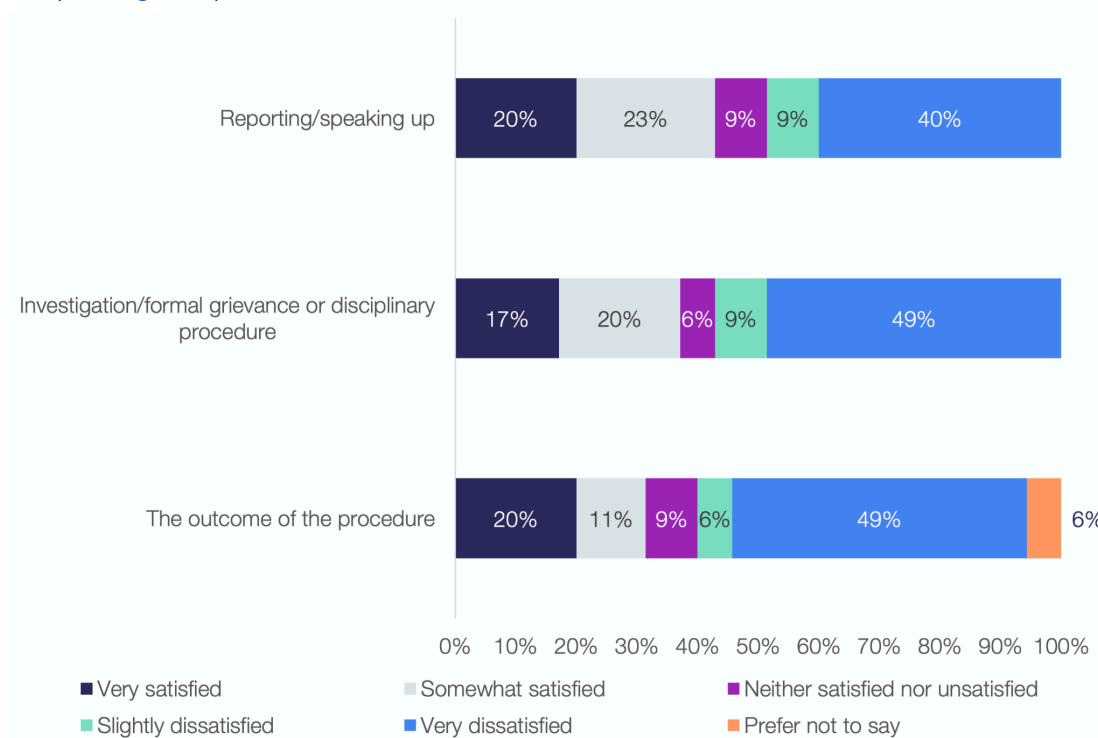
Figure 7. Rates of satisfaction with different stages of formal reporting routes at MAWWFRS

Staff frequently raised issues of poor communication, breaches of confidentiality and inadequate access to evidence during investigations. Some staff reported what they described as 'aggressive' investigatory practices and a 'guilty until proven innocent' approach. Many felt discouraged from seeking union representation, contrary to the stated policy.[35] A perceived arbitrary approach to the thoroughness of investigations was frequently cited. For example, contrasting a low level complaint that resulted in a lengthy investigation where tens of witnesses were interviewed, with more serious accusations, including those which were seen to constitute significant safeguarding risks (see here), that did not result in any kind of formal investigation.

Our engagement and survey revealed dissatisfaction with disciplinary processes, including perceptions of leniency, symbolic punishments, and disproportionately harsh penalties. Such processes are likely to evoke contrasting views, as complainants and those being complained about are unlikely to agree on the outcome.

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[35] For example, HR 6.19 states that *"an employee has the right to be accompanied at every stage of the disciplinary procedure by a Trade Union representative or work colleague"* as well as granting a 7 day delay to hearings if representatives are not available.

However, what stood out most from our engagement was the inconsistency in how these processes were applied. A recurring concern raised by staff — whether real or perceived — was a lack of impartiality, with investigators often seen as having personal connections to the individuals involved.

> "I believe my investigation was tailored to protect certain people."

> "That individual had close ties and links with people who make the decisions on who gets investigated and who doesn't. The individual was protected."

> "Instead of looking at all the evidence for and against, they will just look for [the evidence] against, and they will persecute that person. They will harass them."

> "The evidence didn't say you did it, but I think you did it, and then you're guilty."

> "'Balance of probability' seems to be the buzz phrase that the service uses in investigations, and it seems to be a whitewash of whether or not there's evidence. The balance of probability is determined by two people sitting there, not the evidence that's being presented."

> "Nothing was done."

> "They didn't deal with the problem, they moved it. He's gotten away with whatever he's done.

These failings contributed to perceptions of unfairness and mistrust in the process. Ethical lapses, such as official notes or summaries of hearings or interviews not accurately reflecting or what people actually said, further eroded trust in the system. This lack of trust contributed to an unwillingness to report unacceptable behaviour in the future, with 62% of survey respondents not trusting that the reporting process would be confidential and 48% thinking that the process of reporting would not lead to any change (see Figure 8). See Box 2 for a case study.

> "They were literally naming names. I mean, these people are under investigation. They were telling them the names, and they were telling them what other people had said."

> "So as far as anybody knows, the person taking notes could've written what they wanted, no one's actually seen what was written."
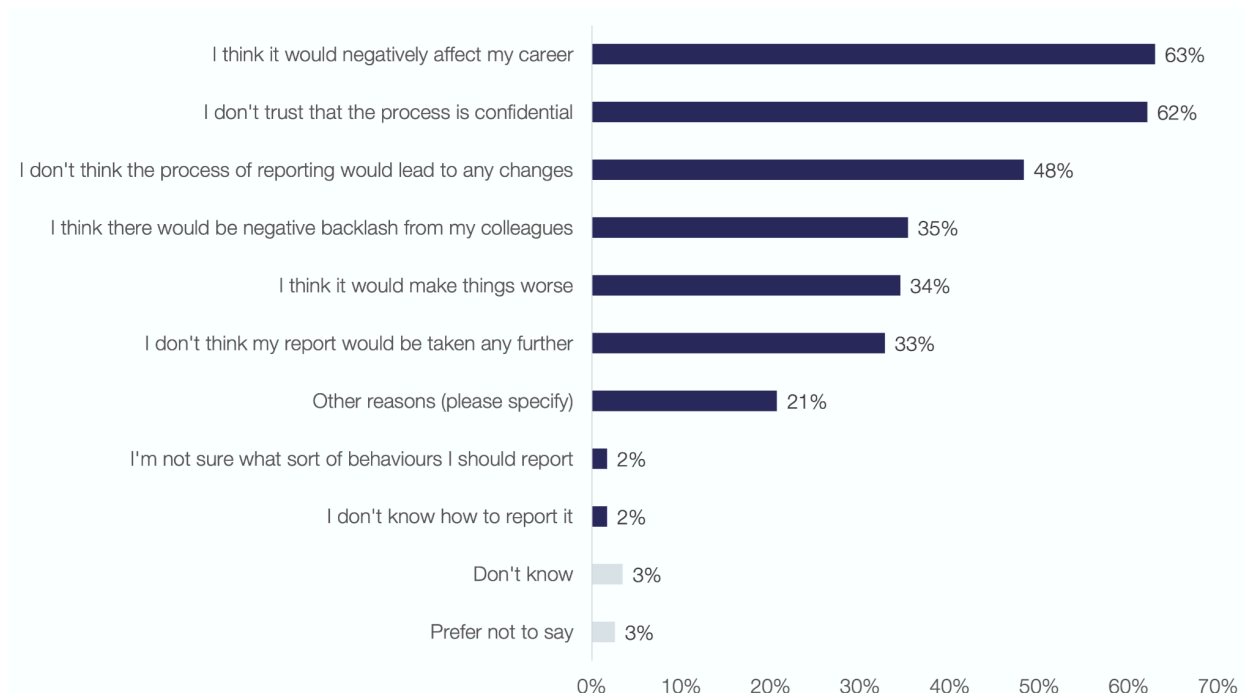
Figure 8. Reasons given for not reporting unacceptable behaviour in the future in MAWWFRS

The most common reason for not reporting misconduct in the future was that staff felt it would negatively affect their career, as selected by almost two-thirds (63%) of survey respondents. This suggests there is a long way to go before speaking out against inappropriate behaviour is recognised as a valuable contribution to the culture of the service.

The Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer and the Professional Standards Board have also faced significant criticism, despite only having been appointed in June 2023 and formally convened in September 2024 respectively. The Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer's prior role as an operational staff member and dual role on the Professional Standards Board raised concerns about impartiality and conflicts of interest, with more than one staff member likening it to MAWWFRS 'marking its own homework'. A lack of perceived transparency regarding the Professional Standards Board's membership and remit further fuelled suspicions.

> "I have an issue with one person being able to determine how things should be progressed."

> "They haven't actually told the service staff who sits on the Professional Standards Board."

Between January 2021 and June 2024, MAWWFRS undertook 150 formal disciplinary procedures, with action taken in 75 cases. 'Management intervention' (e.g. reinforcing expected behaviours, monitoring a situation) was the most common outcome where action was taken (29 of 75 cases) followed by warnings (written, informal, or final), issued in 21 cases, and dismissals in six cases.

'Management intervention', despite being the most common outcome of investigations, is not listed in MAWWFRS's disciplinary policy, and investigation data showed that 'management intervention' was an outcome for a wide variety of complaints. No action was taken in ten cases, of which four were attributed to prior resolution or lack of complainant engagement. Additionally, five individuals resigned or retired during disciplinary processes.

Under Acas guidelines, the disciplinary outcome and details must remain confidential. However, it also states that, '*where appropriate, employers should talk privately with any staff involved to let them know that the process has finished — this would include talking to the individual who raised the complaint*'. MAWWFRS's 'line managers guide to anti-bullying and anti-harassment' states that if there is no case to answer, written feedback should be given to the complainant on the reasons for the decision.

Despite these guidelines and policies stating that those involved in disciplinary processes will be kept up to date with the details of cases they have raised, a lack of transparency around outcomes was highlighted as a recurring issue. Many staff and former staff felt left in the dark, citing 'organisational needs' and 'GDPR' but these were seen as excuses to obscure decision-making.

> "We feel very constrained in the fire service that we don't tell the whole truth".

The most common reason behind negative experiences of reporting was the report not being taken any further, as selected by 62% of those who stated that they were not satisfied with their experience. Three in ten (30%) felt that there was a lack of communication or update during the process, and that the process was not transparent.

> "The process started off very positively but as time has gone on the support / transparency and lack of communication has dwindled to now being barely existent. Communication has probably been the worst, we ask for updates but get none, then we hear information about the investigation from other sources within the service. People that are not involved with the investigation, why are they finding out about it when the service refuses to tell us anything of note? Yet we're the ones most affected by it."
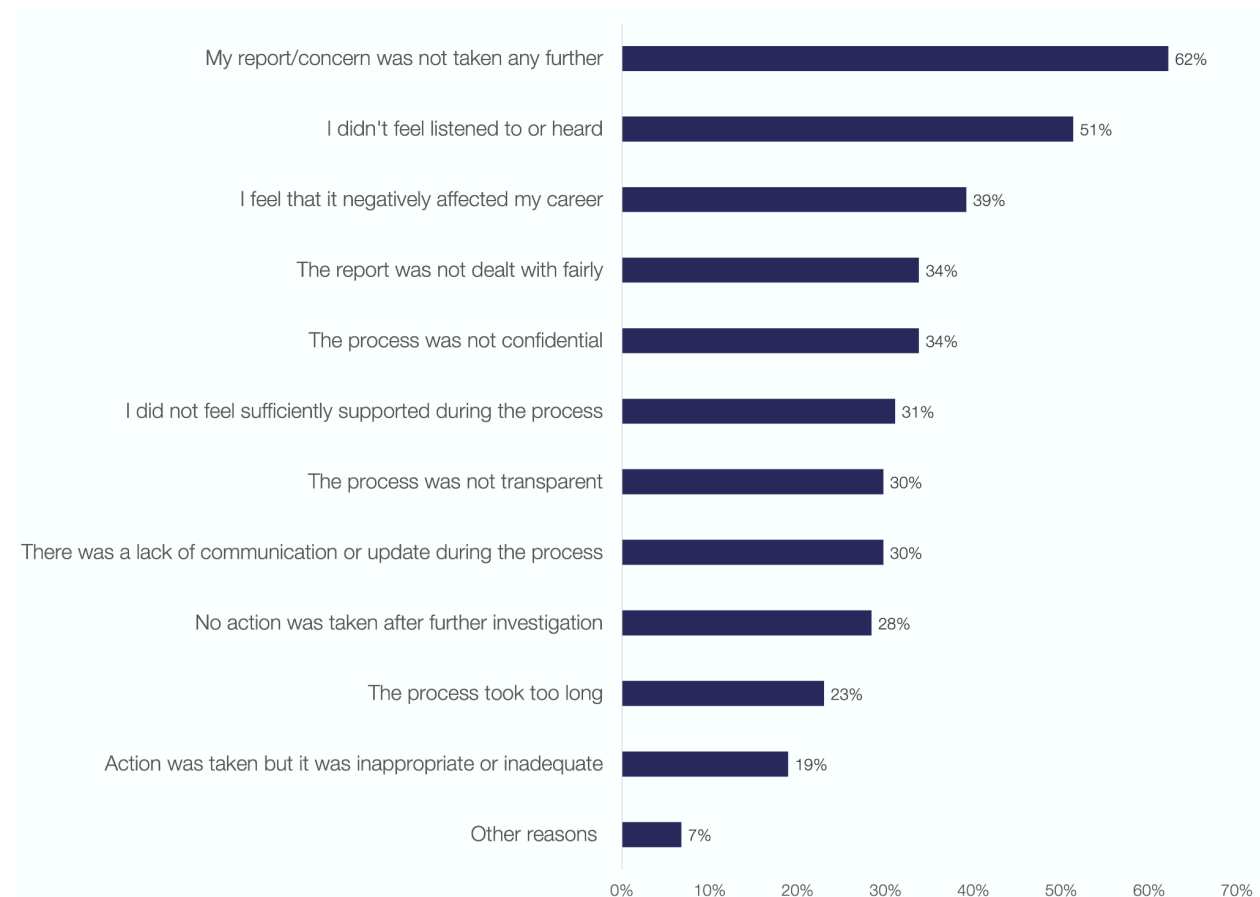
MAWWFRS encourages informal resolutions for minor conduct issues.[36] Survey data revealed that just under a third of those who reported misconduct saw their concerns progress to a formal process (31%). Based on these figures, it is estimated that over 400 misconduct reports (including formal and informal) were made between 2021 and 2024, based on a baseline of 150 formal reports. However, informal approaches were poorly received, with 51% of survey respondents who reported unacceptable behaviours via an informal route being very dissatisfied with their experience. Common criticisms included informal measures that placed responsibility on victims, such as reassignments or advice to avoid certain colleagues. Another common criticism was letters

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[36] HR 6.19 Discipline Procedure

being sent clearing individuals of misconduct while implying ongoing suspicion. This form of outcome was particularly prevalent among complaints raised through the Speak Up line (see Box 4). In 21 of 52 recorded complaints, investigations found no evidence to substantiate the claim, yet employees were still issued with letters 'reminding them of expectations and values'.

Inadequate guidance and gaps in management training further hindered effective informal resolution. The lack of confidence among managers in handling behavioural issues was said to lead to inappropriate escalations to formal processes or insufficient action at the informal level. Survey responses indicated that unresolved informal complaints often resulted in dissatisfaction and further escalation with over three-fifths (62%) of those dissatisfied with disciplinary processes citing their reports not being taken further as a primary reason, with 51% not feeling listened to (see Figure 9).

Reason	%
My report/concern was not taken any further	62%
I didn't feel listened to or heard	51%
I feel that it negatively affected my career	39%
The report was not dealt with fairly	34%
The process was not confidential	34%
I did not feel sufficiently supported during the process	31%
The process was not transparent	30%
There was a lack of communication or update during the process	30%
No action was taken after further investigation	28%
The process took too long	23%
Action was taken but it was inappropriate or inadequate	19%
Other reasons	7%

Figure 9. Reasons behind negative experiences of reporting at MAWWFRS

Some managers interviewed felt that a lack of guidance or policy relating to informal resolutions of behavioural issues hindered their ability to deal with reports effectively. Though a training package on 'conducting investigations' exists, its content and uptake (as well as uptake of line manager training on 'dignity at work') were unclear. While the dignity at work training provides some guidance, there was no clear procedure for deciding which incidents warrant investigation, what process investigations should follow, and how to ensure impartiality. This lack of clarity undermined

confidence in the disciplinary system — both from complainants and managers dealing with reports — and the impartiality of outcomes.

Staff frequently highlighted the negative emotional toll of reporting unacceptable or prejudicial behaviours they had experienced or witnessed, including stress, reputational harm, and prolonged case durations. Two-fifths (40%) of survey respondents who reported unacceptable behaviour that they had personally experienced reported significant emotional impacts, as did 34% of witnesses. Many staff members described how poor communication, including vague updates or a complete lack thereof, intensified these effects.

> "You've got the stigma that's probably the biggest thing. It's the whole umbrella or cloud that's over everybody."

> "We've forgotten that this person, whether they're guilty or not guilty, they're still a person. They're still going to have to work with us — it affects relationships."

The vast majority of survey respondents (85%) thought they would speak up about unacceptable behaviour in theory, but a much smaller proportion (17%) consistently reported in practice

Most staff and former staff said they would be likely (in theory) to speak up about unacceptable behaviour if they experienced or witnessed it at work, with 85% of survey respondents stating they would be somewhat or very likely to report at least one form of prejudicial or unacceptable behaviour listed. However, of the survey respondents who had witnessed or experienced unacceptable behaviour (in practice), only 17% always reported it, with 29% sometimes reporting and 37% never reporting it.

Confidence in reporting varied significantly depending on the type of behaviour (see Figure 10) and who respondents would need to report to (see Figure 11). Respondents were most likely to report sexual harassment (87%), with similarly high levels of confidence for reporting other criminal activity and discrimination. Survey respondents were least likely to report an abuse of power, with 63% rating themselves very likely or likely. While 86% of respondents were very or somewhat likely to report unacceptable behaviour to their line manager, only 38% would report it to senior leadership, and 37% to senior members of HR.
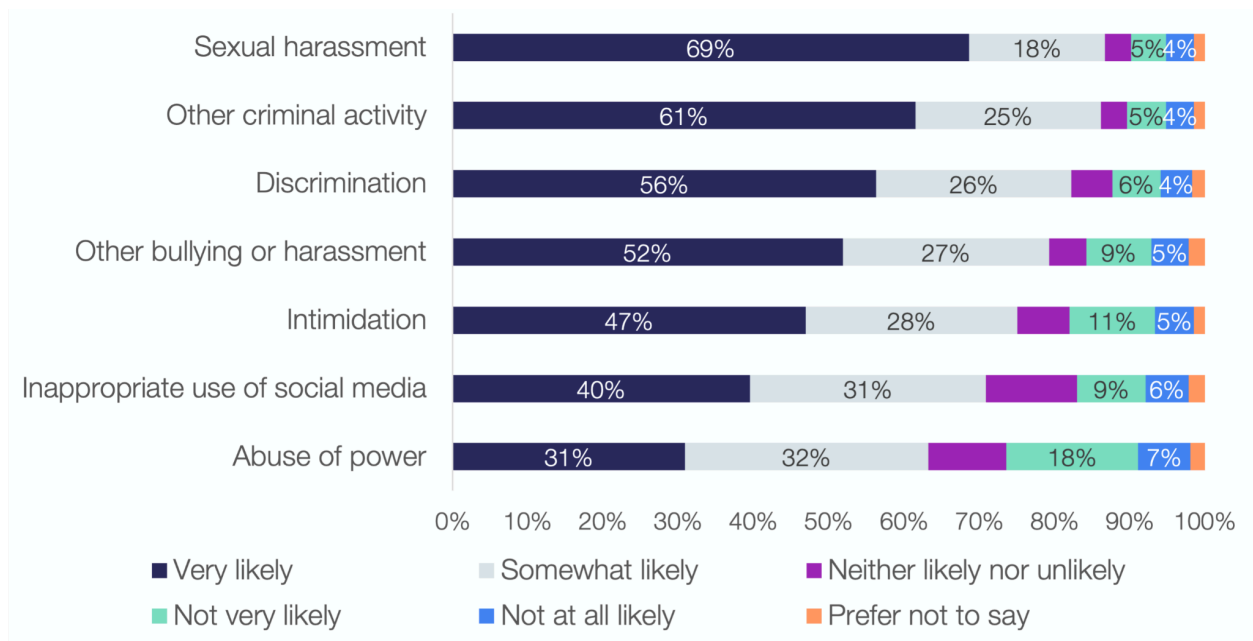
Figure 10. The likelihood of reporting different types of prejudicial and/or unacceptable behaviours at MAWWFRS
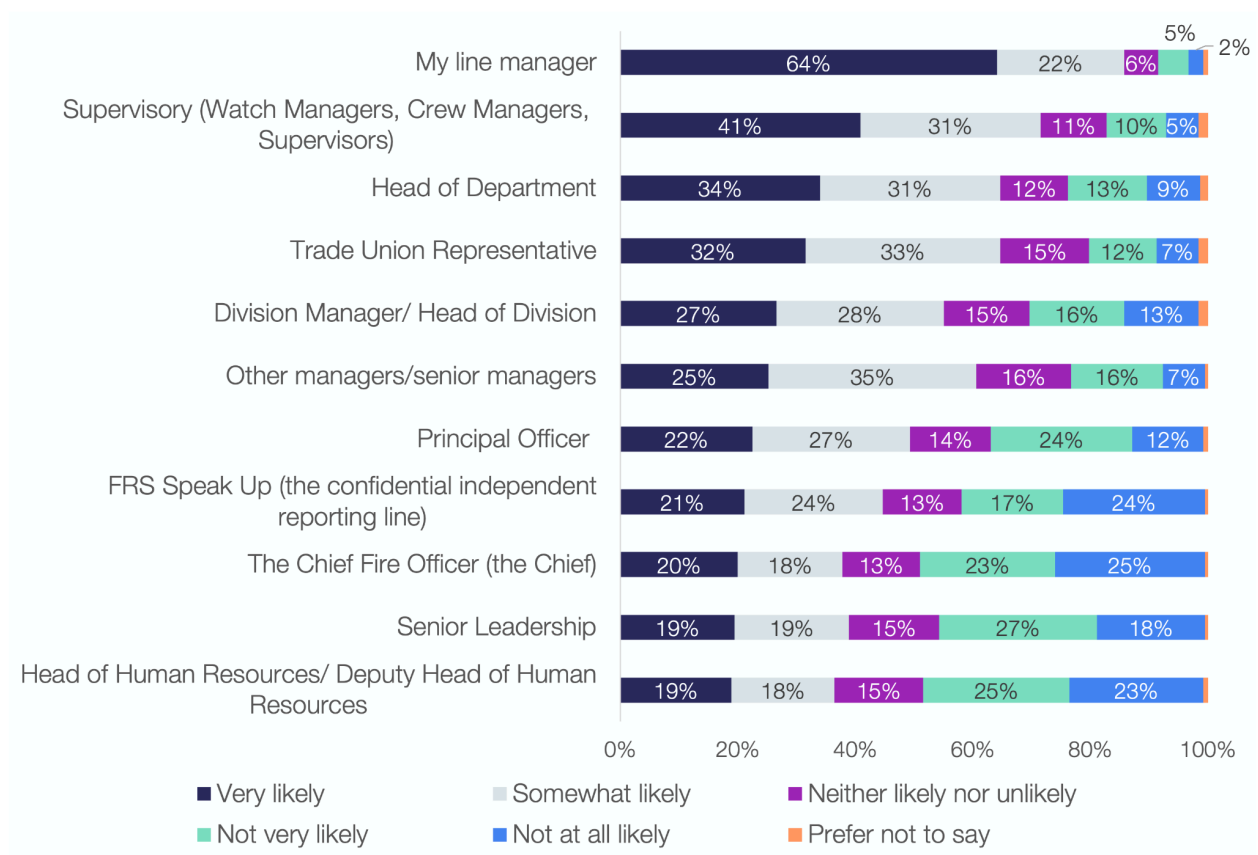
Figure 11. The likelihood of reporting prejudicial and/or unacceptable behaviours to different staff at MAWWFRS

Among survey respondents unlikely to report prejudicial and/or unacceptable behaviour, 63% believed it would harm their career, and 35% feared backlash from colleagues (see Figure 8). This aligned with interview and focus group findings, where many staff viewed speaking out as 'career suicide', fearing they would be labelled troublemakers or problem creators. Those who had spoken up or 'challenged to status quo' often reported experiencing career setbacks, including being overlooked for development opportunities or promotions.

A widespread belief that success at MAWWFRS required conformity and alignment with the 'in-group' discouraged staff from challenging problems, creating a significant barrier to addressing unacceptable behaviour and cultural change. Staff and former staff who participated in interviews and focus groups often attributed a lack of confidence in challenging poor behaviour to fears of ostracism, being labelled a 'snitch', or not being believed.

The perception that senior staff and managers failed to challenge problems, combined with apathy, inertia, and groupthink among senior leaders, led some staff to believe that speaking out was futile. For instance, 47% of survey respondents agreed that senior leadership conducted themselves professionally, compared with 72% for supervisory staff, 80% for direct line managers, and 86% for teams. In interviews and focus groups, staff and former staff described being especially reluctant to approach senior staff due to MAWWFRS's hierarchical structure.

> "If you've ever seen The Matrix, that's how we can describe the service. If you want to progress, you want to go up, you've got to swallow the pill, and you don't raise your head, and you don't see nothing."

Most staff who engaged with this culture review expressed strong concerns about the confidentiality of their participation, highlighting fears of retaliation or negative reactions from colleagues. This lack of confidence was reflected in the high number of survey respondents who chose not to provide demographic details or job roles — 25% preferred not to disclose their gender, 21% preferred not to disclose their sexuality, 12% preferred not to disclose their ethnicity, and 11% preferred not to disclose if they had management responsibilities.

> "It feels like people are tiptoeing."

> "People can't really put a finger on it. It's just they feel that they're in an environment where [...] they're scared to have a normal conversation."

The Speak Up line was set up to support staff to feel confident in the confidentiality of reporting processes. However, it was perceived by the majority of staff who discussed its effectiveness to have created unintended consequences, including a 'tit for tat' approach to reporting issues, fear of false accusations and an over-reliance on formal reporting instead of direct resolution (see Box 4).

Box 4: Speak Up reporting line

Since its launch in autumn 2023, 52 Speak Up reports have been made, with numbers steadily increasing and peaking in October 2024. Nearly two-thirds of all reports (33, 63%) were submitted between May and October 2024.

While some staff praised Speak Up for providing a safe, anonymous way to raise concerns and surfacing otherwise unnoticed issues, feedback was largely negative. Many felt its anonymity encouraged misuse, such as malicious complaints and 'tit for tat' disputes, potentially reflecting low confidence in informal resolution processes. The highest category of reports (15, 29%) related to alleged abuses of policy and procedure, including alleged abuse of annual leave, working hours, and sick leave. The majority of Speak Up reports (27, 52%) were found, after investigation, to be unsubstantiated.

Concerns were raised that Speak Up complaints were directed straight to the Professional Standards Board, often resulting in formal investigations even when supported by minimal evidence. Some current and former staff members noted that Speak Up is not mentioned within MAWWFRS discipline, grievance or whistleblowing policies, creating a lack of clear and transparent procedures for the handling of complaints. These factors heightened mistrust, causing stress for accused individuals and fear of anonymous complaints. Of the 15 substantiated reports, ten resulted in management interventions, with a few leading to written warnings, revoked job offers, or dismissals.

> "Speak Up has provided staff with the opportunity to report confidentially and having more courage to highlight serious issues to the service. However this has also been a negative change, with the fear that anyone could report someone for anything and everything and can sometimes feel like its a keyboard warrior culture rather than communication face to face to deal with disagreements."

Survey responses suggested that staff appreciated the opportunity provided by Speak Up to raise concerns confidentially, but that opinions on its implementation and effectiveness were poor. Over half (55%) of respondents thought that opportunities to raise concerns confidentially had got much better or slightly better. At the same time, confidence in the use of Speak Up was low. Only 21% of survey respondents said they were likely to report via Speak Up, with 41% unlikely or not at all likely to use it. Nearly a third (30%) believed that the handling of misconduct and disciplinary allegations had got much worse.

Action 1.2 of the CRMP 2040 stated that MAWWFRS would 'evaluate, action and embed improvements from the Speak Up independent reporting helpline' and that an evaluation would be undertaken in September 2024. An independent review of the Speak Up line by Carmarthenshire County Council has been commissioned by MAWWFRS and is due to report in January 2025. The service has also worked with Crimestoppers to discuss ways to improve

processes, and are engaging with an FRS user group to enable shared learning, with plans to develop further guidance on the management of complaints raised through Speak Up. The CFO has delivered a number of webinars aimed at providing staff with guidance related to the Speak Up system, and an FAQ list has been produced by MAWWFRS and shared with staff.

Internal processes

Inefficiencies and challenges in some corporate processes and practices negatively impacted inter-departmental working and damaged staff morale

Many staff in corporate and support roles expressed frustration with outdated, inefficient processes, particularly for tasks like contractual changes, recruitment, and managing annual leave. Many systems relied on manual or paper-based workflows, which were prone to delays, errors, and security risks. IT systems, where available, were often outdated, incompatible, or lacked centralisation, creating inefficiencies and duplication of work. Departments including HR and people and organisational development (POD) faced challenges sharing and coordinating information due to the absence of a centralised database. MAWWFRS's CRMP 2040 states that the service is 'committed to exploiting digital and information technology solutions to deliver our strategic objectives', but no detail is included on planned activity.

> "The processes are a bit naff, to be polite."

> "We only went to electronic filing four months ago."

A small number of staff reported a lack of training to maximise IT systems' potential, limiting the organisation's ability to analyse data and improve performance. Siloed working practices increased workloads and created single points of failure, with tasks often dependent on individual knowledge or relationships, and when staff left, there was no corporate memory to rely on. Absences left work uncompleted, creating reluctance among staff to take leave and negatively affecting wellbeing.

> "There are no systems. If there were systems, processes would be easier."

> "The process is emailing each other. If for example in [a department], the only name I know is X, I'm going to email X. X might be on leave for three weeks, but I don't know anyone else in [the department] who would deal with that. I'll wait three weeks for X to get back to me then."

> "You dread taking leave. I physically could not catch up."

Attempts to innovate were often perceived as slow or stalled, with examples of incomplete projects like electronic recruitment and timesheets taking years to progress. Staff cited inconsistent leadership and a lack of senior curiosity about unmet goals as barriers to improvement. Frequent turnover in head-of-department roles, particularly involving grey book (operational) station managers, further hindered strategic planning and process development.

Many staff and former staff reported feeling overworked and overwhelmed, and did not think MAWWFRS offers adequate wellbeing support

Many staff and former staff across MAWWFRS felt overwhelmed by high expectations, citing low staffing levels, growing workloads, and inefficient processes. Many reported working evenings and weekends without pay to manage unsustainable workloads, despite their commitment to delivering high-quality work. However, welfare support was widely seen as inadequate. Three-quarters (75%) of survey respondents thought that inadequate recognition was a significant or partial weakness in the culture at MAWWFRS, while 71% viewed insufficient support for the wellbeing of employees as a weakness (see Figure 2).

Data supplied by MAWWFRS suggests that as of mid-November 2024, 71 employees were off work due to sickness, of which 16 (22%) were off work due to mental health, including anxiety and stress at work. 1,821 days of work were lost due to mental health absences in 2023/24, making up 25% of all days of work lost by MAWWFRS.

The Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) programme was designed as a trauma-focused peer support and risk assessment system. TRiM is activated when staff encounter operational incidents deemed 'outside of routine experiences'. These include employees experiencing or witnessing serious injury or death of colleagues, or persons known to them; when the trauma involved infant fatalities or where a child has suffered serious injury; and when firefighters attend a fatal incident for the first time. However there was criticism of the programme being unfit for purpose, with inconsistent delivery, inadequate follow-up, and perceptions of it being a 'tick box' exercise. Since its launch in February 2019, MAWWFRS has recorded 341 events requiring TRiM support, including 50 incidents so far in 2024/25.

Staff reported that TRiM practitioners — who voluntarily take on these responsibilities alongside their regular roles — struggled with excessive workloads and insufficient training, hindering their ability to provide effective support and conduct thorough risk assessments. The programme currently relies on 15 practitioners, 4 managers, and 1 coordinator. A review of TRiM provision is planned as part of MAWWFRS's Cultural and Inclusion Action Plan, to be delivered by the Culture and Inclusion Working Group.

Staff involved in misconduct or grievance cases, whether as complainants or alleged perpetrators, reported feeling unsupported, often experiencing significant stress as a result. Positive experiences were uncommon and typically attributed to individual line managers rather than organisational processes. This was reflected in survey results, which highlighted that team members and line

managers were seen as supportive when compared to those in more senior roles (see Figure 12); 58% and 49% strongly agreed that they feel supported by their team and by their direct line manager respectively, compared to 8% strongly agreeing that they feel supported by executive leadership.
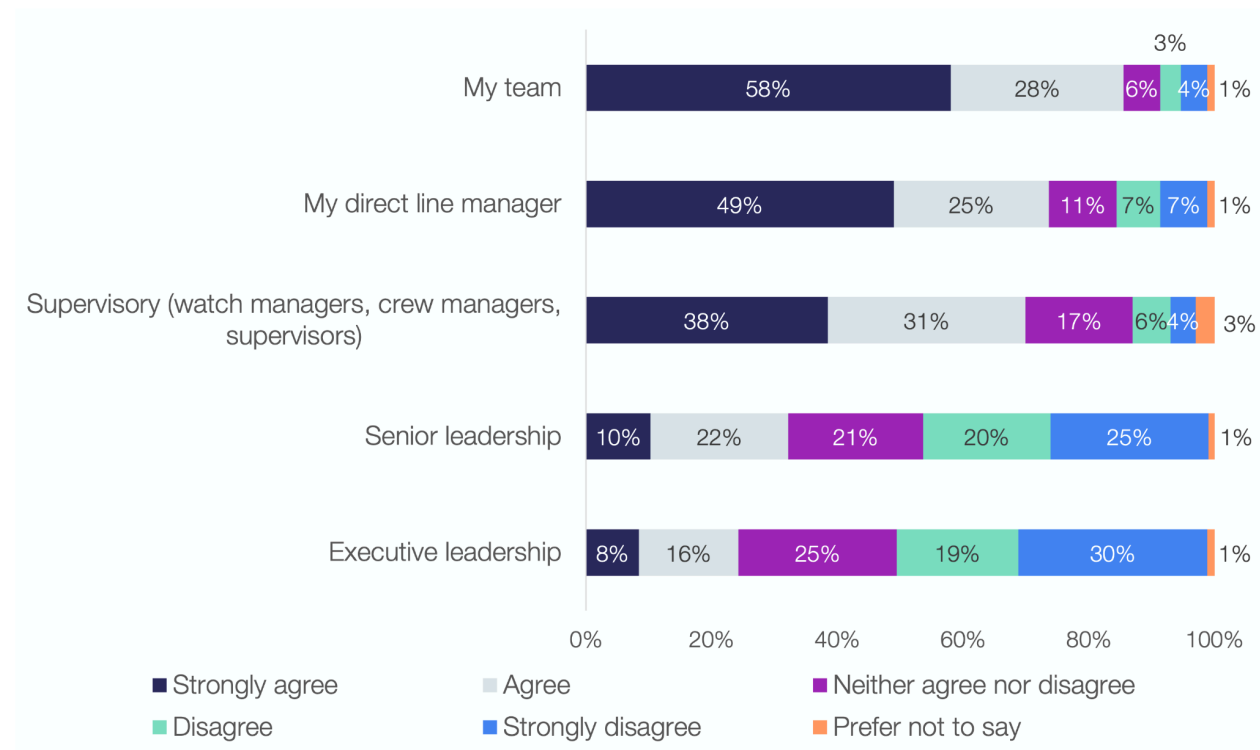
Figure 12. The extent to which MAWWFRS staff/former staff feel supported by different individuals or groups

While MAWWFRS's discipline policy states that support is available to staff, it primarily outlines the right to be accompanied by a trade union representative or colleague, offering little additional detail. Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of 'welfare officers' assigned to support individuals during disciplinary procedures. Instances were reported where such officers demonstrated a troubling lack of understanding and training, including in cases involving individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts.

> "The wellbeing of staff when they're under investigation is not looked at."

Those who accessed counselling often faced delays and found the service inadequate, with complaints about limited availability, lack of face-to-face options, and insufficient follow-up for long-term cases.

Staff on sick leave reported experiences of minimal communication, feeling their job security and pay was sometimes being threatened, and pressure to return to work. Staff often described these actions as not in the spirit of MAWWFRS's sickness and absence management procedure (HR 6.12). The procedure clearly outlines the service's approach to keeping contact with employees on

long term sick leave at specified intervals, and the circumstances in which pay may be deducted. Positive experiences of support during sickness were rare and anecdotal.

Wellbeing support was widely viewed as performative and superficial, with posters and rhetoric not translating into tangible action. Action 1.3 in CRMP 2040 introduces MAWWFRS's commitment to develop a wellbeing strategy in the 'short term' (within 1-2 years). However, a perceived lack of focus on welfare beyond this commitment in the CRMP 2040 and the current absence of a wellbeing strategy or policy related to staff support procedures reinforces the perceptions of indifference. Many felt the service prioritised policy, procedure, and performance over employee welfare.

> "I think we need to take better care of our employees, and I think that would solve a lot of problems."

> "Management support for employees is disgusting. You are just a number. There is no human emotion or concern for the well being of employees shown from senior management [group manager and above]."

Conclusion

The findings revealed that MAWWFRS is a service divided along various lines: grey book (operational) staff vs green book (support and corporate) staff, men vs women, and senior vs junior ranks. This division is underpinned by a visible, formal hierarchy that rewards conformity with success and career progression and fosters an 'us and them' culture, perpetuating mistrust and disconnection across the organisation, and allowing high rates of bullying and harassment to persist unchallenged. Coupled with a lack of accountability, effective communication, and governance, senior leadership are seen to 'close ranks' to make decisions, and there appears to be minimal oversight from the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (MAWWFRA). Fear of speaking out is pervasive, and a 'do as you're told' culture discourages open dialogue and innovation.

Management practices remain fundamentally outdated, with limited understanding of staff development and poor processes that lead to inefficiencies and inequalities. The suspension of 13 staff members between February 2023 and December 2023, costing 64 months of work and £155,853, exemplifies the cost of these inefficiencies. Support for staff wellbeing is inadequate, perpetuating a lack of trust and morale. These issues stem from leadership failures and a cultural resistance to reform, particularly at ELT level, where change is often perceived as threatening. Problems are frequently glossed over with a toxic positivity, especially at the top levels of the organisation.

Systemic resistance to reform is exacerbated by a structure built around operational firefighting functions, despite the organisation's growing role in broader public safety and a greater focus on

prevention. There are also questions about the effectiveness of MAWWFRA in holding senior leadership accountable for reform. Members of the MAWWFRA were invited to engage in this review but no members took part. Similarly, the Welsh Government has been slow to act on longstanding concerns about the governance structures of Fire and Rescue Authorities, failing to implement much-needed reforms. This absence of oversight and modern governance practices undermines trust both within the service and among the public.

While some work has been undertaken to address these issues, much of it is piecemeal, and many problems remain systemic. MAWWFRS's male-dominated culture, despite equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, highlights the risks of non-compliance with legislation such as the Equality Act. Limited representation of women, especially in operational roles, further entrenches an insular and homogenous environment. Addressing gender disparity and offering a greater variety of roles that reflect the skills and competencies required could attract a more diverse workforce, promote inclusivity, and reduce the organisation's resistance to change. To meet HMICFRS's recommendation, MAWWFRS should significantly and boldly expand its efforts in achieving greater gender diversity, including positive action initiatives. This will require going beyond current measures despite their unpopularity, to create a workforce that genuinely reflects the communities it serves.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that MAWWFRS's shift in priorities and core functions has not been matched by a corresponding change in its organisational structure or processes. While the significant reduction in fires attended by MAWWFRS is a commendable achievement, the service is increasingly called upon to deal with a wider range of public safety duties, includling the safety of vulnerable members of the community. This requires a wider set of skills, attributes and structures, which need to be equally recognised and valued. Without decisive action to align its culture and structure with contemporary public safety priorities, MAWWFRS risks remaining trapped in an obsolete model, failing its employees and the public it serves.

However, any cultural improvement efforts so far have been insufficient. Change has been neither fast enough nor far-reaching enough to address systemic issues. MAWWFRS remains stuck in the past, needing more honesty and self-reflection to overcome its challenges. Bold and transformative actions are required to demonstrate a genuine commitment to change, rather than relying on incremental adjustments, vague communications, or surface-level initiatives. Learning from some of the successful reforms undertaken by NWFRS, including positive action relating to the recruitment of whole-time firefighters, MAWWFRS leadership needs to delegate some functions, relinquishing its 'judge and jury' approach. Such decisive steps are necessary to rebuild trust, foster inclusivity, and modernise the service for the future.

Recommendations

Bolstering accountability and building trust

Leading by example
- MAWWFRS's Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and Service Leadership Team (SLT) must make a conscious and sustained effort to lead the cultural change by example
    - ELT and SLT need to embody the principles of openness, accountability, and humility as they steer the organisation towards a more inclusive and supportive culture
    - Each member of ELT and SLT will need to lead by example, which may require them to reflect on their ability to successfully do this
- MAWWFRS should bring in a culture change implementation specialist (independent to MAWWFRS and the culture review team) to support leadership in this difficult task, helping them to understand their role in leading the organisation through cultural change

Breaking down organisational divisions
- Contact and communication across the organisation needs to improve to build mutual understanding between employees at different levels of the service
    - This can be achieved by embedding existing lines of communication alongside building new avenues of communication between the top and the bottom of the organisation. For example:
        - The reliance on newsletters or memos shared via email and online webinars should be diversified, given retained staff are not consistently monitoring electronic workplace communication
        - MAWWFRS could establish a 'suggestions for change' box which is routed directly to the CFO
        - SLT and ELT should schedule regular visits to every department and station (i.e. not only station visits)
- A staff forum involving grey book (operational) and non-operational (support and corporate) staff should be set up
    - Members of the forum should be consulted on ongoing work related to organisational culture, for example the review of roles as part of the planned Strategic Workforce Strategy
- Actions to increase mutual understanding and respect between grey book (operational) and green book (support and corporate) staff should be considered
    - For example, a 'culture cafe' initiative could be established to enable accessible and informal conversations between human resources (HR) and operational staff on concerns, issues, feedback or queries, including on workplace culture — this has already been established in North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS)
- Feedback should be consistently recorded, acted upon, with any actions or outcomes reported back, creating a loop of actionable change with a focus on continuous improvement

- Updates could be published in a regular 'you said, we did' format
- The adoption of a MAWWFRS uniform which includes green book (support and corporate) staff should be considered
  - The aim of a single uniform would be to reduce visible divisions, particularly between 'white shirts' and 'blue shirts' (i.e. senior and junior operational staff), and between grey book (operational) and green book (support and corporate) staff

Strengthening governance and oversight
- Mid and West Wales's Fire and Rescue Authority (MAWWFRA) members should take a more active role within MAWWFRS processes to enhance oversight and accountability
  - This could include requiring MAWWFRA representation on Transfer and Promotion Panels and Professional Standards Board meetings
- Despite concluding in 2018 that Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities' (FRA) governance structures were in need of reform, and intervening in South Wales's FRA following the publication of their culture review, the Welsh Government has not taken forward its proposals
  - We therefore recommend that the Welsh Government urgently puts in place governance reforms for FRAs

Investing in every individual's development

Management and leadership training
- All individuals in management positions or with management responsibilities should undertake leadership and management training, which is refreshed regularly
- Training on handling difficult conversations should be made mandatory for all those with management responsibilities
- Targeted training on identifying and responding to welfare concerns — including mental health awareness, accommodating neurodiversity, and work-life balance — should be delivered to managers on a regular basis

Improving development and progression opportunities for green book (support and corporate) staff
- Tailored development programmes for green book (support and corporate) staff should be established and clearly communicated to all green book staff
  - The development of the tailored pathways should be based on the findings of the planned review of green book (support and corporate) pathways, using engagement with staff to inform findings, actions, and desired outcomes
- Opportunities to open roles currently reserved for grey book (operational) staff to green book (support and corporate) staff should be explored
  - The Business Fire Safety and Community Safety Departments can be used as a good practice example of how this could be implemented

Fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce

Increasing diversity of thought and experience within the workforce
- A review should be conducted on the extent of operational competencies required for all roles which involve management responsibilities, identifying opportunities to open roles to those without firefighting experience
- Two-tier entry should be implemented for those roles which do not require operational competencies (after above review), allowing direct entry to roles with management responsibilities without firefighting experience

Improving cultural competence
- The All Wales Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Group should be expanded to focus on cultural issues affecting Welsh fire and rescue services (FRSs)
  - The similar cultural issues affecting all FRSs in Wales could be more effectively tackled by a cross-Wales group which would allow for the sharing of experiences and learning from each FRS's cultural journey
  - The cross-Wales group might include public sector partners, including police forces or ambulance trusts, who have had similar experiences and useful learning to share
- The content and delivery method of MAWWFRS's equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) training should be reviewed in line with staff feedback on its usefulness and applicability, as well as input from the All Wales Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Group
  - Based on this review, an updated training offer should be developed, with a focus on building cultural competence
  - This should include mandatory training on neurodiversity and violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV), and an understanding of the importance of this internally and in delivering services to and safeguarding the community

Promoting inclusive workplace practices
- Staff networks should be provided with direct lines of communication and feedback to ELT, with the aim of amplifying the voices of diverse groups within the organisation and improving the representation of diverse views at a senior level
- Mentoring within MAWWFRS should be formalised by implementing a future leaders development scheme for grey book (operational) and green book (support and corporate) staff
  - This should include opportunities for staff to self-nominate and shadow other business areas, as well as mentoring training for potential mentors
- A reverse mentoring scheme should be put in place, where more junior staff mentor senior staff across MAWWFRS
  - This would help challenge the idea that only senior employees have something to teach, and help break down divisions between junior and senior staff more broadly

Increasing diversity in recruitment
- A sustained and focused programme to increase the representation of women, particularly within grey book (operational) roles, should be developed
    - This should include greater use of positive action as needed
- Service-wide understanding on the importance of a diverse workforce and how positive action supports this goal should be improved
    - This could be implemented via a 'culture cafe' as well as new lines of communication (see above recommendations) and revised EDI training (see recommendation below)
    - An up-to-date review of the adherence of MAWWFRS's diversity and inclusion approaches with the Equality Act 2010 and Well-being of Future Generations Act, and an analysis of how more positive action initiatives could help support the service's adherence with both pieces of legislation, should be completed

Cultivating fairness and accountability in disciplinary processes

- Thresholds for determining whether reports necessitate informal or formal processes should be developed and included in MAWWFRS's discipline policy
- MAWWFRS's discipline policy should also clearly set out when complainants can expect to hear about the outcome of complaints, what information will and will not be included, and the reasons for this
    - This information should be consistently provided to complainants at the point of reporting
- Guidance on investigation procedures (for both formal and informal disciplinary issues) should clearly set out how impartiality will be ensured, including the disclosure of any potential conflicts of interest and how these would be mitigated
- The role, remit and membership of the Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer and Professional Standards Board should be clarified and communicated to all staff, explicitly detailing the principles and parameters through which they operate
- The role of HR advisors in disciplinary processes should be expanded and clearly explained in relevant policies, and cascaded to all staff
- Line management training should be updated to reflect the changes recommended above. This is so all those with line management responsibilities understand the disciplinary process and when and how to use it

Improving the Speak Up anonymous reporting line

- Upon publication of Carmarthenshire County Council's internal audit of the Speak Up line, the approach of how anonymous complaints are made through the Speak Up system should be refined, with considerations made for:
  - Complaints being triaged through the HR department, rather than being directly shared with the Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer
  - Minor issues warranting management interventions should be dealt with by divisional HR advisors in collaboration with line managers, while anything warranting a formal investigation procedure being dealt with by the Professional Standards and Resolutions Officer as usual

Improving the transparency, fairness, and effectiveness of promotion and transfer processes

Improving communication and transparency
- The membership of the Transfer and Promotion Panel (TPP) should be reviewed with the aim of increasing its diversity
- Feedback should be provided to all candidates following promotion and transfer decisions
  - The process for providing feedback should be clearly set out in relevant policies
- An independent third party should sit on the TPP for a limited time following the publication of this review, to demonstrate senior level commitment to improving transparency
- A clear competency framework outlining the skills required for each role/rank/grade should be developed and communicated to all staff to improve the objectivity of decision-making
  - The competency framework should include people management skills for all roles where line/people management is expected

Reforming the use of temporary contracts
- Temporary contracts should be limited to six months, with explicit justification for any roles not made permanent after this period
  - The process for returning to substantive roles should be standardised across departments
- Staff on temporary contracts should have access to the same internal training opportunities as those on permanent contracts
- The use of temporary promotions/transfers within corporate departments should be formalised to ensure consistency, including a clarification in terms of the process for returning to permanent positions

Prioritising staff welfare

- The development of the employee wellbeing strategy (currently underway) must be urgently prioritised
  - The strategy should set out how the welfare of staff at MAWWFRS is managed across grey book (operational) and green book (support and corporate) roles
- The disciplinary policy should be updated to include all the support options available to complainants and those who have had complaints made against them, beyond union representation
- Welfare officers who support staff during disciplinary procedures should be provided with bespoke training which covers the relevant processes and policies, and how to best support the wellbeing of staff going through disciplinary processes
- A review of the counselling service provided to MAWWFRS employees should be undertaken, which addresses feedback received from staff
  - The review should include an analysis of average waiting times for counselling

Developing efficient and sector-leading processes

Digitising and modernising workflows
- Any remaining paper-based systems or processes should be transitioned to digital platforms
- Investment should be made in IT systems that enhance cross-departmental collaboration
- Staff should be offered prompt training on new systems and procedures, focusing on good data management practices

Making the best use of data for continuous improvement
- A dedicated project team should be established to analyse organisational data and generate insights on workforce management and performance
  - Findings from this project team should feed into cultural change initiatives and evaluation, in addition to general monitoring

Appendix A: Terms of reference

The review's terms of reference were to:

- Undertake an assessment of the organisation's current position in relation to Fenella Morris KC's findings and other relevant studies regarding workplace culture; staff satisfaction and motivation; staff engagement; promotion arrangements; grievance arrangements; and workforce diversity.
- Consider the outcomes of work already commissioned by both organisations in these areas, such as staff engagement surveys and focus groups and the next steps proposed in response.
- Identify and prioritise opportunities for improvement, with indicative timelines for implementation.
- Engage fully and openly with current and former staff and with other interested parties as part of the above. All such engagement will have the ability to be conducted through the medium of English or Welsh.
- Engage and involve appropriately the relevant trade unions and staff organisations in this process.
- Produce a report which will be published in full, except for any details which may identify individuals.