

Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service

Equality and Diversity Review

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Summary

You asked us to look at one element of the Equality Framework (Leadership, Partnership and Service Commitment) but ultimately to be mindful that this review was to prioritise issues within the workforce over the community.

There is a strong sense of determination by staff to help vulnerable people and protect everyone from harm irrespective of background or needs. This positive commitment has been a pleasure to experience. The next step is to shine a light on minority statuses and educate everyone that seeing the colour of someone's skin or talking openly about one's sexuality is not a bad thing. In fact, it's better than a leaning towards 'not seeing difference'. This is how inequalities are identified and challenged.

Shifting this passion for serving the community into a new direction which consciously *asks* all staff to take note of equality issues and minority statuses - not just thinking about 'vulnerability' and 'fairness' - would be a major step forward on the equalities agenda.

Overall, the Service should consider developing an Equality and Inclusion Strategy which complements existing strategies but specifically addresses its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. This will pull a lot of work already in place together in a cohesive way but will also provide a mechanism to identify possible gaps in service delivery and in barriers to making the workforce more diverse and open.

A lot of people are doing a lot of good of their own initiative. However, there is always a risk that these individuals could leave the Service and all that hard work might be lost. A clear equality strategy to embed the initiatives in the Service and make it part of everyone's role mitigates against that risk.

Some may say an equality strategy would be just another 'tick box' exercise. This shouldn't be the case if it is produced thoroughly with a clear vision and measurable and achievable objectives. The strategy should identify a process for monitoring success of the objectives and make reference to accountability and scrutiny. A subtle but powerful impact of a strategy is the opportunity it presents to change the language being used and this, in itself, is educational and consciousness-raising.

In this review, we believe that where staff may appear to have been critical of the Service's equality agenda it demonstrates that they care very deeply about facilitating change. Everyone who has volunteered or agreed to help with this review has given up a lot of time and shown great commitment to this review being a catalyst for powerful changes. They are a credit to the Service.

Methodology

The review has been carried out by two members of The Wisdom Factory CIC, a non-practising solicitor and a psychotherapist. Both are highly experienced equality and diversity practitioners and between them have personal or professional experience of the fire service.

Throughout February 2017, in reviewing the Service against the equality framework, the team reviewed all documentation provided to them, conducted telephone interviews with a broad spectrum of staff and facilitated two focus groups at your Headquarters.

The equality data monitoring exercise has been performed on the basis of data collected by the Service and with the support of HR.

The following should be noted:

- Factual statements and statistics sourced from publicly-available documents have been accepted as accurate;
- Interviewees' responses on issues/themes within their professional area of experience or expertise have been accepted as accurate;
- Telephone and/or face to face contact has been made with most members of the Organisational Development group;
- Access to specific interviewees was proposed by the Service or by us following on from emerging themes.
- The team has spoken to several members of staff via informal channels of communication with an assurance of total anonymity.

Although our role was not to 'critique' them, we have accessed the following documentation:

- Fire Authority Annual Report 2015/16
- Ethical Framework and Code of Conduct
- Community Risk Management Plan 2014-2020
- Community Risk Strategy 2017-2020
- Policy & Resources Committee minutes
- Ethical Framework (powerpoint presentation)
- Organisational Development group: Terms of Reference
- Organisation Development group minutes (8 December 2016)
- Communication Review final report 2016
- Samples of Service bulletins (3 February 2017 and 10 February 2017)
- Exit Questionnaire template
- Template Impact Assessment Form
- Equality & Diversity Advisory Group minutes 2014-16
- Equality Scheme Assurance Statement by EDAG (2014)

We would like to thank all members of staff involved in this review, who have been extremely helpful, approachable and honest in facilitating this exercise.

Employment Monitoring

Data Analysis Assumptions

- 'USAR – On call' data relates to people with secondary roles so, as they appear twice in the data, they have been disregarded in compiling this report.
- Unless otherwise stated references to the present position relate to the data from 2015/16.
- All data was collected by Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service

Key Themes to Note

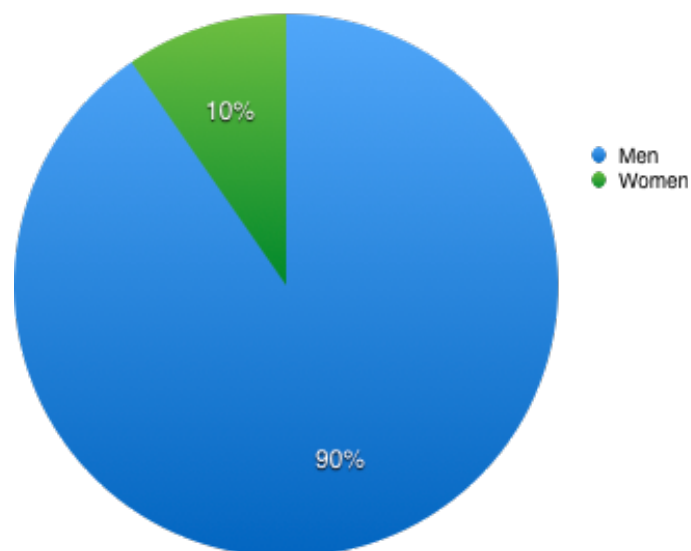
1. In terms of recruitment, the majority of applications are from men. Notably 90% of applications for retained positions are male.
2. Of the 47 applications for promotion this year, two identified as female, all as White British, six as disabled and none as LGB.
3. The Service attracts a strong number of job applications from the BAME community but they are underrepresented in the number of staff in post.
4. Disabled members of staff raised three out of the six formal grievances this year.
5. Sixty-five per cent of the current workforce sit within the age brackets 36-45 and 46-55.
6. Under 1% of the workforce identify as LGB.
7. A large proportion of job applicants prefer not to state their ethnicity. However, disclosure rates of the actual workforce are very high.
8. No employees this year declined to state their disability status or age, but over half declined to disclose their sexual orientation or religion.

Gender

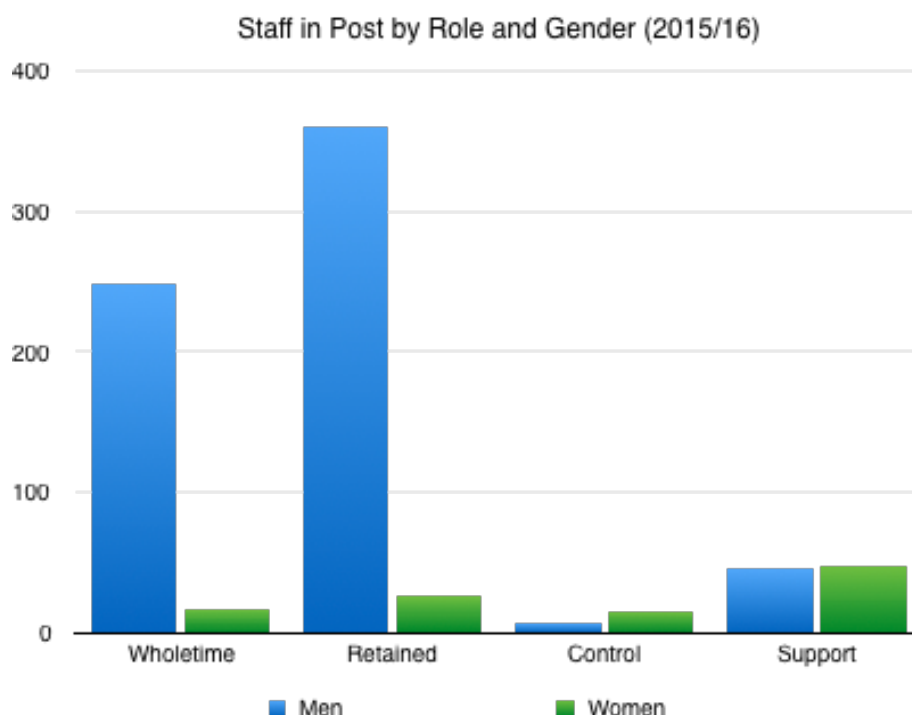
Sixty-five percent of all employment applications are from men. Breaking this down into the types of positions being applied for:

1. The number of applications for fire control positions is relatively fairly split between men and women.
2. There is a disproportionately high number of men applying for retained positions (90%) and support roles (58%).
3. There has been no increase in applications from women for retained roles over the last two years, but the number of applications from men increased by 49%.
4. The number of applications for support roles nearly doubled this year. Applications for these roles increased by 72% for men and by 123% for women.

Applications for Retained Roles (2015/16)



In terms of staff in post, 40% of women work in operational roles compared to 92% of men. From a resourcing perspective, given the increasing emphasis on retained firefighters it should be noted that 93% identify as male.



Of the 47 applications for promotion this year all but 2 were from men. However, this is unsurprising given the vast majority of those applications related to wholetime positions which are predominantly performed by men.

Almost all the staff who left wholetime and retained positions this year were male but, again, it should be remembered that men are disproportionately represented in operational roles in any event. The ‘gender split’ of those leaving the support roles was more proportionate.

Eighty-three percent of staff who left the Service this year were men. The most common reason recorded for men and women leaving the service this year was resignation (57% and 65% respectively). The second most common reason for men leaving was retirement.

Five of the seven formal disciplinary cases and four of the six grievances this year involved a male member of staff.

Given the disproportionately low number of women in the datasets it is difficult to identify possible themes or trends for women in more detail.

Ethnicity

In the 2011 census, Herefordshire¹ and Worcestershire² estimated that it has a relatively small (6-8%), but growing, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) population; compared to around a 20% the national average. The White British community makes up 92-93% of the counties’ population which is higher than the national level (80%). Conversely, the White Irish and White Other communities make around 0.5% and 2.5-4% of the counties’ population which is slightly lower than the national average.

Of the 540 job applicants this year, 80% described themselves as White British, 11% as BME, 3% as White Irish or White Other and 7% chose not to disclose. Given the BAME community is believed to have grown

¹ <https://factsandfigures.herefordshire.gov.uk/about-a-topic/population-and-demographics/ethnicity>

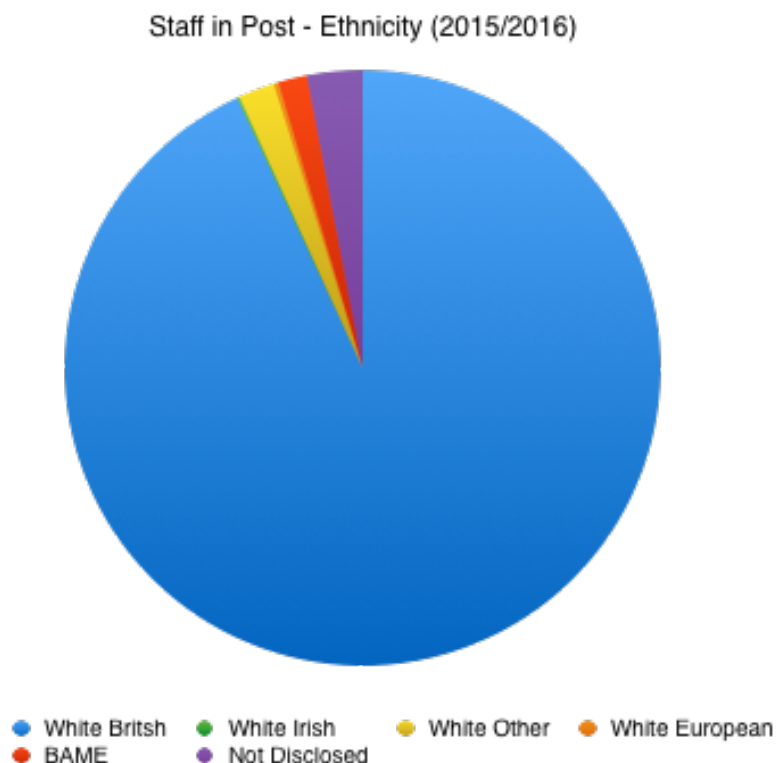
² file:///Users/sarahrennie/Downloads/worcs_demographic_report_Census__2011.pdf

since the 2011 Census, these figures seem to reflect the Hereford and Worcester community. The data doesn't, at present, allow us to analyze ethnicity by reference to stations/communities.

The Service doesn't record the success rate of applications by reference to ethnicity. However, it is perhaps fair to say that the rate may not be proportionate if this year's 'in post' data is maintained. For example, 11% of job applicants identified as BAME but only 1.5% of staff in post did so. Of course, only next year's 'in post' figures can be used to really judge this year's applications.

Turning to staff in post, 93% describe themselves as White British, 0.1% as White Irish, 2% as White Other, 1.6% are from the BAME community and 3% chose not to disclose. This suggests that the BAME and non White British communities are under represented in the current workforce.

All 47 applications for promotion this year were from staff who identify as White British.



Of those who left the service this year, 93% were from the White British community. The number of members of staff leaving, the reasons cited for doing so and the numbers of disciplinary, grievance and harassment cases seem to be proportionate to the ethnic diversity of the workforce.

Disability

In the 2011 Census, 19% of Herefordshire³ reported a limiting long-term health problem or disability and 18% of Worcestershire⁴ reported experiencing longterm health problems which limit daily activities a little or a lot. This generally reflects the national level of 18%⁵.

Disabled people make up nearly 6% of all job applicants this year. It is possible that there may in fact be higher numbers of disabled applicants and employees than reflected in the data. Firstly, it is very common for disabled people not to identify as such either because they do not fully understand the definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 and/or because they don't consider their impairment to be a disability. Secondly, there may be some stigma around disclosing a disability given traditional stereotypes about mental 'strength' and fitness expectations.

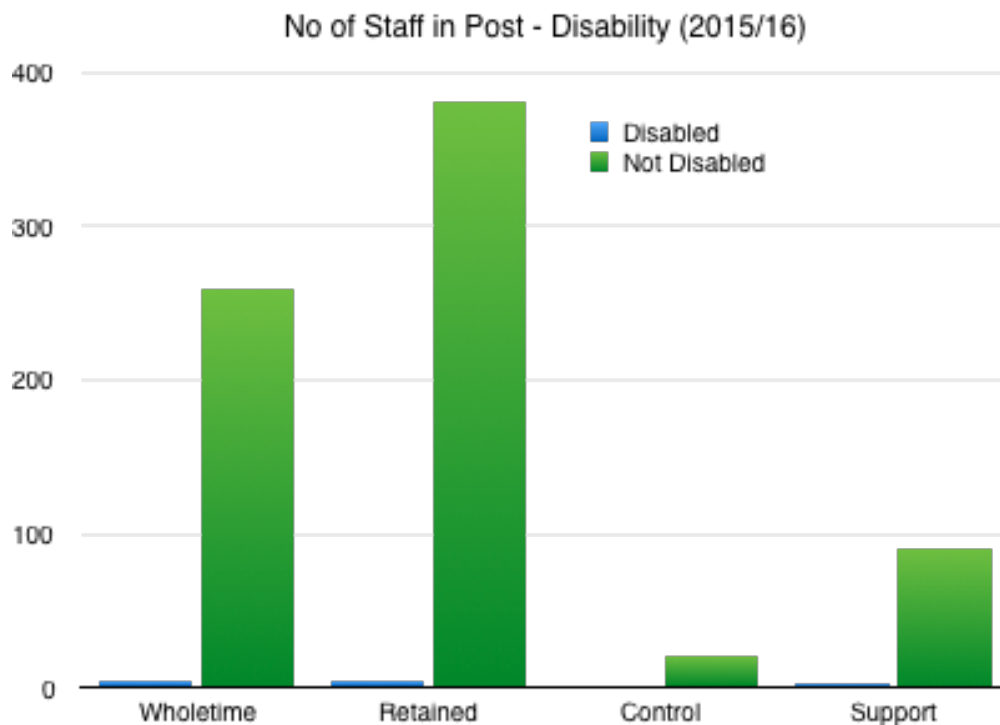
Of the 30 applications from self-identifying disabled people, 8 were for retained roles, 3 for control and 19 for support positions.

³ https://factsandfigures.herefordshire.gov.uk/media/16074/2011census-hfds_key_statistics_summary.pdf

⁴ "Worcestershire Demographic Overview 2013" Worcestershire Public Health Intelligence Team (2013)

⁵ ONS - Census 2011

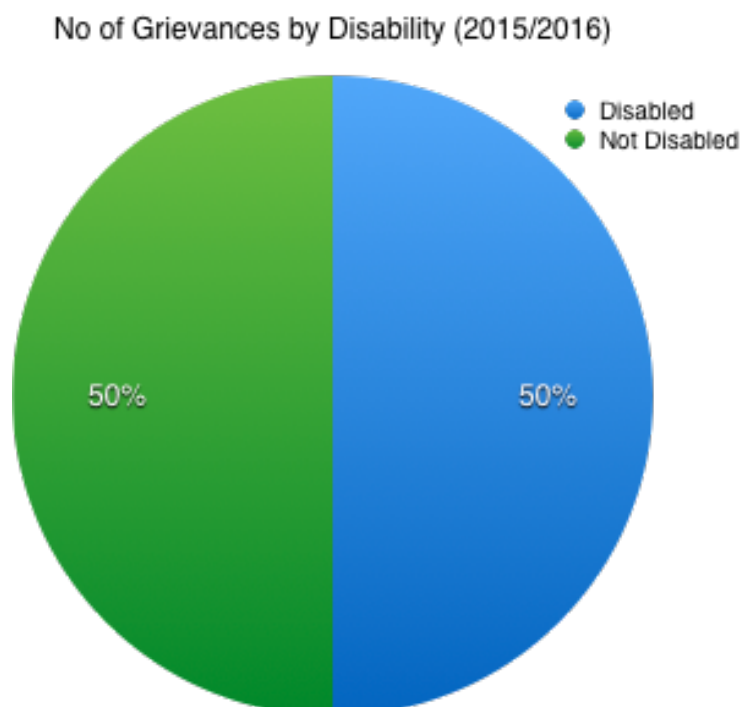
Of all 780 employees in the current workforce, 14 members of staff (1.8%) consider themselves to be disabled which is considerably lower than the regional and national level. Of these, 10 are in operational roles and four are in non-operational roles.



Of the 47 applications for promotion, six were from disabled members of staff and related to wholetime positions.

Seven of the 100 members of staff who left the Service this year were disabled. This appears to be a disproportionately high in light of the number of disabled staff in post. The most common reason for leaving among disabled members of staff was “resignation” in a virtually identical proportion to the all ‘leavers’ irrespective of disability.

There were no formal disciplinary or bullying/harassment investigations cases against disabled members of staff this year. However, three of the six formal grievances raised were made by disabled employees. Irrespective of whether these grievances were upheld, this over representation by disabled members of staff should be noted.



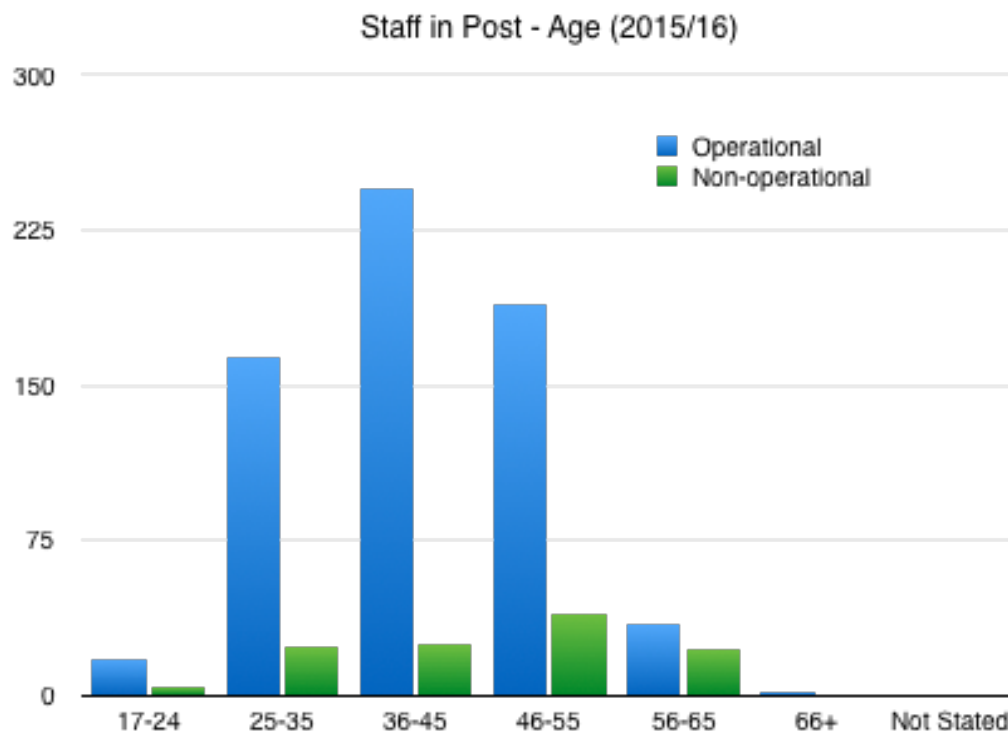
Age

Herefordshire has an older age structure than England and Wales as a whole, with 23% of the population aged 65 years or above (43,900 people), compared to 18% nationally.⁶ It also has a lower proportion of younger working age adults (16 to mid-forties) compared with England and Wales and a higher proportion of older working age adults (mid-forties to 64). Similar themes were identified in the 2011 Census for Worcestershire⁷.

This year, 71% of applications for retained positions, 75% for control positions and 55% for support positions were from applicants aged 17-35. Eighty percent of applications from people aged 36 and over were for support roles. Given that the counties have an older population compared to national average, the job applications are still heavily represented by people under 35 but this is perhaps, for similar reasons to disability, to be expected given the nature of the service and associated attitudes around expectations.

Looking at the current workforce:

- 65% of staff are in the age brackets 36-45 and 46-55.
- The third most common age bracket is 25-35.
- Eleven per cent of the workforce is over 56 years old.
- Ninety percent of wholtime firefighters are aged 36-55.
- The age demographics of retained firefighters is slightly more evenly spread with 36% aged 25-35 and 30% aged 45.
- The age of staff in control and support positions are fairly even spread from age 25 to 65.



Given the age demographics of the current workforce, it is perhaps unsurprising that all but one of the applications for promotion were from staff aged 25-55 and 82% of those that left the Service were aged 25-55. The reasons for leaving have been generally proportionate across the age groups except (unsurprisingly) retirement which was more commonly cited in the older age bands. The disciplinary and grievance casework is generally proportionate to the age demographics of the workforce.

⁶ <https://factsandfigures.herefordshire.gov.uk/about-a-topic/population-and-demographics/population-overview.aspx>

⁷ http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/1626/demographic_report_-_census_2011.pdf

Sexual Orientation

It is estimated that between 1.5%⁸ and 9% of the population are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB).⁹

This year 3.5% of job applicants to the Service identified as LGB.

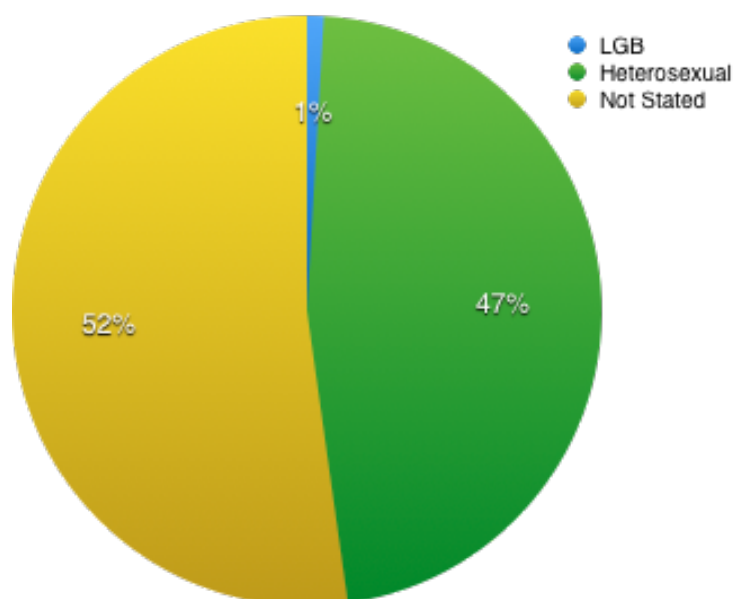
Under 1% of the workforce identifies as LGB and none of these members of staff applied for promotion this year.

Only one person out of the 100 people who left the service this year identified as LGB.

One of the six people who raised grievances this year identified as LGB which is disproportionately high in relation to staff in post.

One of the most important themes relating to sexual orientation is disclosure (see "Disclosure" page 11).

Staff in Post - Sexual Orientation



Religion and Belief

In both Herefordshire¹⁰ and Worcestershire¹¹ the largest proportion of people (68%) report Christianity as their religion, which was slightly higher than the 59% national level. Twenty-three per cent stated they had no religion, 0.3% identified as Buddhist, 1-2% as Muslim and 7-8% did not state a religion.

The largest proportion of job applicants this year identified as Christian (40%), followed by those that did not describe themselves as religious (39%). After those who preferred not to disclose (14%), the fourth largest group were Muslim applicants (4%).

Twenty-nine per cent of the workforce describes themselves as Christian which is disproportionately lower than the region. Eighteen per cent described themselves as having no religion. Fifty per cent preferred not to state their religion which is considerably higher than the regional proportion. There are no members of staff who describe themselves as Hindu and five who are Muslim, Sikh or Jewish.

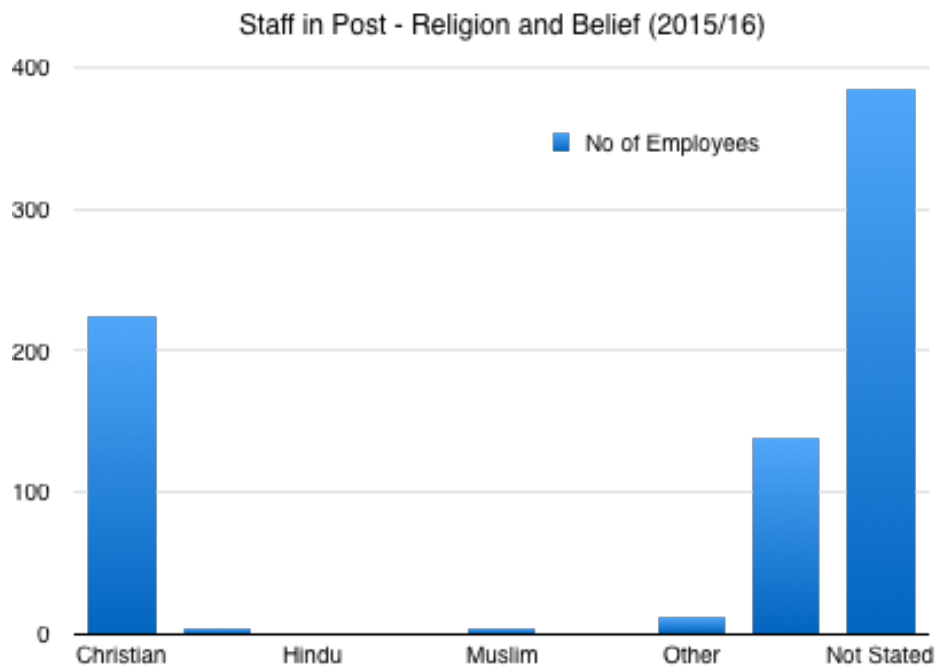
The religious identities of those that left the Service this year are not entirely proportionate to the current workforce; 62% were Christian, 34% were not religious and 4% preferred not to say. The largest proportion who resigned (45%) and six out of nine of those who were made redundant preferred not to provide their religious status.

⁸ Sexual identity, UK, ONS (2015)

⁹ YouGov (2015)

¹⁰ https://factsandfigures.herefordshire.gov.uk/media/16071/2011census_ks_profile_hfds.pdf

¹¹ 2011 Census: Religion, local authorities in England and Wales (ONS)



Four out of seven disciplinary cases and four out of six grievances this year involved a person who preferred not to state their religion.

Like sexual orientation, a key theme for religion and belief is disclosure (see below).

Grievances

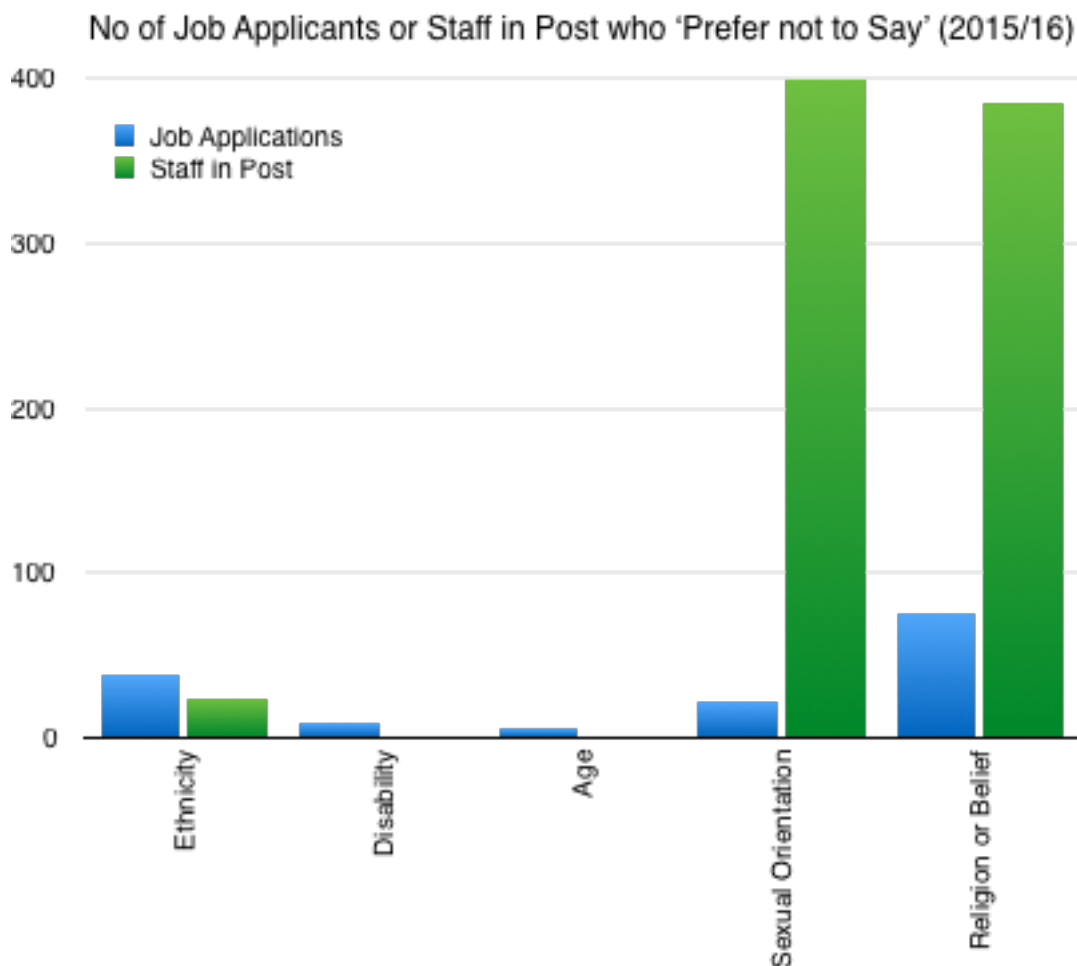
There was a notable level of political minority status involved in the six people who raised grievances this year. Two identified as female, three as disabled and one as LGB. It is important to monitor this issue.

Disclosure

Of all job applicants this year, 44% preferred not to state their ethnicity and 14% their religion or belief. In all other aspects of identity, non-disclosure rates were under 5%.

Positively, the non-disclosure rate on ethnicity is significantly lower among the *actual* workforce with only 3% preferring not to state their ethnicity. Also, no employees this year declined to state their disability status or age.

However, 53% and 51% declined to provide their sexual orientation and religion respectively as part of the E%D characteristics data collection processes. This seems very high.



Collection and Reporting

Job applicants provide their own equal opportunities monitoring data via the online form on West Midlands Jobs recruitment portal when they submit their applications. Given the third party nature of this step, it is difficult to gauge its accessibility and applicants' experiences if they do have difficulties.

When an applicant is confirmed as successful, a candidate pack is created from WM Jobs and handed over to the HR team to place onto HR Connect. The data is placed onto the profile of that person and the form is destroyed. For staff in post, in January 2017 an e-bulletin asked all staff to check and update their data on their personal profile via the intranet. Whilst this sort of 'prompt' has been irregular in the past, we understand that January marked the first occasion of a regular reminder which will occur every 6 months.

Collecting and analysing this data is an important way of demonstrating compliance with the public sector equality duty. It is therefore imperative that data is collected across all nine protected characteristics. At present, data on the following protected characteristics is limited as follows:

- Gender reassignment: data is not collected;
- Marriage or civil partnership: data is collected but not monitored;
- Maternity and pregnancy: data is not collected in a way which could be easily reported on as part of E&D characteristics data monitoring exercise. We understand that this issue would be dealt with on a case by case basis and in line with the Pregnancy & Maternity Guidance document.

The terminology for equality data monitoring via the forms on the intranet is in places a little limited and could be more progressive. For example, you would expect to see an 'other' category for gender and sexual orientation and it would be appropriate to refer to 'dual heritage' ethnicity options. A progressive stance on this and a shift away from traditional attitudes (eg a binary approach to gender) sends a positive message to political minorities in the workforce and is, in itself, an education exercise about diversity.

Turning to promotions, the recruitment team manually extract equality data from applications and record this on an excel spreadsheet. The tracker informs where the employee is in the process. On a separate tab, the team keep a 'tally' of the E&D data received. This is summarised data which doesn't follow the employee through the process. Like job applications, it is not possible to report on the E&D characteristics of successful/unsuccessful applications. This means the Service cannot analyse the conversion rates based on protected characteristics and makes it harder for the Service to demonstrate it is meeting its Equality Duty without the data as evidence. For instance, we know that this year the applications for control positions was fairly evenly split between men and women, but the Service cannot report whether the successful candidates was equally proportionate on gender. Starting to capture this may result in reassurance or impetus to exploring recruitment barriers including unconscious bias.

When staff leave the Service, the recruitment team monitor statistics by running a report via HR Connect. The reason (by category) for the staff member's departure is inputted manually. When analysis needed on casework (eg grievances raised or disciplinary cases) the HR team use HR Connect to identify the staff members' E&D characteristics confidentially.

National Joint Council - Cultural and Behavioural Survey

Last year the National Joint Council led a piece of work to assess the current position of the Fire and Rescue Service on equality, diversity and cultural matters and this involved survey responses from 45 FRSs. This concluded that:

- The majority of the workforce is over 40 years old;
- 95% of firefighters are male and 70% of control specific roles are performed by women;
- 96% of retained firefighters are male;
- 5% of personnel in firefighting roles and 3% in fire control role are from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities;
- Women and BAME personnel are underrepresented in managerial roles
- 91% of respondent FRAs were able to evidence their public sector equality duty documentation and policies

Looking at the national picture is helpful but it is important to remember that each FRS serves and employs staff from different communities. Hereford and Worcester Fire Service seems to experience the same imbalances as the collective FRS (particularly on gender and age) but the proportion of staff from the BAME community is a little lower than the national average.

Recommendations

1. Consider a review of the terminology and range of options in the data forms.
2. Consistently provide a 'prefer not to say' option for all characteristics in data collection processes and monitor those responses. This may indicate characteristics which still attract stigma and act as barriers to an open and respectful culture.
3. Add gender reassignment, marriage/civil partnership and pregnancy/maternity to the full data collection and reporting processes or otherwise ensure there is a mechanism to monitor these protected characteristics.
4. Consider why non-disclosure rates are disproportionately high for ethnicity at the job application stage and for sexual orientation and religion among the workforce. This may require reflection on a 'it's no-one's business but mine' belief and consideration of the benefits of an open-minded and trusting workforce (see 'Disclosure: Being our 'Whole Self' at Work', page 34).
5. Amend the data collection process to ensure collection and analysis of successful and unsuccessful applications for employment and promotion by reference to protected characteristics in order to further evidence commitment to the public sector equality duty. We know, for example, that this year 11% of job applicants were from the BAME community but what was the conversion rate? What proportion was offered a job compared to other ethnicities? If certain protected groups were

disproportionately failing in recruitment stages, it is important to know this and consider the impact of issues like unconscious bias.

6. The new regular reminder to staff to keep their data up to date is positive. Consider monitoring the response rate by retained staff who may not have the same levels of access to the office and may need a facilitated time to do this to demonstrate the importance of this exercise. Consider clearly articulating the benefits of disclosure, reflecting our communities and having accurate data (see 'Disclosure: Being our 'Whole Self' at Work', page 34).
7. Check that the current I.T systems are being fully utilised to their full reporting capabilities.
8. Evaluate staff's understanding of disability in its true broad terms using training and surveys. Also, seek to combat myths and unnecessary fears by exploring opportunities internally and in recruitment to demonstrate real life examples of adjustments which the Service has implemented to support disabled staff.

Framework Review

Leadership

In addition to committing itself to the National Fire & Rescue Service's values, the Service has developed a unique set of values:

- To value innovation, change and learning
- To value its people
- To value diverse communities
- To value the Service

The second value includes working in an "inclusive way" and respecting and seeing "difference as a strength". The third value refers specifically to serve all parts of the community, recognising diverse needs require diverse solutions and removing barriers to entry and seeking true diversity to reflect the community. The Service's commitment to equality and diversity is documented in the Ethical Framework and Code of Conduct. This is publicly available and is introduced/signed by the Chairman and Chief Fire Officer. The values are also clearly communicated in the Annual Report, which, again, is introduced, by the Chairman and Chief Fire Officer.

When asked in the focus groups 'who leads on equality and diversity?' positively several participants took the view that all staff must take responsibility for this issue. This view reflects the Ethical Framework which makes clear that "each individual has a unique contribution to make whilst upholding these values" (para 2.2.6) and encourages all staff to "demonstrate leadership by exhibiting the Service's values and embodying its culture" (para 5.2).

At a Fire Authority and service leader level, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer is the most senior lead. He is the Senior Management Board (SMB) sponsor of this review and report. In addition, the Head of Community Risk and Training and Head of Corporate Services are on the Senior Management Board (SMB) and play a crucial role in identifying vulnerable communities and developing policy.

The Policy and Resources Committee (PRC) deal with all matters relating to the development of strategic policy, financial management, assets, staffing and performance. The PRC receive reports on equality and diversity matters from the Organisational Development group.

Strategically speaking, there have been one or two senior people named as well respected champions of diversity. As they have not been openly or formally identified and promoted as ambassadors for equality matters, it would be inappropriate to name them here. The main mechanism for driving the equality and diversity agenda and challenging inequalities is the relatively new Organisational Development working group, chaired by the Head of Corporate Services. 'On the ground', managers are expected to deal with any inappropriate behaviour via formal and informal disciplinary mechanisms as inappropriate.

Leaders, and indeed staff at all levels, are very alert to and knowledgeable of vulnerable and at risk groups. The Chief Fire Officer is a member of strategic partnership groups for Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Whilst representing the Fire Service, the partnerships with other local leaders facilitate a collective contribution to equality matters. An example of this is the use of data to improve the safety of vulnerable groups. The Service is part of a pilot scheme in Worcestershire which focuses on five themes for improving outcomes for vulnerable people and involves the sharing of data and providing an element of funding. The Head of Corporate Services and Head of Community Safety are also members of other strategic groups locally for at risk groups eg WODA.

Analysis of the history of a random sample of existing equality initiatives suggests that quite often targeted work is initiated by Heads of Department or individual stations.

The Head of Community Risk is doing some important work with the four local Clinical Commissioning Groups in an attempt to secure agreement for the Service to provide additional value and support during

Home Fire Safety Checks. This sits with the development of 'Safe and Well' visits, an idea being explored and noted in the Community Risk Strategy.

Summary

The Service's values offer a public commitment to diversity and inclusion. There are many valuable initiatives and campaigns which undoubtedly benefit minority groups, including older and disabled people. There seems to be a firm and widespread commitment to seeking data-sharing arrangements to optimise all opportunities to identify people 'at risk' and to find new and innovative ways to support them.

Vulnerability overlaps with equality but they are not the same.

A clear and transparent equality strategy would allow the Service to expand upon its values, by agreeing a shared vision for the Service internally and for the way in which it provides services to the community and setting achievable objectives. This would help the Service demonstrate that the leadership understands the importance of equality and inclusion to employees, the different equality needs of local communities and give clear direction to everyone at all levels in the organisation.

Local Vision and Priorities

The main documents which capture the Service's commitment to equality, along with partners, are:

- The Ethical Framework and Code of Conduct
- The Community Risk Management Plan 2014-2020
- The Community Risk Strategy 2017-2020
- The Annual Report(s)

The Annual Report briefly analyses the key characteristics of the various districts. From an equality and diversity perspective, the commentary is generally limited to affluence and age. The breakdown of demographic information in the Annual Report¹² could include a breakdown of minority groups/protected characteristics in the area to show a consistent interaction with equality and diversity. However, it does outline some key partnership initiatives which relate to an equalities agenda:

- The **Signposting** initiative which, in conjunction with partners, connects people to services that can provide them additional support and assistance. Last year the Signposting service received over 1,000 referrals for Home Fire Safety Checks for "at-risk" members of the community. Out of these referrals the Service connected people to additional services leading to over 200 further requests for extra help.
- The Service is a member of **Community Safety Partnerships** across the two counties, pooling information to link the emergency services with other support agencies such as social services, primary care trusts, housing association and voluntary organisations such as Age UK and Mind. In the last year, work has included water, road and fire safety as well as supporting the health inequalities agenda.
- Working with the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and other fire and rescue services in the region, the Service assesses **NHS data** in order to access important information on elderly people likely to have health issues and be more at risk of fire.
- The Service's **volunteering model** has been shared with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service and its signposting and partnership working models were shared with a number of charities including Age UK and the British Red Cross.
- Crew members from Bromsgrove fire station were involved in making and screening a new film to raise people's awareness about recognising the signs of **early onset dementia** in young people. The film called The Shout, featured a firefighter with dementia and highlighted some of the early warning signs to look out for that can be easily missed in a younger or middle-aged person.
- In January 2016, the Service signed up to the national **Mind Blue Light Pledge** to promote mental health awareness in the workplace and tackle the stigma about speaking openly about it. This initiative aims to ensure the Service is aware of the need to support the mental health of crews. It is supported by additional guidance for managers and action plans, which review key policies such as sickness, capability and stress management. Within the Annual Report¹³ the indication is that the pledge is related to both workplace and community mental health, however, the internal discussions undertaken have suggested this is specifically an internal promotion.

The Community Risk Strategy 2017-2020 is a new policy document which seeks to demonstrate the organisation's commitment to improving the safety, health and wellbeing of the community. It identifies five priorities for prevention and seeks to support the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). The document does not make any specific reference to equality but "vulnerable people" are highlighted in two priorities: "to reduce the number of accidental fires in the home" and "to improve the health and wellbeing of the people in our area".

In interviews and the focus groups, staff were able to discuss partnerships and initiatives in place which serve either staff, the community or both. Knowledge of these initiatives and partnerships was strong. The police, NHS, Mind and Age UK and Local Authorities were identified as key partners.

¹² Annual Report, page 8

¹³ Annual Report, page 54-55

It was understood that some initiatives stem from mandatory relationships such as the Community Safety Partnerships. Exploratory work with the local Clinical Commissioning Groups is hoped to lead to innovative new ways of working which address the needs of 'at risk' communities. Other initiatives, like "The Shout" film, evolve from internal motivation or seizing opportunities that arise. Focus group participants did not appear to be confident on how they would highlight a potential opportunity for internal initiatives, however, operational staff were more confident about making outward-facing community partnerships as and when they became aware of a local need.

It is difficult to see from an external perspective which specific communities are considered to be high risk. They are not identified in the Community Risk Management Plan or the Community Risk Strategy, although references to 'vulnerable groups' as a catch-all term is, of course, made in most documents.

Information is gathered to identify 'at risk' groups using:

- Incident and activity data (both national and local)
- Learning reflections from professional judgement and research works
- Use of risk modelling techniques

Neither focus group were able to name any specific "equality priorities", although reference was made to vulnerable groups within the community and so was a sense of striving to work in a way that is 'fair to everybody'. There was some confusion over whether there were any localised equality priorities and the participants in both groups became notably more confident discussing vulnerable/'at risk' groups and how they were supported by operational staff. When asked, the focus groups identified 'at risk' groups as:

- People who live alone
- Elderly people
- People living in areas of deprivation
- Those with physical or mental disabilities
- Those with substance abuse problems
- Young people who aren't in mainstream education
- Young children
- Older teenagers
- Migrant communities (particularly during periods of seasonal farm-based work).

Two people in the focus groups said "we lack knowledge on who our community is". Conversely, some staff were confident that the Service knows its community well and are responsive to its needs. An example was given of working with local caravan site communities to support them understand risk factors in the setting. There was also a concern that when internal systems such as Mosaic and MARAC meetings do not highlight potential vulnerable communities that they may 'fall through the net.'

Focus group members consistently had robust knowledge of vulnerable groups which were considered 'at risk', however there was difficulty expressed around the idea of engaging with communities when they were asked to think specifically about those with protected characteristics (under the Equality Act 2010).

Vulnerability and protected characteristics overlap but are not the same.

The Head of Corporate Services perceives that the Service has tried very hard with limited success at securing partnership organisations to sit on strategic groups within the Service in a more long term arrangement in order to shape local vision and set priorities. The partnership arrangements for specific initiatives are however very strong. The Communications team are keen to explore 'hard to reach' groups (see Effective Communication, page 29).

Interviewees in senior roles openly perceive that the Service probably isn't utilising the existing equality objectives in planning and policy at this present time.

Focus group participants discussed confidence about operational staff interacting with members of at risk groups and using the signposting system. This supports the Annual report's¹⁴ reflection on community partnerships for community gain. However within the Annual Report there were no reflections on working in the community with a focus on issues of equality.

¹⁴ Annual Report, page 34

There does not appear to be a cohesive structured process for vulnerable communities or those from protected characteristics groups to be involved with shaping local vision and setting local priorities. Although several interviewees and focus group participants suggested that staff interacting with the public are committed to being helpful and to signposting wherever possible to support a person considered to 'vulnerable'. Formal consultation exercises, using an expert external provider, carefully secure contact with people from the full range of protected characteristics but anecdotally interviewees have raised concerns about the accessibility and inclusion of a few public meetings. Sadly, numerous individuals stated that they did not believe public-facing staff were conscious of potential issues when dealing with a minority group member through lack of knowledge and training.

When considering whether equality objectives are reflected in local strategic planning, there was little knowledge from staff members on whether this is happening. Two interviewees referenced a localised priority to hire more women in the fire service and one individual mentioned a localised effort to consider how to encourage minority ethnic communities to apply for operational positions. A common thread across both focus groups and interviews was a sense of equality objectives being 'wooly'. This is a shame because there is clearly positive hard work going on but it is not being presented to staff as part of an 'equality agenda'. This has the effect potentially of unintentionally devaluing the Service's commitment to equality and diversity. Several interviews suggested that it was difficult to have conversations about the equality and minority groups (internally and externally) as staff are worried about 'saying the wrong thing' or getting into trouble (see page 33). Numerous focus group participants and interviewees referenced a belief that equality priorities were a 'box ticking' exercise that were in place to safeguard the organisation not change behaviour.

Interviewees have not been able to identify whether or to what extent communities have been involved in shaping vision and setting priorities, other than through representation of interests via partner organisations eg charities.

There is definitely evidence of shared objectives with key stakeholders and partners to improve the health and wellbeing and reduce risk of harm to certain groups eg older people. It has been difficult to identify a single coherent shared vision with partners for equality generally and across all protected characteristics.

Turning to resourcing, clearly the Service is experiencing the challenge of meeting needs in light of financial pressures. Despite this, many interviewees did not perceive funding to be the key barrier to pushing forward with an equality agenda and two were very confident a budget could always be secured for valuable targeted work. More strategically, there is evidence of allocating resources to deliver a shared equality vision via the time and financial contribution being made to a pilot scheme in Worcestershire which focuses on five themes for improving outcomes for vulnerable people including data.

As the equality priorities are not publicly set out, it is difficult to see how the Service can be seen to monitor and evaluate performance against this. This is similar to the lack of robust monitoring of the Service's unique equality objectives (see 'Meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty', page 24. However, there is no doubt that evaluation is being performed on broader partnership programmes.

The Service is exploring many new partnership arrangements, such as bidding for providing a patient discharge service in collaboration with Age UK and seeking to collaborate with Worcester University's undergraduate occupational therapists to provide much needed support to older people and people with dementia. The arrangements are not yet in place so outcomes cannot be assessed.

Summary

A lot of good work is being done by individuals who are passionate about serving the community and particularly vulnerable people. There are programmes emerging or in existence which target specific groups identified as a local priority. Confidence levels in established processes like signposting and Home Fire Safety Checks are high. Many people are leading on new strategic partnerships to deliver Services differently to meet local needs in light of shrinking budgets. Knowledge of local 'at risk' groups is also strong.

Interviewees and focus group participants struggled to articulate a clear 'shared vision' across the two counties with partners. There was a perception that most initiatives are responsive rather than part of a clear plan. This may not be the case and, if it is not, this is a communication issue not a strategy problem.

Corporate Policies and Processes

The Service's equality impact assessment process was reviewed internally in 2013. The full Business Impact Assessment Form and equality and diversity guidance notes were implemented in 2014. Operational Support were notified and asked to implement these. An article was placed on the Service Bulletin to communicate this with all staff.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission advises that assessing the impact on equality of policies and practices is an important part of complying with the general equality duty under the Equality Act 2010 (see 'Meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty', page 24). Although the general equality duty does not specify how to undertake these assessments, case law from the previous duties indicates that these assessments should be done before decisions are made and that a written record is useful for demonstrating compliance.

Anecdotally from interviews there is an impression that impact assessments are not routinely and/or meaningfully conducted as an equality and diversity tool. All Fire Authority papers include a section on 'Equalities' under 'Corporate Considerations' and these are publicly available on the website. Several interviewees questioned how much attention this is being given and whether impact assessments are being viewed as a 'tick box exercise' rather than a way of meaningfully influencing processes from the outset.

For many years, recruitment and employment data trends has been monitored annually by HR. The Employment Monitoring Report is provided to the PRC to advise on trends. The Employment Monitoring Reports are published on the Service's website. The style, angle and content of the reports are at the discretion of each report's author and so effective scrutiny is limited. For example, the PRC paper dated 21 September 2016 notes that "progress has been made in increasing the diversity profile of Retained Duty System staff with an increase in representation from female and Black and Minority Ethnic RDS groups". The number of female RDS increased that year from 25 to 26. The definition of "progress" here seems quite subjective.

The employment monitoring reports would benefit from a review of the data collection approach (see recommendations, page 13. Strong knowledge of equality and diversity matters and skills in data analysis must be found in the teams responsible for producing the employment monitoring reports as this is a crucial part of the public sector equality duty.

In addition to quantitative data, a question on staff's experiences of equality and diversity in the exit questionnaires would provide useful qualitative data.

The narrative and integration of the 'equality story' is definitely implied in corporate documents but could be stronger. For example, no reference is made to equality, diversity, inclusion etc in the "Our Strategy" diagram which is promoted in the Ethical Framework and Annual Reports. With reference to the Community Risk Management Plan 2014-2020, the Annual Report identifies activities which contribute to its aims. All areas of section 5 (Organisational Support and Development) have a potential impact on equality and diversity but there is no specific reference to this, the public sector equality duty or the Service's equality objectives. The Annual Report¹⁵ refers to the amalgamation of key strands of 'Health and Wellbeing' and 'Equality and Diversity' in 2016-17. Revising fitness standard and occupational health provision are referenced specifically, however, there is no specific detail on what changes may occur regarding equality and diversity. There is also no mention of the public sector equality duty in the Community Risk Strategy.

A key process for supporting and delivering accessible services is the signposting process and performing free Home Fire Safety Checks. All feedback we received and discussion in the focus groups suggested that these processes are very embedded in the Service. Colleagues immediately influential in this process work closely with and identify partners and seek feedback to check people 'don't fall through gaps'. The Annual Report notes that last year the signposting service received 1,226 referrals for Home Fire Safety Checks for the more vulnerable members in our communities and out of these referrals the Service then connected people to additional services which led to a further 1,663 requests for extra help to keep people safer in their own homes.

¹⁵ Annual Report, page 72

Whilst levels of confidence in and knowledge of these processes are very high, in terms of direct engagement in the community interviewees expressed a lack of confidence around appropriate etiquette with different minority groups eg disabled people or people of different faiths. One person explained how they valued an introduction made by a colleague to a local Mosque and the positive outcomes of this relationship. Another person enthusiastically told us about how a training session on domestic violence led to a deeper understanding of how women from different ethnic backgrounds experience different barriers to accessing support. Both interviews felt that these valuable opportunities for providing more inclusive services are limited.

In terms of how policies and processes are developed, all Service Policy/Instructions are developed by area commanders with their teams. These then go out to consultation internally via the SMB and representative bodies for 21 days. After feedback has been considered, the SPIs are taken to the SMB with a recommendation and a decision is made on whether to adopt it. There does not appear to be a particular stage for scrutiny by reference to equality and diversity (involving the community or experienced representatives) although it is assumed that an impact assessment will be considered.

A Positive Action Steering Group was established in March 2014 by a group of staff who were enthusiastic about improving inclusion and diversity within the Service. Several valuable initiatives were implemented as a result including open days to attract female firefighters. The terms of reference of this group are under review at the moment (along with recruitment) and this consciously coincides with the performance of this review and the development of the People Strategy. It is advised that any revised terms of reference include emphasis on the public sector equality duty and all protected characteristics. Gender is clearly an issue in recruitment, but also note that all 47 promotion applications this year were from people who identify as White British. It might be valuable for the group to take an active role in scrutinising the employment monitoring data and gain a deeper understanding of the 'make up' of the Service rather than focus on personal interests. It may also be extremely valuable for the group to champion an awareness-raising initiative about raising disclosure rates on staff's religion and sexual orientation data (see 'Disclosure: Being our 'Whole Self' at Work', page 34).

Numerous focus group participants were motivated to find ways to create a different impression of the Fire Service and encourage new recruits from groups not traditionally engaged (in their opinion) such as women and people of minority ethnic background. It was noted that those responsible for recruitment are experiencing tough challenges recruiting retained firefighters at all, let alone considering attracting applications from underrepresented groups. It is important that this challenge is acknowledged appropriately otherwise there is a risk that resentment for positive action initiatives could develop.

The consideration for exploring the option of part time contracts for retained firefighters in order to encourage more female applicants is an important example of positive action to improve staff diversity and reflect the community. One interviewee was keen to point out that initiatives to attract under represented groups, eg single parents, is important but that the Service must reflect on whether the systems and culture is ready to develop in order to support and retain any new recruits.

Turning to input into policy, when draft or emerging policies are shared internally for consultation, including SPIs, generally staff's interests would be represented by representative bodies and the public via the elected members.

Another vehicle for influencing policy on equality and diversity is the Organisational Development group, tasked by an Organisational Development Board, which is led by the Assistant Chief Fire Office. All 15 members (with the exception of three) volunteered to become part of the group. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Head of Corporate Services task the Organisational Development Working Group and provide the PRC with updates as appropriate. This is a very real way for staff to influence the equality agenda.

Other groups staff can be involved in to make an impact include "Health, Fitness and Wellbeing" (an outcome of which included identifying a new occupational health provider), Joint Consultative Committee and the soon to be established ICT review group.

Summary

There is some suggestion that the equality impact assessment processes lack teeth. They are often criticised in organisations for being a 'box ticking' exercise. Their true value is only seen when they do their job and identify a positive or negative impact on a vulnerable group. For them to do their job, the person performing or overseeing them needs to have a sufficient knowledge about differing needs of groups and barriers.

The annual employment data monitoring exercise is an important corporate process for reflecting on equality and diversity and evidencing commitment to the public sector equality duty. See page 13 for recommendations on making this process more robust.

The consistent messaging around 'vulnerable groups' in corporate documents is strong. A concerted effort to identify and communicate the Service's 'equality story' with reference to specific minority groups into future documents would be very powerful in advancing the equalities agenda.

Levels of confidence in the Signposting and Home Fire Safety Checks processes appear high.

Staff seem empowered to create partnerships and suggest initiatives to better support community groups. Confidence levels to make advances on the equality agenda *inside the Service* were not so high with some anxiety expressed about how this might affect career progression. The Organisational Development group members all nominated themselves to get involved and support policy-making which is very positive. The interest in a positive action group also demonstrates commitment from current staff to improve diversity within the Service. It is important that these groups are provided with training so they continue to feel empowered, to ensure their input is based on sound and knowledgeable foundations and to create a legacy impact by sharing this expertise in their day to day work.

Meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)

In April 2011, the public sector equality duty ("PSED") came into force under the Equality Act 2010 ("the Act"). The duty harmonised existing equality duties and extended it across the protected characteristics. It consists of a 'general duty' and is supported by 'specific duties'. In summary, in the exercising its functions, the Service must have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; and
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The Act states that compliance with the duty may involve treating some people more favourably than others. This is where 'positive action' comes in.

The equality duty covers the nine protected characteristics.¹⁶

The broad purpose of the equality duty is to integrate consideration of equality and good relations into the day-to-day business of public authorities. If one does not consider how a function can affect different groups in different ways, it is unlikely to have the intended effect. This can contribute to greater inequality and poor outcomes. The general equality duty therefore requires organisations to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations. It requires equality considerations to be reflected into the design of policies and the delivery of services, including internal policies, and for these issues to be kept under review.

There are clearly business benefits to the equality duty and the Service recognises these reasons in the Ethical Framework (section 4.3).

Equality data is useful for assessing relevance, setting objectives, planning engagement and for assessing the impact of policies and services on equality and good relations. Collecting and using this information across the Service's functions will help identify any information gaps and allow the Service to take steps to fill them.

Under the specific duties, public authorities are required to publish information annually to demonstrate compliance with the general equality duty. This information must include information relating to people with protected characteristics who are employees and those who are affected by its policies and practices. All information should be published in an accessible manner. The duty to publish equality objectives was to be fulfilled for the first time by 6 April 2012 and then after that at least every four years. The Commission advises that all objectives should be specific and measurable and stresses that "clear leadership is crucial".

The Service's current equality objectives are:

- To continue to embed equality and diversity within all aspects of service delivery and support functions
- To develop partnerships to promote equality

These are published on the Equality and Diversity page of the Service's website. They are not, however, referenced in the Ethical Framework or training materials which might explain why neither focus group could identify one.

It has not been possible to speak to anyone involved in how these objectives were developed and why. It is assumed that they were drafted by HR, approved by the Equality and Diversity Advisory Group and formally accepted by the PRC.

¹⁶ Public authorities need to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination against someone because of their marriage or civil partnership status but the second two aims of the duty (advancing equality and fostering good relations) do not apply to this characteristic

In 2014 the Equality & Diversity Advisory Group produced a paper¹⁷ for the SMB which included updates on seven actions that sought to advance the two equality objectives. The exercise has not been performed since.

Several interviewees have openly acknowledged that a process for monitoring progress on the Service's equality objectives has not yet been implemented.

The Service is currently developing new equality objectives. These have been developed by the Organisational Development working group. They are being put forward for 'sign off' by the PRC and then will require approval by the Fire Authority.

It is important to note that equality objectives must always be specific and measurable. How will the Service assess whether it has been successful? Each objective is a vision for the future and requires an action plan to identify how the Service intends to achieve them.

In terms equality analysis being part of the planning process, a succession planning exercise was recently performed. This looked at the retirement profile for wholetime staff; age is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. The Head of Corporate Services has concluded that this now must be broken down to other protected characteristics, such as gender, and look at promotion and learning and development.

Turning to involvement of the public, for the Wyre Forest consultation exercise in 2016, the Service commissioned an external provider to ensure all processes involved engagement and representation from all groups including from the protected characteristics under the Act. Only accessible buildings were used for public meetings.

At the moment, strategy on the equality objectives is limited so resourcing implications will only be assessed on a case by case basis. However, the position of Organisational Development group within Corporate Services provides access to budget and to the SMB for time and leadership. A strategy for the revised equality objectives, alongside the People Strategy, will need to consider how resourcing implications will be assessed.

This review has already identified many initiatives and activities that have a positive impact on various communities which are at high risk. Sadly, evaluation from a PSED perspective is limited as data is only collected on certain protected characteristics, commonly gender, disability and age. Analysis of the impact on different communities by reference to all protected characteristics is therefore difficult to perform.

The Signposting Co-ordinator has not been tasked with reporting or analysing the data by reference to the Act's protected characteristics. Any interventions around this would require the provision of training to understand the needs and barriers of distinct communities.

One aspect of the Service's PSED is to foster good relations between groups. One interviewee recollected two particular activities, one of which was an awareness day with a Mosque to create new and positive relationships with the local Muslim community. This connection was made with the support of an 'outreach worker'. Given there was a common theme in the focus groups and many interviews about 'fear of saying the wrong thing' there is a strong risk that progress on this part of the PSED will always be restricted if staff lack confidence to approach community groups with whom they are unfamiliar (see 'Doing the Right Thing or the Wrong Thing?' page 33).

Finally, the Framework suggests reflection on the diversity of decision makers and what the Service plans to do to improve levels of diversity. 'Equality monitoring' surveys are not performed to assess the diversity of decision makers specifically. However, one interviewee described the Fire Authority as 'older, white and mixed gender' and another pointed out the predominantly 'white male' nature of the SMB. The Service may see the Positive Action steering group as an opportunity to explore the future vision for diversity of the decision makers but this has not been suggested by any interviewees.

Summary

¹⁷ <https://www.hwfire.org.uk/assets/files/equalityobjectivesprogressreport2june2014.pdf>

The Service has devised and published equality objectives in line with its PSED. It is accepted that, to date, there has been a low level of monitoring and scrutiny. The absence of references to the duty in corporate documents and strategies suggests that, to date at least, they have not been consciously valued. This is echoed by the fact that no-one in the two focus groups - staff who are engaged in equality matters - could identify one of the Service's equality objectives.

Some processes are really becoming more robust eg by using an expert provider for the Wyre Forest consultation to secure contact with members of the community from all protected characteristics.

There is no strategy as yet around equality and diversity so this presents an opportunity to reflect on what the workforce and leadership will/could look like in ten years time and what interventions are needed both practically and culturally to achieve this.

Monitoring and Scrutiny

Ultimately the Fire Authority is the decision maker for delivering the equality agenda, under the advice of and via reports from the PRC. In turn, the PRC receive updates from the Organisational Development group. The strategic leads are the Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Head of Corporate Services.

The Organisational Development group's terms of reference state that its purpose is to support and develop staff in line with the Service's values and to deliver the Community Risk Management Plan to provide communities with high quality services. The group's five objectives are:

1. Embedding the Service's values into the organisational culture
2. Development and monitoring of the Service's equality objectives which are embedded into the Community Risk Management Plan
3. Development and monitoring of a Health and Wellbeing Framework
4. Development and monitoring of a Workforce Development Strategy
5. Horizon scanning

There are 15 members of the Organisational Development group, 12 of which nominated themselves to be part of the group. The group has delegated powers from and reports to the Organisations Development Board.

The group have had three meetings since its inception in June 2016. The December 2016 meeting had eight attendees and considered the review of the Service's equality objectives, commissioning this review, feedback from the representative who attended the AFSA conference and the gender pay gap reporting conference and an update on relevant Senior Management Board activities to note eg ICT, health and wellbeing and the communications review.

Elected members are also involved in setting and scrutinising the equality agenda as part of their role on the Fire Authority. Three elected members have taken a particular interest in the equality agenda and representing their constituents from minority ethnic backgrounds. All elected members receive equality and diversity training from their Councils.

In the next financial year, reports from the Organisational Development group are expected to cease going to the PRC and instead will be presented to the Audit and Standards Committee. The Service considers that this intervention will increase the depth and breadth of scrutiny and advance the equalities agenda.

In terms of resources, the Head of Corporate Services is confident that by having the Organisational Development group in that department this provides the equality agenda with better access to resources and support for meaningful work. Turning to funding for targeted (but non-budgeted) equality work in the community, the Head of Community Risk would seek to secure funding via underspends or would be happy to formally approach to the SMB for funding for projects offering powerful returns.

Turning to public scrutiny, the public are involved via formal and informal consultation exercises. The public is also entitled to attend and observe Fire Authority meetings and minutes are available on the Service's website. One interviewee considered that the public are technically represented at Fire Authority level via their elected members.

The Head of Corporate Services noted in our interview that the process of developing the revised equality objectives for the next four years has not yet involved the public but that this might be an important issue to consider.

Progress on equality matters is reported to the public via the Service's Annual Reports. These reports and social media channels are the 'public facing' method of showcasing any good practice. From an internal perspective, reporting is the responsibility of a policy officer in HR and this is actioned via quarterly reports to the PRC and, at a delivery level, via the Organisational Development group. Any teams/individuals who have led on a valuable initiative would be promoted via the staff weekly bulletin.

Summary

It appears that there has been a great deal of reflection this year about the Service's general approach to equality and diversity. The Equality and Diversity group was disbanded and the Organisational Development group was established with cross-Service representation. The idea to move this group so it reports to the Audit and Standards Committee would be valuable if it results in more robust scrutiny of the equalities agenda (which is currently quite 'gentle'). The positive action group was also placed on hold this year whilst opportunities are explored to clarify its terms of reference and give it more powerful strategic direction.

Effective Communication

The main formal and informal channels of communication within the Service are watch-based, by department, by role or management level and virtually via the organisation's intranet. The intranet hosts a weekly bulletin which staff are alerted to by email. The Communications team produces the bulletin. This team consists of a Corporate Communications Manager (CCM), a Corporate Communications Officer (CCO) and a graphic designer. The CCM has been in post for 2 years and the CCO post was created in August last year. The CCO edits articles submitted by the different divisions in the Service and leads on creating specific content where necessary.

The bulletin is contained on the intranet in a Word document. We understand that most staff motivate themselves to read the bulletin. The bulletin can be printed off, read out in team briefings and placed on noticeboards but this is down the preferences of each team/station. The Communications team are aware that retained staff may experience barriers to accessing the intranet given the nature of their role (i.e. time and logistics) and expect that managers are mindful of this. The Communications team rely entirely on team managers to notify them if any members of staff struggle to access the bulletin in its current format, eg due to dyslexia, but would strive to make adjustments on request. No requests have ever been made.

There is an ability to monitor the 'click rate' for articles in the bulletin although this is not enabled at present. The levels of actual access of the bulletin by employees is not monitored. At this stage it's therefore difficult for the Service to know who is and is not accessing the bulletin and whether this disproportionately affects certain minority groups in the workforce.

A communications review was conducted in-house in 2015 which explored access to and content of communication. The survey did not collect equality monitoring data so it was not possible to analyse the results by reference to protected characteristics and/or explore whether minority groups are impacted differently.

There are no routine open fora in place for staff and this would be logistically challenging with staff spread out across so many locations. However, open meetings are arranged for staff as deemed necessary eg a briefing on the HQ move. There are also working groups in which staff may participate via self-nomination eg fitness or the Organisation Development Group.

It is generally the responsibility of the Communications team to ensure equality and diversity issues and opportunities are communicated to staff. The opportunity to attend as (and the subsequent attendance of) a Service representative at the Asian Fire Service Association and Women in the Fire Service UK Annual Conference was featured in the staff bulletin. Involvement in these events were not promoted in external communications with the public eg social media. Opportunities to publicly demonstrate the Service's commitment to diversity and inclusion and fostering good relations should always be seized.

Each year, the CCM plots out key events throughout the year in the team's calendar and sets up meetings with relevant project leads to identify external and internal communication needs. The team is small and it can therefore be challenging if they are involved in initiatives at a late stage, although their experiences are improving.

The Service reports that media coverage has increased significantly over the last year. A key reason for this is said to be the proactive efforts of the team and wider Service seeking opportunities. The Service's website, which was relaunched in 2015, attracts around 25,000 'hits' per month (an increase over previous years). This includes an accessibility page which also encourages the public, in nine different languages, to request information in another language if required. It is not known why these nine languages were selected as this pre-dates the current team. No requests for information in another language have been made in the last two years. Visits to the Service's Twitter and Facebook accounts have also increased. Website and social media channels are vital tools to access certain groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 and to advance the Service's equality objectives.

The Service has also developed its YouTube channel. Currently videos include a recruitment video for retained firefighters (in which women are well-represented) and one which raises awareness of early-onset dementia.

The Communications team have not been involved in an exercise to identify and target 'hard to reach' groups but would like the opportunity to do so. It is anticipated that this sort of exercise might align well with any work flowing from the Positive Action group but should ultimately tie in with a wider strategy to identify minority groups.

Images for communications are sourced from an internal bank of photographs. The graphic designer in the team is currently studying for a photography course to increase the bank of images available to the team. It is important to reflect what messages the Service sends out to the community and potential job applicants about diversity through an individual image or the overall impact of multiple images in a single document.

The comments and complaints page on the website is clear and outlines the process including three methods of communicating a response.

The website, Annual Report and CRMP 2014-20 encourages the public to provide feedback or comments directly through a range of communication channels including social media, post and email. The two key documents above offer provision in another language, large print or audio format.

Consultation exercises also encourage dialogue through a range of channels. The Wyre Forest Consultation 2015 document promotes the provision of feedback via questionnaire (in hard copy or online), attending a public meeting or otherwise by telephone, letter, email or social media. Promotion of the exercise was made across a range of media including radio and newspaper which is important for accessing a diverse range of communities. The questionnaire sought to capture respondents' gender, age, disability status and ethnicity. The graphic designer would be happy to amend documents wherever possible (eg font size) on request. There have been no such requests in recent memory. The Service is not currently aware of any 'easy read' suppliers which could be called upon to reproduce its publications if needed.

One focus group participant recalled the lack of level access at a public event at a station in Malvern. A parent with a pushchair carried her child's buggy up the stairs to attend the event. The lack of baby change facilities was also noted by this member of staff. This raises an important issue about environments being inclusive and accessible for both staff and the community. In terms of events like open days, these are organised by the stations and not centrally which is why issues like accessibility may fall through the net. It is understood that Place Partnership should have information on all buildings and levels of accessibility. It might be useful to remind staff, via the bulletin, about organising events, of resources that are available to make them more inclusive and why the Service has to go 'the extra mile' under the public sector equality duty.

Turning to formal procedural matters, the Service's equality objectives are published on the equality and diversity page of its website. The page might benefit from some more information for a member of the public to understand their value and purpose. A link is provided to a paper by which the PRC sought to provide assurance on the Service's progress. The paper is internal, in 'corporate speak' and around two and half years old. This risks sending a message that the equality and diversity agenda is not a live and prioritised issue.

Secondly, we have considered the Ethical Framework. This is available to the public on the website via the equality and diversity page. The document does not state that it is available in alternative formats but it does provide a helpful and clear glossary of a wide range of terms. Future editions of the document might wish to consider the following:

- including case studies and practical examples of reasonable adjustments, positive action, perception discrimination etc;
- Elaborating on what accountability means
- Signpost staff to handbooks and training to effectively embody the expectations of staff (para 5.4)
- Expanding the list of suggested external sources of support and advice (para 5.5) and categorise them by theme or specialism.

Summary

There is a lot of evidence of effective communication mechanisms. The Service clearly empowers staff to get involved and implement an idea which is intended to support and reach out to the community.

The Communications team have a strong channel of communication internally and a range of external channels to share messages. Strategic direction on equality priorities both in the Service and in the community would allow all staff to make a powerful additional impact through clear and consistent messaging about the Service's equalities agenda.

Framework Recommendations

Exploration of the 'Leadership, Partnership and Service Commitment' theme in the Framework has led to the following recommendations for advancing the equality and diversity agenda:

1. Consider developing, in consultation with staff and community groups, an Equality and Inclusion Strategy which demonstrate the importance placed on equality and diversity by the organisation and its leadership.
2. Identify who should lead the equality and diversity agenda from both a behavioural and practical/expertise perspective.
3. When promoting initiatives and activities, carefully communicate who they seek to target or support in order to avoid suggestions of 'wooly' policies.
4. Review equality impact assessment processes against their purpose.
5. Identify the Service's equality messages (and language that reinforces this) and take steps to ensure this is integrated in all future corporate documents.
6. Vehicles for staff to influence policy should be promoted and broad cross-sections of staff should be encouraged to get involved to seek fresh perspectives on an evolving issue.
7. Staff groups charged with influencing and monitoring equality policy and outcomes need robust training.
8. The revised equality objectives (required under public sector equality duty) need to be taken through a process which is grounded in evidence and results measurable objectives.
9. Take steps to ensure all policies consciously consider the equality objectives so that the Service can begin to openly embed them in strategy and in staff's minds.
10. All protected characteristics should be considered in equality matters but this is particularly required under the public sector equality duty.
11. Improving data collection processes on protected characteristics will enable the Service to identify differing impacts on different groups, help evidence fulfilment of the public sector equality duty and potentially identify gaps in delivering to certain groups.
12. Use vehicles such as the Organisational Development group and positive action group to explore opportunities for fostering good relations and utilise internal and, crucially, external communication channels to promote activities.
13. Continue to explore the reporting and scrutiny process for activities which advance the equality agenda eg is the Organisation Development group the right vehicle and, if so, are its recommendations and outputs being scrutinised thoroughly and by the right people?
14. Review the extent to which the public is approached in setting (and challenging progress on) the equality objectives.
15. Ensure any equality and diversity strategy involves clear direction on communication, both internally and externally.
16. Seek out opportunities to evaluate access to internal and external communication channels by minority groups in order to take steps to mitigate potential barriers.

Organisational Culture and Experience

In addition to considering the Framework, you asked us to support you with analysis of equality and diversity matters within the Service. The following section seeks to share themes which have arisen in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Independently, as part of this review, connections have been made informally to enable conversations with many employees from minority groups for example LGBTQ. Anonymity has been promised and preserved as most of these participants do not share their identities, experiences or feelings with colleagues.

Protecting the Community

In both focus groups there was a shared and very strong commitment to protecting the community. One person said “We’re not interested in your religion, colour, sexuality; we don’t want you to get hurt”. This ultimate commitment and a strong sense of ‘being fair to colleagues’ was very apparent from both groups.

When asked about equality and minority groups, participants and interviewees were less confident. However, when discussing “vulnerability” and “at risk groups” conversation flowed more easily. Interviewees seemed confident discussing how ‘vulnerability’ is assessed and the evidence-based approach to identification. It is perhaps worth reflecting on the public sector equality duty and protected characteristics to sit alongside this assessment tool because ‘vulnerability’ is not a protected characteristic although there is undoubtedly overlap.

Doing the wrong thing or the right thing?

In our interviews and in focus groups several people mentioned being fearful of ‘doing the wrong thing’. This seemed to refer to the nature of internal relationships and when interacting with the community. Two people used the phrase “walking on eggshells,” one person asked “how can I be myself if I have to always mind what I say?” and another asked “no-one wants to cause offence but isn’t avoiding someone causing unfairness in itself?”

We agree that it’s better to have conversations using ‘clumsy language’ rather than avoiding the opportunity to query a situation. Creating or increasing confidence around language and terminology can have a significant positive impact on confidence to communicate generally.

It is also, however, worth the Service exploring whether there is a cultural issue around fear of change. As an organisation becomes more diverse, the previously dominant groups are required to adapt their behaviour and styles of interaction. Without support it is inevitable that some people may struggle with this and, at worst, this can lead to resentment about diversity initiatives. Several interviewees suggested that ‘more long-standing staff members seem to struggle with engaging with equality issues.’ Research tells us that feeling exposed or threatened by diversity leads to negative behaviour.

“We Don’t Want ‘Tick Box’”

At least three focus group participants referred to the Ethical Framework presentation as “a tick-box exercise”. One participant strongly praised one presentation they attended because it had been enhanced to include a discussion over themes like ‘when is banter appropriate?’ This version of the presentation was delivered by a member of the HR team and is not accessible to all staff. When asked, no participants and few interviewees could recall any discussion in their annual refresher training.

One focus group discussed the routine question ‘what is equality and diversity?’ when they conduct interviews for new recruits. One person said “people usually mention some protected characteristics and say it’s about ‘treating people fairly’. If they don’t have an answer, I just talk them through it and they normally get it then.” This group struggled to identify, when asked, what purpose this question served as interviewees could be successful even with a disappointing response to the question.

Disclosure: Being our 'whole self' at work

Both focus groups reflected on why there are mixed levels of disclosure by the workforce about their religion and sexual orientation. Several people told us that they didn't think these characteristics were anyone's business but theirs. On a cultural level, this demonstrates a lack of appreciation of the power of being proud of who we are, for the impact this has been proved to have on productivity and for the barriers non-disclosure presents the Service when seeking to demonstrate fulfilment of the public sector equality duty. The Service will struggle to perform positive action exercises without data so staff's support for disclosure is crucial.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission recognises that some employees and service users may not be ready to be asked about certain characteristics (e.g. sexual orientation) and so it advises public bodies to take steps to develop a culture of trust so this can be done in the future. This involves explaining why information is collected (i.e. the benefits for staff and for exercising the Service's functions), how it will be used and how privacy will be protected.

A strong message from the Leadership on this issue would be extremely positive in developing this culture of openness and trust.

Behind Closed Doors

Multiple interviewees describe a 'lads culture' where public-facing behaviour is always appropriate but 'behind closed doors' internal behaviour and language could not be said to reflect the Ethical Framework. There was reflection offered that staff members feel able, to a degree, to report inappropriate action to their direct line managers. There were also multiple comments suggesting it would be helpful to have a specific contact within the service with whom to discuss issues of equality and diversity. There was also conversation in interview about the need to only disclose the more 'acceptable' deviations from the cultural norms but that if there was a minority status that could be invisible, to keep it so. The reflection on internal behaviours may not be related to overt prejudice and discrimination but may be a signifier of unconscious bias surfacing.

Assimilation

Two interviewees representative of different minority statutes explored the feeling of needing to 'fit in' with those around them. In these instances, it has meant a need to hide parts of their identity to assimilate more fully with those around them or make overt commentary to prove their minority status is not an issue eg laughing about diversity or pretending jokes don't hurt their feelings. This type of covert or overt activity can have a negative impact on a person with minority status; the process of trying to 'fit' in can devalue a person's sense that their minority status characteristics are important and respected within their environment.

Confidentiality

Two interviewees independently raised the issue of confidentiality. One was concerned that confidentiality is not always respected as they had observed someone inappropriately disclosure facts about an ongoing grievance case. Conversely, the other interviewee who raised this theme felt that respect for confidentiality was so strong that it might be impeding access to rich qualitative data which could be used to inspire valuable case studies in equality training materials.

It is perhaps worth considering whether perceptions of confidentiality are different depending on seniority and what impact this has on relationships and trust.

Data Management

Knowledge of data-sharing arrangements was strong (although one focus group believed there was an arrangement in place with the NHS and one did not). In all virtually all interviews, data was raised in some way as holding value and being more or less available in different areas. There was also discussion in some interviews that data is either not collected (or they are unaware of how to access it) to reflect any equality issues that may have arisen within the work environment. Exploring this further requires consideration of confidentiality and trust (above).