

Written Evidence for Senedd Cymru, Equality and Social Justice Committee

Submitted by the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust

March 2024

Introduction

1. The Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Equality and Social Justice Committee to support its inquiry into Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in Wales. This evidence responds to the Terms of Reference outlined by the committee and focuses particularly on the inquiry elements detailed below:
 - The extent governance arrangements contributed to the failings identified in the SWFRS culture review.
 - The capacity and capability of FRAs to change the existing management structures and practices that have been identified as potential areas of concern, and their willingness to deliver cultural change.
 - The effectiveness of mechanisms for ensuring that evidence collected through inspections and reviews of FRSs by the Chief Fire Adviser and Inspector for Wales is used and acted upon and the arrangements for shared learning from inspections of FRSs undertaken in other UK nations, specifically in England, to inform policy.

2. In responding, the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust can reflect only on its own experience and learning, recognising that it is not familiar with the detail of the governance and culture of fire and rescue services, beyond what is outlined in the recently published review into the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service. The Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust is an NHS organisation and, therefore, its governance arrangements are wholly different from those of fire and rescue services. It is in this spirit that this evidence submission is made.

3. The Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (WAST) provides healthcare services for people across Wales, delivering high quality and patient-led clinical care, wherever and whenever needed. WAST attends more than 250,000 emergency calls a year, more than 50,000 urgent calls and transports more than 1.3 million non-emergency patients to some 200 treatment centres throughout Wales and England. Its dedicated people are the organisation's biggest asset, comprising around 4000 employees and 1000 volunteers. WAST is also the provider of the national 111 service.

Welsh Ambulance Service: Culture and Cultural Reform

4. Following an externally facilitated cultural audit and an initial survey that explored the climate of sexual safety in the autumn of 2022, the Welsh Ambulance Service has committed to cultural reform, leadership development and improving psychological safety across the organisation.
5. The audit and survey confirmed that, in line with many other organisations, the Welsh Ambulance Service has work to do to ensure its workplace culture is one in which everyone is able to thrive. It is acknowledged that poor behaviour may have been tolerated in the past, but is not, nor ever has been, acceptable.
6. In order to bring staff along on a journey of cultural reform, it is important to focus on education and support, pro-actively addressing poor behaviour where there is clear harm but looking to achieve a genuine cultural shift which is not predicated on fear of retribution, but on reflection and learning. Processes and policies were already in place to investigate concerns raised, but it was clear that the absence of a safe to speak up culture which includes a lack of trust from

affected colleagues, was having a silencing effect. From listening to affected colleagues, the organisation has learned and understood that dominant social norms have normalised discriminatory behaviour masked as banter, perpetuated by the strong sense of identity and belonging present in ambulance service culture that can create fear of social rejection.

Creating Space, Building Trust & Listening

7. The Welsh Ambulance Service has responded to that cultural audit through a commitment to empowering and amplifying the voices of lived experience, achieved through the launch of an employee-led network (inclusive of students and volunteers).

8. The purpose of the network and appointment of advocates is to embrace survivor leadership, enable a learning approach to change throughout what is a geographically dispersed organisation, better understand and remove barriers to speaking up, identify harmful power imbalances, signpost to appropriate support, and provide a safe space for colleagues to be seen and heard. More broadly, the WAST Voices Network represents a range of different perspectives, experiences, harnesses the spirit of inclusion and plays a key role in the move towards cultural maturity.

Organisational Learning and Approach

9. In recognising the impact that certain incidents may have had on individuals, a sincere and unreserved apology has been extended by the Trust Board. In so doing, the intention is not to be defensive but to genuinely acknowledge and learn from these experiences. This acknowledgment is a crucial step in fostering a culture of trust and collaboration within WAST. By taking ownership of organisational shortcomings and committing to continuous improvement, the aim is to build a workplace where everyone feels secure, respected, and

supported. This journey of introspection and accountability is a vital aspect of the broader efforts to create a workplace that is not only safe but truly inclusive and empathetic, as clearly demonstrated in the Trust's People and Culture Plan.

10. Drawing on ideas for improvement shared through the survey and nudge science, the WAST Voices Network and Organisational Development Team have introduced a range of different interventions, including a new Freedom to Speak Up process (including an anonymous reporting platform), reverse mentoring (connecting senior leaders with lived experience), Empowerment Pairs (mentoring to support colleagues experiencing imposter syndrome and improving confidence), the development of sexual safety guiding principles, a poster campaign, the launch of a podcast which delves into societal themes and their link to the workplace, hosting regular guest speaker events, the delivery of bespoke learning sessions that include active bystander training and facilitating topical group discussions at all new colleague welcome events.

11. It is also recognised that these interventions do not just apply to improving the climate of sexual safety, but also support the organisation's efforts to improve the working environment of all staff, foster improved relationships between managers and staff and improve employee satisfaction and staff retention. It is recognised that this is a long-term process and that this cultural shift will take a significant length of time.

Governance and Accountability

12. The WAST Board and Executive Leadership Team (ELT) have been fully informed and supportive of this work and were key in commissioning the listening exercise conducted in 2021 that surfaced issues within the service of bullying and harassment. The recommendations from that report lead to the sexual

safety survey and ELT was fully briefed from an early stage in relation to the significant themes arising.

13. The approach to creating space for listening and being guided by those affected by the issues has ensured open communication channels and ownership of issues with the service. Over the course of the last three years, this has shaped the Board development programme, ensured frequent discussion at a senior level, and the development of cultural metrics, both qualitative and quantitative, to demonstrate meaningful culture change. There was a conscious decision to move away from establishing a discrete and concrete action plan devised by senior leaders, but to engage in a dynamic process co-created with our Voices Network.

14. The cultural metrics and themes have multiple appropriate reporting mechanisms. The People and Culture Committee receives quarterly updates on the themes, amongst other people and culture metrics; the Chief Executive, Non-Executive Director lead for people and culture and the Director for People and Culture, receive quarterly Guardian reports. ELT has monthly updates on cultural metrics, alternating between quantitative and qualitative each month and including measures looking at EDI issues, recruitment, employee relations and absence for example.

15. The pivotal role of our Chief Executive and the unanimous endorsement from the Trust Board have been instrumental in driving a commitment to improving the organisation's culture. Senior leaders have taken a bold stance in championing this cause and their unwavering support is not merely symbolic; it is a tangible expression of the organisation's commitment to cultural transformation. Recognising the need for open and candid discussions, podcasts have been developed, focussing on conversations about sexual safety

featuring directors, fostering an environment where insights and learning can flow freely.

16. As part of the speaking up culture, the Chief Executive, lead Freedom to Speak Up Safely Non-Executive Director (NED) and Director of People and Culture receive a verbal and written update directly from the lead Guardian about key themes and patterns of reporting through the various routes to speak up. This is a key National Guardian's Office (NGO) recommendation and also a key recommendation from other cultural reviews to ensure senior leaders are aware of themes. In addition, the Director for People and Culture also has monthly conversations with the CEO to discuss themes that arise from EDI, Culture and People Services teams.
17. The Trust's People and Culture Committee has a keen focus on issues of culture, receiving regular reports and conducting deep dives on culturally related issues in order that Committee members, and the wider Board, can scrutinise work in this area and seek the relevant assurance.
18. The removal of traditional hierarchies and boundaries underscores the Trust's commitment to listening and learning from every level of the organisation. This approach has facilitated a more inclusive and collaborative atmosphere, allowing for the exchange of ideas and experiences without fear of retribution. The endorsement of the Trust Board is not just a top-down directive; it is a collective and genuine commitment to driving positive change. The Board's active involvement in dismantling barriers and fostering open communication reflects the organisation's ethos of shared responsibility and collaborative leadership in pursuit of a safer and more inclusive workplace.

19. The Welsh Ambulance Service's Executive Leadership Team, Board and People and Culture Committee all hold space for discussion, support and learning, particularly in relation to areas where they may be unaffected. The lived experience presentations and case studies from colleagues and service users are carefully considered with rationale as to the impact on the person presenting, including consent and recognition of the potential power imbalance and any detriment in participating; and careful recording of outcome and follow up. The NGO mantra of Speak Up, Listen Up, Follow Up provides a useful framework.

Broader Learning

20. Owning the problem in its entirety, no matter how uncomfortable that has been, was WAST's starting point for change. Organisations that have previously committed to 'stamping out' such behaviour have failed, as demonstrated in the [Casey](#), [Afzal](#) and [Atherton](#) reports. Cultural awakenings are continuing to take place across different industries and sectors, largely driven by Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012) activism. A healthcare contextual factor also influencing how awareness is raised throughout the organisation, is a belief that shifting attitudes will have a positive impact on patient care and the overall [gender health gap](#) in Wales.

21. The Trust has been open and transparent throughout the journey so far and took a proactive approach with the media to demonstrate our commitment to positive change, working with [BBC Wales](#) to highlight this work in August 2023. The organisation has been recognised by an extensive range of external stakeholders including the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the College of Paramedics, and the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives as leading the sector with the approach and commitment to future-proofing the

Welsh Ambulance Service's culture by taking full ownership of the past and present.

22. WAST is committed to an ambulance sector-wide approach to [Reducing Misogyny & Improving Sexual Safety](#). The Association of Ambulance Chief Executives recently provided oral evidence and submitted [written evidence](#) which highlights increasing concerns, to a UK Parliamentary call for submissions.

Conclusion

23. The Welsh Ambulance Service's key learning has been about owning the findings and apologising to those affected, the importance of leadership in all areas of the organisation, engagement in discussions, reflection and creating space, but above all listening and accepting that, as an organisation, there is some distance still to be travelled.