

CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING OF: PERFORMANCE AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE
DATE: 2 MARCH 2022
REPORT OF: DIRECTOR OF TRANSFORMATION
AUTHOR: BENJI EVANS

SUBJECT: EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION
SIX-MONTH UPDATE, MARCH 2022

Purpose of Report

1. To provide an update about the key equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) developments that have taken place during the last six months and to highlight upcoming work.

Recommended: That

- [1] Members note the report and highlight any issues for clarification, or discussion.

Background:

2. Under the Equality Act 2010, public sector organisations including Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service have a duty to: eliminate discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between different groups (the “public sector equality duty”).
3. In order to fulfil this duty, the Service has for a number years had in place an EDI Strategy, underpinned by a detailed action plan monitored on a quarterly basis by the Equality Steering Group. The Group is chaired by the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, who holds overall responsibility for overseeing EDI within the Service and attended by Member Champions for EDI, Heads of Department and staff representatives from across the organisation.
4. Since 2020, the Service’s commitment to EDI has also been enshrined in its Core Value to ‘be inclusive; by acting fairly, with integrity, respect and without prejudice’.
5. The way in which fire and rescue services meet their EDI obligations is a focus for Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) during its routine assessments of effectiveness, efficiency and the way organisations look after their people.

Progress over the last six months

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2021-24

6. At its September 2021 meeting, the Fire Authority approved an EDI Strategy for 2021-24. Produced in consultation with the Service's EDI staff networks, it sets out key priorities for the next three years under four key themes: our people; our partners, our communities and our organisation. The Strategy is available to download from the Service's website intended to show the Service's public commitment to being an inclusive service provider and employer.
7. Work is currently underway to finalise the detailed action plan that will support the delivery of the Strategy. This will be signed off at the next Equality Steering Group in April.
8. On 1st February 2022 responsibility for the delivery of the Strategy transferred to the Head of Communications and Engagement, with the EDI Advisor role moving into the in-house Communications and Engagement Department.

Positive action in recruitment

9. In November and December the Service ran a high-profile recruitment campaign for wholetime firefighters with an emphasis on attracting female, black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and LGBT+ applicants. For the first time, targeted Facebook advertising was used to reach these audiences. Early analysis indicates this has resulted in a modest increase in applications from across these three protected characteristics compared to the 2017 recruitment campaign. For example, of the 1,900 applicants 14.7% are female compared to 12.1% four years ago. BAME applications rose from 6.6% to 7.6% and LGBT+ applications from 8.7% to 11.4%. Further analysis will be carried out as candidates progress through the recruitment process.
10. Latest Home Office benchmarking data confirms that the Service is making progress with regards to addressing disproportionality. Just over 9% of firefighters in Cheshire are women. In the past year, the Service has increased its female representation from 7.3% to 9.3% and this ranks Cheshire 4th out of 45 services. The percentage of staff from a minority ethnic minority background has increased very slightly in the past six months, from 4.2% to 4.8%. There has also been a small increase in the number of staff with a disability from 2.9% to 3.3%, partly as a result of recruiting new staff with a disability and partly due to existing staff feeling able to disclose a disability, often due to a recent diagnosis (e.g. dyslexia).

Staff network groups

11. The Service's new Race Equality and Cultural Heritage (REACH) network is gaining momentum and new members, and has participated in national Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA) meetings and events. The network will play a significant role in organising AFSA's Winter Conference on 23rd and 24th November 2022 in Warrington.

12. The Limitless women's network has continued to meet quarterly and has progressed work around buddying, maternity, menopause and appearance. The network is playing a key role in promoting a trial of new ecofriendly products which enhance the accessibility and quality of hygiene packs on fire stations and in all Service vehicles. Work is underway in preparation for a conference to mark International Women's Day on 8th March 2022.
13. The Firepride LGBT+ network held a successful breakfast meeting to mark Bisexual Awareness Week in September with a guest speaker from the University of Sunderland. On 27th January 2022, the network hosted the third 'Proud to Provide' conference which was delivered virtually. The focus of this year's event was intersectionality and multiple identities. It saw more than 130 delegates 'attend' representing organisations across the UK including fire and rescue services, police, NHS, local authorities and many other partners who all benefited from a range of high profile speakers.
14. A number of staff expressed an interest in establishing a neurodiversity network during 2021. Therefore, an initial meeting was held in February and regular meetings and working groups are being planned throughout 2022.

Policy development and review

15. A new Domestic Abuse Policy, reflecting the latest best practice from the sector and organisations that work with people who experience domestic abuse, has been drafted and is currently subject to consultation with stakeholders.
16. Following feedback from staff and to acknowledge the need to introduce new ways of working during the pandemic, the Service has introduced an Agile Working Policy to enable people to work from home or other agreed locations. This policy will enhance our ability to promote flexibility which will support people with different commitments, needs and aspirations.

EDI education and training

17. The quarterly Equality Monitoring Report scrutinised by the Equality Steering Group now includes completion rates for EDI training. This enables Heads of Department to ensure their teams complete mandatory e-learning. This has resulted in measureable improvements in three of the four learning modules. In addition, more educational resources have been published on the intranet to support learning around LGBT+ visibility days, Race Equality Week, Black History Month and International Women's Day.
18. EDI content has been embedded into the BTEC Level 3 Education and Training course offered to staff who deliver training and the 'Step In' and 'Step Up' leadership development courses.
19. Further Equality Impact Assessment training workshops have been delivered to more than 100 staff over the past six months. Additional sessions have been planned for February and March 2022. This interactive training covers the Service's legal responsibilities, practical tips to complete EIAs and best practice case studies.

Partnerships

20. As part of the positive action in recruitment, connections have been made with Crewe Alexandra Women's Football Club, Bannatynes Health Club and Spa in Crewe, Orford Jubilee Centre in Warrington and Brio Leisure which manages the Winsford Lifestyle Centre, Ellesmere Port Sports Village and Northgate Arena in Chester. The Service has also reconnected with Warrington Wolves Women's Rugby Team by sponsoring their training kit for the 2022/23 season. In return female rugby players and representatives will attend internal events and also support us with engaging with the local community. This partnership arrangement will increase visibility and enhance our connection with the local community.

Neurodiversity

21. Twenty new members of staff have been screened using the 'Do-It Profiler' dyslexia screening tool since September. Overall, 26 staff have now received initial support and adjustments. This support enables individuals and their line managers to receive tailored advice sessions and coaching. The EDI Advisor is currently completing the British Dyslexia Association Accredited Workplace Assessor Programme. This will help the Service follow best practice. The long-term plan is to upskill human resources colleagues to build capacity to support a growing number of staff accessing screening, support and advice.
22. The Service has joined the Business Disability Forum (BDF) to enable the benchmarking of performance in relation to supporting staff with disabilities. The aim is to achieve the Disability Smart award by August 2022 and the Level 3 Disability Confident Leader status (the highest standard set by the UK Government) by December 2022.

Stonewall Workplace Equality Index

23. The Service submitted its annual Stonewall Workplace Equality Index application in October 2021. The index was suspended in 2020 but has been relaunched to include challenging new criteria around working with marginalised LGBT+ people. The Service is due to learn of its new ranking at the time that this report was produced and the full index will be published prior to the meeting.
24. The Service was able to include in its submission details of work in September and October with ForFutures Housing in Chester, to deliver EDI training to their staff and communicate key safety messages and advice to clients, many of whom identify as LGBT+.

Contributing towards the national agenda

25. A paper on equality of access to services and employment for Gypsies and Travelers (G&T), co-authored by the EDI Advisor, has been published on the UK fire and rescue service website for the benefit of the 45 services in the UK. The paper provides an insight about challenges faced by the G&T community and specific reference to barriers recruitment opportunities for public services.

26. REACH members presented at the AFSA Disability Summit in December 2021. This session focused on the Service's approach to supporting staff with dyslexia.
27. The Service is working with West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service and AFSA to explore the sector's approach to appearance for operational staff. A briefing paper is being prepared by the working group which will be presented to the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Home Office and the fire minister.

Priorities for the next six months

28. The anticipated White Paper on fire and rescue sector reform is expected to revolve around professionalism, people and governance and it is likely that there will be a strong emphasis on ethics. Over the coming months, it is possible we will learn about the detail of the paper and be able to establish its implications for EDI.
29. We will reinvigorate our staff networks now they are able to meet safely in person. A programme of events will be agreed for Firepride, Limitless, REACH and the new neurodiversity network.
30. In light of the #BLM campaign, the Service and REACH Network will continue to explore issues surrounding racism and the ongoing challenges black people face. A focus on how we can recruit more people from black and other ethnic minority groups can help build further connections and relationships with our communities.
31. Although the official launch of the neurodiversity network has been postponed until the group can meet in person, a Dyslexia Working Group will have met for the first time in February 2022. Discussion and review of the Service's approach to dyslexia will be the initial focus.
32. The Service will review the feedback from its latest Stonewall submission. An action plan will be developed to enable further development over the next six months.
33. A review of the Service's welfare facilities on fire stations will be finalised. Consultation involves staff across all departments, staff networks and duty systems. Also part of the review, further work is planned to explore and overcome barriers relating to other gender related issues including menstruation and endometriosis.
34. The Equality Impact Assessment for the fire station modernisation project will be carried out in support of the next phase of development. This process will ensure the Service is developing facilities which promote inclusion for all, enable us to attract talent from diverse communities and be an employer of choice.

Financial Implications

35. The EDI function has its own budget but a budget bid was approved by the Fire Authority approval in February 2022 to extend the work around neurodiversity, dyslexia screening and staff training. This provides additional funding of £5-7k.

Legal Implications

36. As referred to in the 'Background' section, the above activities will help evidence the Service's commitment to and compliance with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and in particular the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Equality and Diversity Implications

37. Due to the nature of this report, equality and diversity implications have been considered and discussed throughout the main body of the report.

Environmental Implications

38. None

**CONTACT: KIRSTY JENNINGS, GOVERNANCE OFFICER
TEL [01606] 868641**