



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Home Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Fire and Rescue Services, HC 505

Wednesday 1 May 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 May 2024.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; Simon Fell; Carolyn Harris; Kim Johnson; Tim Loughton.

Questions 249-276

### Witness

**I:** Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, Chief Fire Officer, West Sussex Fire and Rescue Services; Chair of Improvement Committee, National Fire Chiefs Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[National Fire Chiefs Council](#)



## Examination of witness

Witness: Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton

**Q249 Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Home Affairs Committee. This is our final session in our inquiry into the fire and rescue service. We are very pleased to have with us Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton. We want to find out from Dr Cohen-Hatton, as the chief fire officer at West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, about the cultural change within that service, and also a more general understanding about leadership in the fire and rescue service and how it is held to account. You are very welcome, Dr Cohen-Hatton.

I would like to start off by seeking some advice from you, because I know that you are also the lead for the National Fire Chiefs Council on its improvement committee. Last week, there was a story running about chief fire officers and senior fire officers in Shropshire and messages that had been leaked from a WhatsApp group. Some of the things in that WhatsApp group referred to threats and wanting to kill female colleagues, with things like calling women “lazy cows”, “fecking bint”, “useless”, and “I would still like to kill her, buddy”—messages like that. The Committee has been quite taken with the evidence we have heard throughout the inquiry about some of the cultural issues within the fire and rescue service. It struck me as being particularly interesting that the people involved in those exchanges are still in place; they have not been suspended by Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service. Are you surprised by that?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** First of all, I would say that we were all really shocked to read the news report. It made for incredibly difficult reading. I would also say that due process has to go through within that service, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment directly on another colleague, but it is not appropriate for colleagues to be talking about one another in that way, and it was incredibly difficult to watch.

The other point it is important to recognise is that in the fire and rescue service, we are a microcosm of wider society. We still have huge issues with systemic and structural inequalities in wider society. I have also experienced some incredibly challenging conversations with and language from other colleagues throughout my career—I have served for 23 years now—but I have also had some incredible support from within the fire and rescue service. I would say that I experience worse behaviour from people outside the fire and rescue service.

I will give you an example of that. There are comments underneath news articles about me that do not relate to my position in the fire and rescue service. They are not articles about gender equality in any way, but the



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

language and abuse in them is incredibly gendered and intended to humiliate and degrade. I would argue that the abuse that people get who are different in some way from the majority of people in a workplace when they are from an under-represented group comes from all sections of society; it is certainly not just within the service. Recognising that, we absolutely must do better within the service and we have to be better than that. However, the pushback we have is that we must be better than that against that wider perspective as well.

**Q250 Chair:** Returning to my original question about those WhatsApp exchanges, if firefighters in your fire and rescue service were exchanging those messages and you found out about it, would those firefighters be suspended while an investigation was taking place?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** They would absolutely be subject to a disciplinary investigation. Whenever we suspend somebody, we do a risk assessment, and we take into account a number of factors within it: the risk of them remaining in position; the risk to their own mental health from suspending them; and the risk to others' mental health from not suspending them. It is really difficult to give a cut-and-dried yes or no in the face of those things without having gone through that due process and risk assessment. What I would say with certainty is that if that were to have happened in my service, a disciplinary investigation would absolutely be happening as a result.

**Chair:** It seems to me that leadership is so important—that is one of the key things that we have found. It is about setting the tone and setting the culture. It strikes me that if you have the leaders of an organisation exchanging messages in the way that those were being exchanged, that is of huge concern. I am very surprised that there has not been a suspension at this point to carry out that investigation. Thank you for your thoughts on that.

**Q251 Tim Loughton:** Dr Cohen-Hatton, you have been doing quite a turnaround job in West Sussex, and many of the things that you have found there are typical of some of the cultural problems that are now increasingly coming out in the fire service. We have seen some of the evidence, confidential and direct, which has been quite shocking. Do you want to give an account of some of the problems that you have found, and why so far you seem to be turning things around quite rapidly? What is behind that?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** I joined West Sussex back in 2019 following a very difficult inspection report. For comparison, out of that inspection report, we were probably the second-worst performing fire and rescue service in the country. Out of 10 causes of concern that the HMFRS had given out nationally, four of them were in West Sussex. Two of them had implications for public safety, and two of them related to people and culture, so we were starting from a really challenging position.

When I landed in that service, I was met with a workforce of people who, frankly, had not been set up to succeed. They had had an incredibly



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

difficult time. There were excessive cuts that had happened previously. We had a letter from the Minister that recognised that and advised us to review the resources that we had against our statutory functions. However, that meant that we had a workforce that had been desperately trying to do things against a backdrop in which they were not able to succeed. They then had their efforts replayed back to them in language such as “inadequate”, and understandably so, because people had had an incredibly difficult time in that service.

When I landed in the service, a number of things needed to happen. Absolutely first and foremost was fixing those areas that had implications for public safety, but that was against a backdrop of needing to improve the culture. There were people who had experienced bullying. There were people who had accepted a culture where the behaviours were not aligned with the values of the service. People should not have to go into a workplace and have that kind of experience. Being a firefighter is an incredible privilege, because you are trusted by people to know what to do when they are having the worst day that they have ever had. As a leader, it is really important to give people the kind of environment that they need to succeed and be able to do those really difficult things that we ask.

In terms of what we did, there was a huge aspect of breaking down the service into its component parts and putting it back together again so that it worked. To change the culture, people have to have a different experience. Culture is not set by a strategy that you write on a piece of paper; it is set by the experiences people have every single day, and what day they believe they are likely to have when they come into work. We knew we had to change some of the machinery within the service to be able to give people different experiences. People felt that the promotion processes were not fair, so we had to completely revamp them so that they were fair and transparent. We had to review the grievance process and the disciplinary processes to make sure that they were fair and transparent. We had to upskill people so that they could conduct investigations more appropriately, better and more fairly.

There was a huge amount in the machinery—you can’t hinge it just on heroic leadership. It is not that one person says something that others find inspiring, and then you’ve fixed it—you have to put the machinery together to give people a different experience.

**Q252 Tim Loughton:** Going back to the grievance side, one thing that struck us in the evidence is that we have heard particularly shocking examples of clear misogyny and racism, yet there is a culture where if you put your head above the parapet to complain about that, there is a conspiracy of management and others, including union officials covering up, that is weighed in, and you can basically wave goodbye to your career. That has actually been said in those terms to some of the victims we have seen.

How have you changed, or how are you in the process of changing, the grievance procedures in West Sussex so that some of the people we have heard evidence from could feel safer in coming forward with genuine grievances without it effectively being the end of their career? There



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

seems to be a network—we are trying to get to the bottom of who is responsible for it—of senior managers and people in positions of responsibility, who are still in positions of responsibility, that cover it all up. Then, when the inspector appears, they put on a good show, the inspector goes away having ticked all the boxes, and nothing is done about it.

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** That is a really good question. That is absolutely something I have recognised. I have spoken very openly about my own experiences and how difficult I found it as a firefighter coming up through the ranks to challenge some of the experiences I was having. It was not necessarily because I didn't think anything would be done about it—quite the opposite. I was concerned about how I would be perceived by people around me. There is something about recognising that it is not just the processes that impact on this. This is about the culture.

One of our priorities within our service aimed at tackling precisely that is to create a sense of psychological safety. We take that so seriously that it is one of our key priorities in our community risk management plan, which is our overarching strategy for the service. To create a sense of psychological safety, you create an environment where people can speak up and challenge. When I talk about psychological safety, people often mistake it for coming to work and feeling happy. That would be a lovely by-product if it was the case. But when you have real psychological safety, people are prepared to come into work and have a difficult conversation knowing that they will not be derided or humiliated for it. As a consequence, they also feel more able to talk about mistakes and failures. When you are talking about those openly, you are more able to challenge them and do something about them.

I will share a specific piece of work going on at the moment that is aimed at helping with psychological safety—precisely this piece. We have 82 teams around West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, which means that you potentially have 82 different subcultures. When we talk about the culture of the organisation, you may have an overarching culture or a set of beliefs and expectations for the way you can behave, but when you go into work and you are working with a smaller team of people, you might have a different culture, subculture, or level of acceptability of what you can say or how you can behave within that group of people. For us, it is not good enough just to say, "We are going to set our standard. We've got a clear behavioural framework. We'll be clear about what bullying is and is not." We can do all those bits and pieces, but if we are not serious about having conversations at the sub-culture level, it will not matter.

Q253 **Tim Loughton:** How do you know that is working?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We are doing some work on that at the moment. We have brought in some external people to do the work because we recognise that we do not have the skill sets within our service to be able to do that. The key is not just to identify what the culture is, but to mediate between those people, to challenge the culture and to change it. That is still ongoing, but the early indications have been incredibly positive. It is



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

not enough just to go in and do it once. It is also based on team coaching and leadership coaching throughout the service. The idea is for them to go in and have those conversations about what the expectation is within that group of people, and what the behaviour looks like. They then mediate between people to repair relationships and identify relationships that might be out of kilter with our values as a service, and they then return to those teams to do further coaching work. On top of that, we are doing the work with our own staff so that our own managers will have the skillsets to go in and do that.

In terms of how we know it is working, there are a couple of ways that are important for us to monitor. We use a people and culture dashboard, which is now best practice—it is on the NFCC positive practice portal and a number of other fire and rescue services use it as well. That people and culture dashboard breaks down all of our datasets by protected characteristics as well, so that we can identify whether there is any evidence that a particular group within the service is being disproportionately impacted or affected by anything that we are doing. That is one aspect of that.

On top of that, it is really important not to look just at data, because you might miss stuff. If you are not looking at the right data, there are things that you might not capture. We also run a series of focus groups that we now repeat every other year, so that we can make sure that we are listening to the service. If there are things happening that we are not aware of, we are getting that feedback through. Again, I go back to the machinery piece. This is done in a really systematic way, which we can then feed back into the service.

On top of that, we also have what we call a shadow board. That is a group of staff, many of whom have lived experience of being under-represented within the service in some way. They have all of our decision-making papers before we do as an executive board. They meet, review them and comment on them. I describe it as, when we are making a decision, we are throwing a pebble into a pond. We are so focused on where the pebble lands that we might miss the ripple effects. By having that team of people that reviews those, and then comes into our meeting and feeds back to us, it is telling us where all the ripples are that we might otherwise be blind to. We have lots of measures to indicate whether it is working, and I would not be so virtuous as to sit in front of you and tell you that it is fixed and that this will solve everything. Culture change is ongoing. We have to be constantly looking at this, constantly alive to what the experiences of our people are, and constantly responding to that. We might do things that do not work, and that is okay, because we can recognise that and go back and do something differently.

Q254 **Carolyn Harris:** How successful do you think you are in doing this?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** In terms of how successful we are, I think that it has had a significant impact. In the last focus group we ran, 89% of staff fed back that they felt like the culture in their teams and departments had improved, so we have some positive signs of success. When we first



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

started the culture work—I must stress that we have been doing this since 2019, so it has certainly not been just a recent event—we noticed an initial spike in the grievances that we were having, because we had changed the process and were talking about what we could and could not accept in work. That was a sign to us that people had more faith in the system and that they were more likely to use the system. In addition, we run a restorative approach, so it is not just about the formal sanctions that we can give. We are looking at people’s emotional wellbeing as a result of going through the process. We are looking at ways in which we can change our own policies and procedures, if they have had an impact as well. We are looking at ways in which we can make sure that, morally, those wrongs have been righted.

In terms of how we know these things are working, we are constantly checking the data. We constantly have those focus groups that are ongoing. We have a connectivity plan within the service that means people have an opportunity to feed into and connect with one another within the service, from which we are constantly taking feedback. It is a constant temperature check. There are really positive indications, such as people now being proud of the service today where they absolutely were not four or five years ago. For me, those are all indications that things are working, but as I said, there is not a silver bullet. We have to keep focusing on this.

I have to say that doing this takes resources. Leadership is really important. I am accountable, but all of us are responsible for the culture and everybody has a role to play through the interactions that they have with one another. The really intensive cultural work that I am describing to you takes resource. I am fortunate in being a fire and rescue service embedded within a county council. I have been able to lean into the council and get resources to do the work that I have been describing to you. Not all fire and rescue services have been so successful in that.

**Q255 Carolyn Harris:** I would like to talk about other fire services. We have had a lot of evidence from individuals who would not recognise what you have just described. We are not just talking about people who have minor grievances; we have heard from people who have experienced racism, misogyny, bullying and—for me, worse—sexual assault. We have heard from people who talk about wanting to drive into a wall and take their own life because the stuff they were reporting was being ignored. They were the subject of gossip among very many officers in the fire service, and their complaints were ignored and no action was taken.

For me, there is no bigger problem than when people are afraid to speak out publicly. If they have to come to us and ask for anonymity, that says to me that there is a huge problem, because they are not only fearful that the complaints they have already put in would be problematic but afraid to be seen to be making further complaints. How do you see that you will be able to rectify that, especially historical things? You can’t go back and undo a sexual assault. That person’s life is completely destroyed because of what happened under the watch of the fire service, yet that was not just ignored but brushed over. Somebody made the decision that the person responsible for that sexual assault should face



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

no punishment whatsoever, except for being allowed to retire quietly and go off into the wilderness. That cannot be right. That can't be allowed to continue. So how do you remedy that? How do you stop it continuing?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** I absolutely agree with you: it is completely unacceptable. One thing that fire and rescue services have now, on top of the whistleblowing policies and opportunities to whistleblow, is an independent reporting line. There are some quite tight parameters over what constitutes whistleblowing—it has to be in the public interest and it is protected by law—but, crucially, the complaint goes into the same service. Most fire and rescue services, mine included, now have an independent reporting line. Ours goes to an external organisation so that if somebody wants to make a complaint about something that they don't feel comfortable enough to raise within the service, they have that guarantee of anonymity, which is important.

I should say first and foremost that I am personally so sorry that people have had those experiences. They are experiences that I recognise as well, so I absolutely understand the gravity of them and how much they impact your everyday life—not just when you go into work but the entire lens through which you see the world. We need to do better as a sector. We have done some work in our service with historical experiences. Even if those people have left and they think something is historical, actually, you carry that with you. It is important to acknowledge that and give someone the closure that they need to be able to move on.

Q256 **Carolyn Harris:** The people from whom we have heard evidence, who would not give it publicly, would not recognise what you were saying. Their contemporary experience—what is happening now—is nothing like what you were explaining, and they are still afraid to come forward. So it is not that successful. It is not working right across the country, obviously.

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** I can't talk about other fire and rescue services and the success they have had, but I can talk about the experience that we have had in our service and the impact that I believe it is having. One thing I would say is that we as the NFCC are better now at sharing best practice. The interventions that I am talking about have been shared with the NFCC through the positive practice portal, and a number of them have now been adopted by fire and rescue services as well—I gave the example of the people and culture dashboard—so I would hope that the situation begins to improve.

Q257 **Carolyn Harris:** I think they would disagree with you. One last question. You talked about the public interest; what is the threshold for something being in the public interest? I would argue that in any workplace that is not offering support and protection for its staff, if they choose to whistleblow, that is in the public interest. What is the threshold?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** It is set out within law. Each incoming complaint would go into our legal department, and they would assess the threshold. But it is really important that we do not just rely on whistleblowing, which is why it is important to make the distinction between whistleblowing and





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the independent reporting line where people can report anything that they feel uncomfortable with.

Q258 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Dr Cohen-Hatton. I want to start by saying that we recognise the fact that the vast majority of firefighters and fire workers do an exemplary job—they put their lives on the line every single day—but we are looking at a toxic culture that exists at the moment. You mentioned the dashboard that is in place. I was curious about how that works, how that is monitored and who is responsible for overseeing it.

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We have a people and organisational development team within our service and they essentially own the dashboard. The dashboard breaks down a range of indicators by protected characteristic, and we are adding to it all the time. We will monitor sickness, for example, by protected characteristic, and we will monitor recruitment by protected characteristic and a range of other indicators—promotions and so on. Those are really important factors so we can make sure we are constantly checking.

Q259 **Kim Johnson:** Does that provide data in terms of the attrition levels of black officers or women officers who are leaving, and looking at the reasons for those who leave the service?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** The dashboard does break down the data. In terms of the reasons for leaving the service, we always conduct exit interviews, so we collect that data as well.

Q260 **Kim Johnson:** The Chair mentioned earlier the WhatsApp groups and the horrendous messages placed by senior officers. I would like to know what safeguarding the services have put in place to support the women those messages were aimed at. I know that is not your service, but what would generally happen in terms of safeguarding people and particularly women under those circumstances?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** While I cannot speak to that service specifically, can I give you an example of what we would do in our service, if that would be helpful to the Committee? In our service, if something like that happened, we would always allocate a welfare officer and we always take a person-centred approach to that. You cannot just have a policy that says, “This is all you will have if something like that happens,” because it depends completely on the individual, their experiences and the circumstances in which they find themselves. So having welfare officers is absolutely crucial within that.

We would be running a risk assessment around suspension, to ascertain whether suspension would be appropriate within the circumstances. We have a range of wellbeing interventions within our services as well, through not just employee support and occupational health services but a range of other interventions. But the most important thing within this is that the individual experiencing it feels safe and secure in the workplace. So a conversation with them would be at the absolute centre of this.

Q261 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Dr Cohen-Hatton, but I would suggest that those



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

women in Shropshire probably do not feel safe. As a former trade union official, I would say that the people responsible should have been suspended immediately, pending inquiry, to make sure those people were safe. But I will leave that one there.

My next question is about how confident you are about His Majesty's inspectorate and the job it does. We have heard examples of services getting rated "outstanding" and "good" and then literally weeks later we hear about the toxic culture of racism, bullying and sexual assault. Does the service need to be reviewed, looked at and changed?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** The inspectorate gives us a report that reflects the service at a moment in time, and it also measures a range of things, not just people. It is quite a broad review that inspectors do when they come into the services. In my experience, I have found the inspection regime to be helpful. It has provided levers for me as a chief fire officer for improvement that perhaps were not there previously. Certainly, following our inspection report back in 2018, we were able to access funding for improvement, which was absolutely instrumental in our improvement journey and the cultural work that we have been able to do. While I would say that there is always room for improvement in anything you do, in the grand scheme of things the move to an inspectorate for fire and rescue has been a helpful one.

Q262 **Kim Johnson:** Okay. I have a final question. We have heard harrowing evidence from serving firefighters in terms of racism, misogyny and bullying. What I find concerning is that it has spread across the country, so it says an awful lot about a toxic culture that has been allowed to develop in services. You talked about policies and procedures; it is great to have that, but implementing and taking decisive action are another thing. Are you seeing that happen at the moment?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We certainly are in our service. Since 2018, we have had 40 grievances, 60% of which have resulted in formal sanctions, including dismissals. So I am absolutely seeing that activity taking place. Doing that hand in hand with restorative practice is really important, though, because it is not just about the retribution or the justice for whatever has happened, but about how we have a workplace that is effective, with psychological safety moving forward, and about how we make sure that people thrive after those experiences. People should not be having those experiences—that much is clear—but this is about what we can do to change that and what we can do to make sure that they have a different experience afterwards as well.

Q263 **Simon Fell:** Thank you for joining us, Dr Cohen-Hatton. Some of the evidence we have heard has been about the importance of whistleblowing and people being able to tell their stories, but we have also heard about the challenges, with people who do come forward being accused of being a grass and so on. The culture does not encourage it. Will you talk a little about what you have done in your service to make that approach more acceptable and to make sure that people's voices are valued and heard?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** Absolutely. As I mentioned earlier, our focus has been on building psychological safety. That has been a theme throughout everything that we have been doing in the service. I now have a completely new leadership team, compared with the one that I started with in the service, and I think one of the things we have all been focused on as we have come into those positions is what we can do differently that will consider the impact on people. People are our biggest resource within the service—they make the service what it is—so making sure that they are taken care of as part and parcel of what we are doing has been at the forefront of everything. There has been that aspect.

In terms of how people feel and their confidence to use the processes, we previously had experiences of people being bullied. One of the first things that we did was to set out some really clear criteria for what bullying looked like, because some people being bullied did not even realise that they were being bullied, so entrenched was the practice. That absolutely had to change. We had a really clear approach to what that looked like, and a very clear behavioural framework that people could relate to, so that they knew what unacceptable behaviour looked like practically—not just words on a page, but what it actually looked like was really important.

But look, people have to have different experiences. One of the things that I have realised as I have been doing this work is the power of the stories that happen. People will talk with great confidence about something that happened that, when we looked into it, actually pre-dated even their own employment—but such was the impact of the legacy of those examples. So it is not enough just to fix the things; we have to fix the perceptions as well, and that means giving people a different experience. That will take time, because it is based on people's belief systems. We have to give them a reason to believe something differently.

Another thing is also worth stressing. We have spoken powerfully about the impact on people's mental health. I saw some alarming statistics that showed that between 2007 and 2018, 13 firefighters in the UK took their own life. The impact of our workplace on individuals' mental health is something that is really important to us. It is not just about the cultural experience that people have. Firefighters are disproportionately exposed to traumatic events, and research has also shown that we are less likely to ask for support than the general population when it does happen. I am also alive to the fact that suicide has been the biggest killer of men under 45.

When we talk about the culture of the fire service, we have been talking powerfully about the impact of those under-represented within it. That is so important, but it is also important to acknowledge the culture of the men within the service as well, and the impact of not being able to speak out or to express emotions or to be able to ask for help, because of the impact of the toxicity of the culture, and the need to be strong and masculine.

Something that I think is important is how we take care of everybody's wellbeing in the service. We have done a lot of work around mental health



for everybody within the service. It might look different for different people, and those nuances are critical if this is going to be a service that people can access and use. It is important to recognise those impacts on everybody.

Q264 **Simon Fell:** At the beginning, the Chair brought up the toxicity of some of the WhatsApp groups that we know exist. We are looking at the fire and rescue service at the moment, but we have looked at culture in policing as well, and there are similarities in the supposed safe spaces of these private groups, or in what is discussed in the back of the van or when you get back to base. One set of changes are the very visible ones that might get inspected and that are seen to be in place, but with the deep-seated cultural aspect, it is harder to scratch below the surface to see what is really going on and to make changes. Will you give your reflections on what drives effective change? When people are in the privacy of those conversations, what changes behaviour in that space?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** That is precisely the premise of the really targeted work that we have done around leadership and team coaching—targeting those subcultures at that team level. We can do loads of focus groups, we can do loads of work organisationally and we can say things are going to be different, but you need to have those very specific coaching sessions—that mediation between individuals. You need to give people the skills to be able to have psychological safety within that environment and to challenge the environment that they are in.

Look, firefighters' greatest strength is teamwork. We send firefighters into situations that are life-determining, and it is really difficult, so you will be relying on other people around you in potentially life-determining circumstances. The strength in that teamwork can sometimes also be our biggest downfall. To have that strength in the team, you need the cohesiveness of a team, and when you are working together in a small group of people, sometimes the cohesiveness of the team becomes more important than stepping up, challenging, putting your head above the parapet and saying something that might not be received well by the rest of the team. Just thinking it might not be received well is as powerful as whether it is actually received well.

Going in and targeting the interventions at the team level is really important. I want to have strong teams in the service, but I want to have strong teams that are inclusive for everybody.

Q265 **Lee Anderson:** Thank you, Dr Cohen-Hatton. Did you say you have been in the force for 23 years?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** Yes.

Q266 **Lee Anderson:** So obviously you have seen some changes over that time—hopefully for the better. Have you seen cases of misogyny, racism, sexism and bullying while serving in the fire service?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** Yes.

Q267 **Lee Anderson:** And what did you do about it?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** I have seen a number where I have been the presiding officer, for example, in disciplinary cases. I have had a range of incredibly difficult experiences myself, which I have been very open about and have talked about publicly. I have seen those cases, yes.

Q268 **Lee Anderson:** I have a question about inspectors. Now, I have worked in industry before, and when we were given fair warning that an inspector was coming, we would tidy up our workplace and make sure everything was in order. An inspector coming to inspect the operational side of things—that is, how you put fires out, rescue cats from trees and stuff like that—is one thing, but the cultural bit, which I think Simon touched on earlier, is about how the inspector gets into the heads of people in the workforce. Do they actually speak to the workforce anonymously when they are on site?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** They do. They have an anonymous survey that they run prior to the inspection, and then they do something called reality testing, where they will go into a service and assess what they have seen, or what they have seen through the documentation that has been provided, with people's experiences in the workplace as well.

Q269 **Lee Anderson:** As a senior boss of the fire service in your area, do you do these anonymous surveys for staff?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We have the anonymous reporting line, yes, and we run focus groups regularly as well—as I mentioned, every other year—so that we can have discussions to take a temperature check of the workplace, too.

Sorry, could I just go back to the first point that you made, if that is okay? I think it is a really important one.

**Lee Anderson:** Yes, of course.

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We talked about those cases of sexism, misogyny and racism in the service, but I would also like to flag to the Committee some of the experiences that we have had from outside of the service as well. One of the things that has really struck me, particularly since taking a senior leadership position in the service, is some of the abuse and harassment that we have had, not from within the service, but externally to the service. I myself have had to have police intervention twice, and one of those was recorded as a hate crime. The abuse and harassment have extended to my family as well. It is not acceptable.

Public service should not be synonymous with public abuse, and it has to stop. When you are under-represented in some way—when you look different—I understand that you will challenge people's expectations. We all have our own biases and stereotypes that we hold. Those are a result of the experiences that we have and the way that our brains categorise that information, so it is completely understandable that someone might have a bias. But when you do not recognise it and you act in a way that is going to harm somebody, that is when it starts to become a problem.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Too many fire chiefs who have protected characteristics are also subject to the harassment and abuse that I have described. My home address is marked with the police, and I am not the only principal officer with a protected characteristic who is in that position. Especially when you are trying to do something differently and challenge a very long-standing status quo, you can be subject to more of that.

If we are serious about cultural change within the fire and rescue service, which I am convinced that we are, we need also to take account of the wider society that we are operating in, and some of the harms that come with that. We have to be better—it is not an excuse; we absolutely have to be better—but if we are going to be successful within our workplaces, we have to take account of the environment that our staff are in 24 hours a day, not just in the hours that we have them with us.

**Chair:** I think that you make that point very well. I will take one final question from Tim Loughton.

Q270 **Tim Loughton:** Just very quickly, on the recruitment of women, obviously one of the cultural problems is what you might call a sort of laddism culture, which can be very toxic. Nationally, I think the figure is that 8% are women, which is double what it was 10 years ago but still tiny compared with, say, 37% in the police. West Sussex is recruiting 20% women, but because the turnover in the fire service is relatively small—certainly compared with the police—it is going to take some time to get that 8% up to an appreciable level. What can we do about that? How can we make that faster? Do we need to be turning over more people in the fire service who really shouldn't be there and replacing them with women who might help to change that culture? Are we not appealing to women? Are not enough women candidates coming forward? How do we get more women in the service generally?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** I am really pleased that you asked that question, because, for me, one of the things that it is important to stress is that we—and I, selfishly, as a fire chief—want the best of the best to be firefighters. I am not a fan of quotas. I do not think that the sign of success is the number of people; I think that the sign of success is getting the best people. The problem that I have is that the stereotype of a firefighter—people's image of a firefighter—is so narrow that, in truth, I am getting only the best of the best of a very narrow demographic of people, which is those to whom that stereotype appeals. My measure of success will be appealing to a much broader range of people so that I genuinely do get the best of the best.

That stereotype is incredibly deeply ingrained, and it is also incredibly pernicious. Some of the best successes that we have had have been through challenging people's idea of what a firefighter is—for example, through some youth engagement schemes. In a previous service that I was involved in, at one point, 27% of our female firefighters—almost a third—had progressed through a youth engagement scheme, because they had experienced what they could contribute to the service and had a better understanding of the breadth of roles available to them.

There are three asks that I have for the Committee to consider, which might help fire and rescue services, both in terms of cultural change and recruitment. The first is for support to help us change the image of a firefighter. I am less concerned with the turnover aspect, because one of the benefits that we have with firefighters with a great deal of experience is precisely that experience, and the benefit that that gives us on the fireground. So, I am comfortable with that aspect. What I would love is a different stereotype, but to really challenge that is not something that an individual fire service will have great success with on their own. It would need a really joined-up approach nationally, and that would take the kind of resourcing that is not available to fire and rescue services at present. A national campaign that gives a more accurate representation of what being a firefighter is like today would be really helpful.

The second ask that I have for you to consider is strengthening harassment laws for those of us in public service. At the moment, the threshold is incredibly high, and while the police have been incredibly helpful when we have approached them, the threshold probably does not match the harassment that senior leaders—particularly those of us who are different in some way—are experiencing. That is not just for senior leaders, actually; that is for people throughout the services as well. None of us should have to experience that kind of harassment because of the work that we choose to do to help people.

The third ask is around resourcing. As I said, I have been incredibly fortunate in West Sussex with the support that I have received from the council and the additional funding that we have had. Not all fire and rescue services are that fortunate, particularly in stand-alone fire and rescue services, where, to resource this kind of activity, you need to make a cut. Unfortunately, we have had five years of single-year financial settlements, which make long-term planning incredibly difficult. I think that, at the last count, something like 83% of our funding from central Government had been reduced, and, for eight years, we have had no capital funding from central Government. To do this, we need to put resource into that, and that is resource that, at the moment, we do not have because we are so focused on trying to keep the fire engines on the run and available for the public that finding anything extra is really difficult.

**Chair:** Thank you for that. Simon Fell has a very quick question.

Q271 **Simon Fell:** Thank you, Dr Cohen-Hatton. I just want to go back to your previous response, on some of the harassment and experiences you have had from wider society. You have spoken very eloquently about that and I am sorry to hear about those experiences. You partly answered this in response to Mr Loughton's question about the support you have had from the police, but some of this has to be about visibility for your officers and staff and their seeing that, when a complaint is made, the police and other public services take it seriously and respond to it. Have you felt that they have looked at your concerns seriously and you have had a decent response from them?



**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** Absolutely, and that is something that we have shared with staff. I speak very openly about those experiences as well, because I think it is important to talk about the things that you find difficult and make you feel vulnerable as much as you would talk about your successes, because then other people can share the things that worry them as well. I would say that it is having a significant impact on recruitment within fire and rescue services, particularly in senior roles. The feedback we are hearing from staff who are on programmes designed to prepare people for those senior roles is that they are not sure that they want to take senior officer positions any more. Sadly, we are finding that filtering through into the recruitment processes at present as well.

Q272 **Chair:** Would you say that the fire and rescue service is institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We operate against a backdrop of society that has systemic inequalities within it. We are still reporting on a gender pay gap, we still have huge health inequalities in our country, and socioeconomic status has some incredible impacts on people—

Q273 **Chair:** You have made that point several times about society, but I am interested in the fire and rescue service. Do you think it is institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** To be able to say that, I have to have the data in front of me that would demonstrate it. When I first landed in West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, there were aspects that systemically affected different groups of people. For example, some of our fire stations had only male facilities. It is not just about rectifying those aspects, which we have absolutely done; it is about being proactive to make sure that they are not any more. I would not say that we are institutionally misogynistic or racist—

Q274 **Chair:** Would you say “systemically”, then? That is what the Metropolitan Police Commissioner talks about. He doesn’t talk about “institutional”; he talks about “systemic”.

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** We are so proactive in monitoring our data and listening to our workforce that I am really confident that we have done those aspects within our service.

Q275 **Chair:** In your service, but generally?

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** Generally, it wouldn’t be fair for me to comment on other fire and rescue services, but I would absolutely acknowledge that we have more to do.

Q276 **Chair:** You are the national lead for improvement.

**Dr Cohen-Hatton:** I am the national lead for improvement, but I do not have the data in front of me that would enable me to say that another fire and rescue service is institutionally sexist, racist or misogynistic. You would have to ask each individual chief that.





# HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** Okay, well that is a very interesting point to end on. Thank you very much for coming before us today. It has been a very interesting session.