Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service

Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework Pilot Peer Review at ‘Excellent’

November 2010
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Executive Summary

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service are currently performing at the ‘excellent’ level of the Fire and Rescue Service Framework. They are meeting their statutory equality and diversity duties and performing at a high level in a broad range of areas. The service has a well embedded approach to equality and has translated the approach into a wide number of highly effective outcomes for local communities and its own staff.

The service places a strong emphasis on understanding needs and then protecting its vulnerable local communities. This is a long-standing and refined approach which includes a structured understanding of their vulnerable communities, significant year-on-year equality improvements and a broad range of projects and initiatives to target its work at the most vulnerable. Of particular note is the work undertaken by the advocates. They are largely recruited from these vulnerable communities and are making a positive contribution to prevention work.

The service is able to knit together a wide range of these projects and initiatives and can demonstrate how equality informs their values and how these are put into practice to make a real difference for local people. All of this results in the service having an excellent profile and reputation with the members of the community and partner agencies.

The approach to equalities is clear, lead strongly by elected members and senior managers and underpinned by the widespread commitment and enthusiasm of staff at all levels. The service supports the agenda with notable resources. The Corporate Leadership Team and a dedicated Diversity Action Group play a role in holding individuals to account.

Internally, the diversity and equality agenda has been embraced by the organisation. There is a positive approach to supporting flexible working, extensive work on promoting a more diverse workforce and a number of examples of work with specific individual members of staff on return to work issues, again, translating the service’s approach into a positive impact for members of staff.

Training is specifically targeted at under represented groups and the service has exceeded its stretch targets for recruiting female and Black and Minority Ethnic firefighters. The recorded complaints of bullying and harassment are at a very low level. All of this is against a backdrop of historically challenging industrial relations. This makes the service’s impact on equality issues particularly impressive.

In a service performing at the ‘excellent’ level it is not surprising that there are a relatively small number of areas for further improvement in the future. Tackling these will be crucial to meeting short and medium term challenges, longer-term sustainability and demonstrating the ability to inspire and help both other fire and rescue services and the wider public sector. Key amongst these will be sustaining the current positive outcomes for local communities in a climate where resources are reducing.

The service needs to work harder on clearly understanding the ‘Merseyside Model’ for diversity and equality. Other fire and rescue services will be looking to Merseyside to understand how they can improve their own approach and it will therefore be important for the service to have a clear understanding of the ingredients of its own success.

Further work is needed to develop the Diversity Action Group to be a stronger strategic engine for the agenda. Chief amongst this will be to develop a sharper Equalities Action Plan. Members should build on the IRMP Scrutiny Panel to challenge officers on key equality issues to encourage even stronger performance.
The approach to equality impact assessments needs to be strengthened. The service can build on some strengths but the organisation needs to take a fresh look at the overall approach and how managers are approaching the impact assessments.

Ensuring that leadership training creates the potential for a greater proportion of underrepresented groups being promoted will create the environment for more people from these groups to progress to senior levels.

Finally, evaluation, reflection and sharing good practice are key aspects of any excellent organisation. The service needs to build on its good work and be more reflective about how they have achieved this. By exploring a partnership with a fire and rescue service at the ‘developing’ level the service would be able to develop a better understanding of the Merseyside. This would strength the service’s own improvement journey, provide practical help to another organisation and contribute to the national debate about a ‘new’ business case for effective diversity and equality practice to help build a fairer Britain.
Recommendations

Due to the many positives identified by the peer team, there are a relatively small number of recommendations. The recommendations of the peer review team are as follows:

1. To ensure the service has a clear understanding of the ingredients of its own success on diversity and equality outcomes, so that it can reflect on all the elements of this work and draw together a coherent narrative that the service is able to share internally and with other fire and rescue services and public organisations.

2. To strengthen diversity and equality practice and further develop the Diversity Action Group to be a more robust strategic engine, including:
   • the production of a sharper Equality Action Plan
   • taking a fresh look at the Equality Impact Assessment process

3. To ensure stronger accountability, elected members should challenge officers on key equality issues.

4. To ensure the approach to equalities in procurement is strengthened, the Procurement service should work with key suppliers to ensure they are delivering in line with the services’ values.

5. To ensure the service is able to drive the equalities agenda nationally, pair up with a fire and rescue service at the ‘developing’ level to share learning and good practice.
Background to the peer review

1. The Equalities peer review is based around the journey to Excellence Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework developed by the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and Local Government Improvement and Development. These arrangements have a strong focus on ‘within-sector’ peer review. This is one of two national pilots at the ‘excellent’ level of the framework.

2. It was recommended by CFOA and approved by Fire Services Management Committee of the Local Government Association that CFOA and Local Government Improvement and Development operate a partnership approach that included developing the already established local government peer review process to meet the fire and rescue sector equality and diversity requirements. The peer review process is designed to help a Service assess its current achievements, its capacity to change and how well it is progressing toward the ‘excellent’ level. The peer review is not an inspection. Instead it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends – albeit ‘critical friends’. It aims to help a service identify its current strengths, as much as what it needs to improve.

3. The Framework is based around five areas of performance:
   - Leadership and promoting inclusion
   - Accountability
   - Service delivery and community engagement
   - Employment and training
   - Evaluation and good practice

4. The peer review was facilitated by Local Government Improvement and Development, and the challenge team consisted of:
   - Dene Sanders, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Humberside Fire & Rescue Service (Review Leader)
   - Maria Tonks, Equality and Diversity Manager, West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service
   - Councillor Paul Lakin, South Yorkshire Fire Authority
   - Asha Pawar, Associate Peer, Local Government Improvement and Development
   - Michael Keating, National Advisor (Equalities and Cohesion), Local Government Improvement and Development
   - Neil Shaw, Local Government Improvement and Development

5. The programme for the on-site phase of the review was organised in advance and included a variety of activities designed to enable members of the team to meet and talk to a cross-section of people. Examples of activities the team undertook are:
   - Discussions with a range of officers at different levels from within Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service
   - Discussions with elected members of the Authority
   - Discussions with some partner organisation representatives
   - Fire station visits at Birkenhead, Kensington, Speke and Heswall
   - Discussions with operational officers representing key groups of staff including the representative bodies and staff with disabilities, from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups, female, Lesbian, Gay and Bi-Sexual staff
Review of a wide range of supporting documentation including the Service’s own self assessment

6. The team was appreciative of the support provided by the service and would like to thank everybody they met during the process for their time and contributions.

Our feedback to the service on the last day of the review gave an overview of the key messages. This report builds on the initial findings and gives a detailed account of the review. The report is structured around the five performance areas of the Framework listed above.

Context

7. Merseyside covers the five borough council areas of Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St.Helens and Wirral. It has a population of around 1.4 million. It is a place of contrasts with significant high deprivation alongside some of the most affluent areas in the country. The relatively high levels of smoking, alcohol and drug abuse and poor housing are all contributory factors in heightening risk for the service.

8. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority is made up of 18 councilors drawn from the borough councils. The recent elections have resulted in a small number of new members on the Authority.

9. The service employs around 1,425 staff, working from its headquarters and twenty-seven fire stations. The service also has dedicated teams for Search and Rescue and Marine Search and Rescue. The service’s Deputy Chief Fire Officer is the CFOA lead on equalities.

10. The service’s key business document, the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), identifies the following priorities:

- Reduce Risk – reduce risk of fire and other emergencies in all communities of Merseyside through a combination of prevention and protection, working in partnership with other service providers
- Respond – respond to all emergency calls for assistance with a level of response appropriate to the risk and deal with all emergencies efficiently and effectively
- Restore – work with partners to help individuals, businesses and communities recover from the impact of emergencies and help them return to normality
- Organisation – operate efficient and effective organisational functions that will support the core functions of the Authority in a way that provides value for money for the communities of Merseyside, and supports environmental sustainability

11. The 2009 Comprehensive Area Assessment organisational assessment classified the service as ‘performing well’. The 2010 Operational Assessment also identified a high performing service. The service has reduced the number of fires over a number of years: reducing the number accidental dwelling fires from 1,516 (2004/05) to 1,303 (2008/09); the number of deliberate primary fires from 4,467 (2004/05) to 2,083 (2008/09); and reducing the number of road traffic collisions from 843 (2004/05) to 725 (2008/09).
Leadership and promoting inclusion

**Strengths**

- Clear overall approach to diversity and equality
- IRMP Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Leadership Team provide a strong leadership role
- Commitment and enthusiasm of staff
- Supporting the agenda with notable direct resources
- Making wider contributions beyond the traditional community safety boundaries
- Reputation of the service with the members of the community and partner agencies
- Represented on a range of strategic equalities bodies, partnerships and forums

**Areas for consideration**

- Further develop the Diversity Action Group to be a more robust strategic engine for the agenda
- Members should build on IRMP Scrutiny Panel to challenge officers on key equality issues to encourage even stronger performance
- The Equality Action Plan needs to be sharper
- Procurement could work with key suppliers to ensure they are delivering on equalities in practical terms

12. The service’s overall approach to diversity and equality is framed around its strategy: ‘Promoting Equality and Diversity on Merseyside 2010-13’. This is supported by equality actions embedded into service and locality plans and individual personal development reviews. The IRMP Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) all provide a strong leadership role on equality across the organisation.

13. The commitment and enthusiasm of staff at all levels to equality is very good. This is supported by clear leadership at a political and senior officer level. Whilst difficult to quantify, the peer review team found that the diversity and equality agenda was vibrant and alive throughout the service. Staff demonstrated a good understanding of the local issues. The interpretation is many and varied but staff have a clear understanding of what it means for their day-to-day responsibilities focused on making the people of Merseyside feel safer and protecting their wellbeing.

14. The service supports the agenda with notable direct resources - £230,000 for the Diversity Team and draws on a wide range of its own, partner and grant resources to fund work targeted at local vulnerable communities. In May 2010, the Improvement & Development Agency’s Operational Assessment identified that ‘the service is aware of its diverse communities and local plans put in place local initiatives...targeted at priority groups and specific geographical areas.’ This continues to be the case supported from a wide range of data available through the Knowledge and Information Management team.

15. The service is making contributions beyond the traditional community safety boundaries, on issues such as education, health and wider social issues. The service sees itself as a community focused and this wider agenda as core fire and rescue service work.

16. The reputation of the service with the members of the community and partner agencies, who the peer review team met, was very positive. This might possibly be
best summarised by a comment from one representative of a partner agency – “the service is at the heart of the local community”.

17. The organisation is represented on a range of strategic equality bodies, partnerships and forums such as the Wirral Equality Forum, Citysafe Hate Crime Joint Agency Group and the Liverpool Cohesion Partnership Panel. The service’s Deputy Chief Fire Officer is also the CFOA lead on equality.

18. The Diversity Action Group (DAG) is a key officer group focused on diversity and equality issues. However, while it has its strengths, the DAG needs to be developed as a more robust strategic engine: innovating, challenging and adding greater value. This report will explore specific issues in which the DAG could play this stronger role.

19. There is scope for members to provide more challenge through their community leadership role. One channel for this already exists through the IRMP Scrutiny Panel. The service and members should consider how to use the Panel to develop more open joint problem solving in a context of larger public sector spending cuts than has been experienced for many years. This uncharted territory will need the combined skills of professional officers and elected representatives to work out the nature of local inequality and how improved service delivery can be sustained.

20. The Equality Action Plan needs to be sharper. This should include a ‘SMART’ approach to enable the DAG to hold managers to account more readily for the delivery of equalities objectives in a coherent way. The peer review team recognise that managers are held accountable for service delivery through the service planning process, but enabling the DAG to take a stronger role specifically on equality issues is likely to engender greater coherence and challenge. This will also assist the service in understanding ‘what works’ and consequently what is not working. In practical terms this may include, for example, using a reshaped Equality Action Plan to drive performance. The service is likely to benefit from examining the work of the two local authorities currently at the ‘excellent’ level of the Equality Framework for Local Government - Rotherham and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

21. Whilst the service has an Equality in Procurement Policy, the approach to equalities could be further improved by the service working with its key suppliers to ensure these organisations are delivering in practical terms in line with the service’s own values.

**Accountability**

**Strengths**
- CLT and DAG play a role in holding individuals to account
- Diversity and equality performance information is reviewed systematically
- Recorded complaints of bullying and harassment are at a very low level
- The service engages with the representative bodies on diversity and equality issues

**Area for consideration**
- Approach to equality impact assessments needs to be strengthened

22. The CLT and DAG play a role in holding individuals to account for diversity and equality practice and intended improvements within the organisation. Equalities
performance information is reviewed systematically through the district management teams, CLT and with members.

23. Recorded complaints of bullying and harassment are at a very low level. From the officers interviewed by the peer review team there was no suggestion of any evidence of bullying or harassment and staff were aware of the reporting procedures for such incidents should they occur.

24. The service engages with the representative bodies on issues such as disability, race, sexual orientation, religion/belief and flexible working. They have been involved, for example, in putting together family friendly policies and are consulted on key diversity and equality policies.

25. The service is meeting its statutory diversity and equality duties. This has included, for example, some disabled members of staff being able to remain in the workplace (following reasonable adjustments being made) and the roll out of grievance handling training.

26. However, the approach to equality impact assessments needs to be refreshed. The service can build on strengths, for example, the fact that Station and Locality Managers undertake them systematically and they are used extensively. Now the organisation needs to consider how to develop a consistent quality to the assessments and communicate how they can help to strengthen performance management overall. By ensuring that they are a clear part of the Equality Action Plan the DAG would be able to undertake a more structured work programme of monitoring. The implementation of the public sector Equality Duty from next April could provide a trigger. This expects public organisations to use their understanding of communities to assess the impact of their services and thereby set objectives. In turn these will enable these communities to hold organisations to account. With a more streamlined approach this would play to many of the strengths already existing in the service. The two councils mentioned previously would be useful models to explore as would more links with other public sector organisations in the North West. Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service has recently reviewed their approach to the process of equality impact assessments and Merseyside may wish to explore their experiences.

Service delivery and community engagement

**Strengths**
- Structured approach to understanding vulnerable communities
- Significant year-on-year diversity and equality improvements
- Broad range of projects and initiatives undertaken
- Advocates making a positive contribution to prevention work
- The Fire Support Network adds value

**Area for consideration**
- Sustaining the outcomes for local communities in a climate where resources are reducing

27. There is a structured approach to understanding Merseyside’s vulnerable communities. In practical terms, these key individuals and groups are identified through a blend of the ‘hard’ data and intelligence from Knowledge and Information Management, referrals from agencies and ‘soft’ intelligence from local knowledge of
staff. The service was able to demonstrate significant year-on-year diversity and equality improvements.

28. The local focus is captured in a range of local Integrated Risk Management Plans. As mentioned previously, in May 2010 the Improvement & Development Agency identified that the service has ‘a strong commitment to consultation with the community and undertake[s] a range of consultation activities from formal consultation through focus groups to a range of survey based activity, the advocates are also recognised as having a key role in gathering intelligence’. This good work continues.

29. A broad range of projects and initiatives are targeted at key vulnerable groups. These are too numerous for this report to list comprehensively but include the street based teams in Kensington, Crucial Crew, Heartbeat gyms, supporting Liverpool ‘Pride’, the Youth Hub in Wallasey, Beacon project and work targeted at older people, recent Polish migrants and people with physical and mental disabilities.

30. The School Fire Liaison Officer is one example of how the service has gone beyond the traditional boundaries of partnership working. In over 20 local schools, a firefighter works for one day per week during term time undertaking a range of activities including PSHE lessons, PE and mentoring. The Safe at Home Project is a further example of how the service is extending its reach into wider safety areas by working with ROSPA on improving safety within the home.

31. The service has over 40 advocates who make a positive contribution to prevention work. A number of these have been recruited to meet the needs of specific vulnerable communities in Merseyside, for example, deaf people, people with mental health problems, older people and migrants from Eastern Europe, Somalia and Yemen. The work and role of the advocates is embedded, well regarded and seen as integral to the service.

32. The Fire Support Network adds value to the work of the advocates by providing longer-term support and sustainability to issues they have identified.

33. The service aims to have a joined up approach to engagement. There are a number of examples which have led to measurable improvement, particularly with young people and with other communities because of the service’s extensive home safety fire checks.

34. However, a key challenge for this ongoing excellent performance in service delivery will be sustaining the outcomes for local communities in a climate where resources are reducing.
Employment and training

Strengths
• The diversity and equality agenda has been embraced by the organisation
• Positive approach to supporting flexible working
• Extensive work on promoting a more diverse workforce
• Number of examples of work with specific individual members of staff
• Well regarded occupational health services
• Training for future senior leaders is specifically targeted at underrepresented groups
• Exceeded stretch targets for recruiting female and BAME firefighters

Area for consideration
• Ensure that leadership training creates the potential for a greater proportion of underrepresented groups being promoted

35. A positive culture appears to exist throughout the organisation in relation to diversity and equality. The agenda has been embraced by the organisation and translated into action so that equality has largely become ‘business as usual’. The service has taken a ‘values’ based approach based on an understanding of its people. It is clear that this is beginning to be embedded and signals a turning point in terms of how existing staff regard their role and how new staff are recruited and promoted.

36. The service takes a positive approach to supporting flexible working. This includes offering enhanced maternity, paternity and adoption packages and working to accommodate employee’s reasonable requests for changes to their working patterns.

37. The service has undertaken extensive work on promoting a more diverse workforce and reducing inequality in communities in practical ways including a Community Handbook, ‘z cards’ to promote employment opportunities, the Single Equality Scheme, awareness sessions for graduates and the recruitment of advocates to work with specific vulnerable communities.

38. There is recognition of the needs and perspectives of different sections of the workforce through arrangements like the Women’s Forum, the Lesbian Gay and Bi-Sexual and groups for BAME staff and those with disabilities. Women and BAME firefighters are better represented on stations with more flexible duty systems.

39. There are a number of examples of work with specific individual members of staff, which whilst they may appear to be small-scale in the context of such a large organisation, are making a real difference to individual members of staff with issues like dyslexia, physical disabilities and complex return-to-work issues. The service uses well regarded occupational health services to support the diversity and equality agenda including rehabilitation exercise referrals to Total Fitness. Staff, are supported back into work early in a positive way by offering different opportunities to return to work.

40. Diversity and equality issues are communicated through a range of channels including senior staff briefings and dedicated diversity notice boards in all settings.

41. Training for future senior leaders in the organisation is specifically targeted at underrepresented groups including women and BAME staff. Merseyside has exceeded its stretch targets in terms of recruiting female and BAME firefighters.
42. However, it will be important for the organisation to keep track of the progression of under represented groups to ensure that over the medium to longer-term, leadership training results in the potential for a greater proportion of people from these groups being promoted. The aspirations of the organisation in this area of its work are to be commended, particularly given the wider challenges in relation to national recruitment and progression coupled with the future resource implications.

Evaluation and sharing good practice

Strengths
- A range of national awards
- Where evaluations exist they demonstrate a tangible impact
- Examples of other fire and rescue services learning from Merseyside

Area for consideration
- Be more reflective and supportive of driving the equality agenda nationally

43. The service has won a number of national awards, providing a basis for promoting and sharing its work. This includes Beacon awards for Services to Older People, Early Intervention – Children at Risk and Reducing Health Inequalities.

44. Where evaluations exist – such as for the Street Based teams, the Bonfire Partnership, the Fire Support Network Knowsley cage football pilot – they demonstrate a tangible impact on fire and anti-social behaviour reduction. They also highlight wider benefits on a range of other issues affecting young people and other groups. The service uses these to learn lessons and improve future activities.

45. There are some examples of other fire and rescue services learning from Merseyside, such as Greater Manchester’s adoption of the ‘z cards’.

46. Evaluation, reflection and sharing good practice are key aspects of any excellent organisation. The service needs to build on its good work and be more reflective about how they have achieved this. By exploring a partnership with a fire and rescue service at the ‘developing’ level the service would be able to develop a better understanding of the ‘Merseyside Model’. This would strengthen the service’s own improvement journey, provide practical help to another organisation and contribute to the national debate about a ‘new’ business case for effective diversity and equality practice to help build a fairer Britain.
Contact details

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