

Report to	North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority
Date	20 October, 2025
Lead Officer	Dawn Docx, Chief Fire Officer
Contact Officer	Elin Hughes, Culture Champion
Subject	Focus on Cultural Improvement via the Internal Promotion Process



PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 To provide 'a deep dive' into the changes made to North Wales Fire and Rescue Service's (the Service) promotion processes since 2021. The report outlines progress to date, actions taken in response to the CREST report recommendations, and the next steps to further strengthen transparency, fairness, and consistency.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2 Since 2021, the Service has undertaken a regular review of promotion processes in response to concerns raised by staff and representative bodies. The CREST report subsequently reinforced these concerns, identifying areas for improvement around transparency, perceptions of positive action, consistency of development, and fairness in decision making.
- 3 In response, a series of improvements have been implemented. These include clearer criteria for promotions, regular reviews of the promotions policy, alignment with the National Fire Chief's Council (NFCC) Leadership Framework, anonymised recruitment, inclusive interview pilots, and structured feedback mechanisms. Independent oversight and external reviews have also been introduced to build confidence in the process.
- 4 Next steps will focus on embedding these changes, finalising the Workforce Representation Strategy, implementing recommendations from independent reviews, and ensuring regular engagement with representative bodies to maintain trust and collaboration.

OBSERVATIONS FROM EXECUTIVE PANEL/AUDIT COMMITTEE

- 5 The information in this report has not been presented previously to North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) members.

RECOMMENDATION

6 It is recommended that Members:

- i) **Note the progress made, endorse the ongoing programme of improvements, and support the next steps as outlined in this report.**

BACKGROUND

- 7 Concerns were raised in 2021 by staff and representative bodies, particularly the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), around the transparency and consistency of the promotions process. In response, a programme of work was launched to review and improve both temporary and permanent promotions.
- 8 Gap analysis work was carried out using sector specific independent culture reports, including the His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report on Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services (2023), as well as individual service reports from South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (2024), Dorset and Wiltshire (2023), and London Fire Brigade (2022). Promotion processes were a recurring theme in many of the recommendations for improvement. The Service has reviewed these findings and implemented positive changes where appropriate.
- 9 The CREST report subsequently identified further concerns, including that *'there was a perception that favouritism still may take precedence over competence in operational promotion decisions'* and that *'promotion and transfer decisions lacked transparency, fuelling perceptions of bias and feelings of uncertainty'*.
- 10 The Service has made significant progress in addressing these issues.

INFORMATION

Changes Implemented Since 2021

- 11 A comprehensive review of the promotions process was undertaken to strengthen consistency, transparency, and fairness across the organisation. As part of this review, clearer criteria for temporary promotions were piloted to ensure a more robust and equitable approach. In 2021, a new promotions policy 'OPS-P02-2021 Recruitment and internal promotions' was introduced to support long-term succession planning which was successfully applied in Watch and Crew Manager promotions. Following regular reviews and updates the latest version 'Substantive Promotion to WDS Management Roles - Operational and Control Staff' was published in March 2025 which reflects learning and best practice.

- 12 To ensure nationally consistent standards, promotion interview questions were aligned with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Leadership Framework. Scenario-based questions were introduced to provide greater insight into candidate decision-making and leadership capability. In addition, external consultant input was sought to validate the appropriateness of the questioning for supervisory and middle management roles. Regular working group meetings are now held throughout promotion processes to maintain transparency and compliance, with structured post process reviews conducted to capture lessons learned and inform continuous improvement.
- 13 The process has also been enhanced to support staff development. Observers have been invited to sit on interview panels to gain valuable experience, while HR representatives are now involved throughout all stages of the process, from planning through to appointment. HR attendance on every interview panel provides a quality assurance mechanism, and the required composition of panels for each role is explicitly set out in the procedure to ensure compliance and consistency.
- 14 Recruitment training opportunities have also been expanded. Regular sessions are offered to all staff to support application writing and interview preparation to support their development, while panel members receive specific training to promote fairness and consistency in candidate assessment.
- 15 A further key development was the introduction of the Manager Endorsement for Promotions form. This provides a structured and transparent mechanism for managers to formally support candidates by confirming eligibility, evidencing competence, and identifying development needs. The form enhances accountability within the process and reinforces fairness and consistency in decision making at all stages.

Responding to the CREST Report (2025)

- 16 In relation to the promotion process, the CREST report highlighted concerns that “there was a perception that favouritism may still take precedence over competence in operational promotion decisions” and that “promotion and transfer decisions lacked transparency, fuelling perceptions of bias and feelings of uncertainty” (p 38–42). The report also included a number of specific recommendations aimed at improving the fairness, transparency, and consistency of the promotion process.

Progress to Date

- 17 Significant steps have been taken to address the concerns raised in the CREST report. A draft Workforce Representation Strategy has been developed to ensure fair access, inclusive development, and transparent processes while reflecting community diversity.
- 18 An inclusive interview pilot commenced in January 2025. This initiative is part of the ongoing commitment to creating a supportive and equitable recruitment process for all candidates by providing candidates with preparation time to review the questions for 30 minutes ahead of the interview, access to key reading materials to aid their preparation, and opportunities for post process feedback. In July 2025, anonymised recruitment was introduced, removing identifying details from applications to ensure merit-based shortlisting and reduce perceived bias.
- 19 Following the Station and Group Managers promotion process in June 2025, an independent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) led post-process candidate experience review was conducted. This review gathered candidate feedback via anonymous surveys and one-to-one discussions with a neutral third party to inform improvements. In addition, an external expert review has been commissioned to oversee the current Watch Manager, Crew Manager, and Control promotion processes, covering all stages from shortlisting through to postings which is also mentioned below in the next steps.
- 20 Structured feedback and individual development plans have been introduced to standardise support for candidates. A standardised feedback form is being piloted across all recruitment and promotion processes to ensure consistent quality and provide actionable advice.
- 21 Furthermore, promotional processes for operational staff now include the completion of a series of leadership and managerial mandatory training courses delivered by HR Specialists, which candidates must complete to be eligible to apply.

Next Steps

- 22 Following the Group and Station Managers promotion board, findings from the candidate experience review will be assessed, and recommendations implemented where appropriate to enhance transparency and improve the overall promotion process. In addition, an external expert review of the Watch Manager, Crew Manager, and Watch Manager Control promotion processes is currently in progress, with any recommended changes adopted to strengthen fairness, consistency, and alignment with best practice.

- 23 The Workforce Representation Strategy will be finalised and embedded to ensure that workforce planning and promotions continue to reflect organisational diversity objectives. HR Specialists are actively engaging with staff during station/department visits to discuss positive action, clarifying its legal and ethical basis, highlighting its role in promoting equality and inclusion, and distinguishing it from positive discrimination. These discussions encourage open dialogue, share research on the benefits of diverse teams, and invite employee input to support fair access and opportunities for all. Additionally, the outcomes of the new inclusive approach to interview and feedback form pilots will be evaluated, with consideration given to permanent implementation where the evidence supports improved candidate experience and equitable assessment.
- 24 The wholetime recruitment campaign, scheduled for September 2026, will be delivered under the oversight of a dedicated Task and Finish Group to ensure effective planning, coordination, and outcomes. Feedback from both promotion and recruitment campaigns will continue to be regularly reviewed to inform continuous improvement and ensure best practice is embedded across all processes.
- 25 To further strengthen organisational values and collaboration, corporate staff will be incorporated as panel members in future promotion interviews for operational staff. This initiative will support the embedding of organisational values in day-to-day practice and enhance cross-departmental engagement throughout the promotions process, as well as aid their development.

CONCLUSION

- 26 Since 2021, the Service has made and is continuing to make substantial progress in strengthening its promotion processes. Key changes have improved transparency, fairness, and consistency, directly addressing concerns raised by staff, the FBU, and the CREST Report.
- 27 The programme of work now requires ongoing support to ensure these improvements are embedded, trusted, and sustainable.

IMPLICATIONS

Well-being Objectives	Future Service provision could be impacted if the concerns highlighted by the review are not addressed
Budget	Currently within existing budgets
Legal	The Service is working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure that it complies with its legal duties under the Equality Act 2010
Staffing	Nil
Equalities/ Human Rights/ Welsh Language	Nil
Risks	If the programme of improvements is not fully embedded and sustained, there is a risk that concerns around transparency, fairness, and consistency may re-emerge, leading to reduced trust and confidence in the promotion process among staff and representative bodies.