

18 January 2010

Equalities and Diversity progress report

Summary

This report summarises LGA Group activity since the launch of the government's Equality and Diversity Strategy for the Fire and Rescue Service in 2008 and asks members to agree future activity.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note progress and agree future activity.

Action

As determined by members

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Equalities and Diversity progress report

Background

1. In May 2008 the Local Government Association, as the representative body for all 46 Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in England, committed to deliver national level activity for the Government's ten year Equality and Diversity Strategy for the Fire and Rescue Service. This report sets out progress and asks members to agree future activity.
2. The strategy aims to support the service in tackling current inequalities, promoting diversity and fairness, and improving service delivery to all our communities. The strategy sets out, amongst others, ambitious targets for FRAs to achieve by 2013:
 - a minimum of 15% of new entrants to the operational sector to be women;
 - recruitment of ethnic minority staff across the whole organisation to be at the same percentage as minority ethnic representation in the local working population;
 - parity in rates of retention and progression between minority ethnic and white employees and between men and women.

The current situation

3. Ten years ago the Home Office found that there were 513 people from black and ethnic minorities and 436 women employed across the fire service in England and Wales. Today the picture is very different. It is to the great credit of the service and its leadership that we have progressed so far. More important are the benefits to the wider community in terms of service delivery, employment opportunities and reducing fire deaths.
4. The proportions of female staff and staff from ethnic communities are increasing but fire services do not yet reflect the communities they serve. In 2008 women formed 3.1% of the operational workforce while 3% of all fire service staff were from minority ethnic communities (national average 13%). At the same time public expectations of the fire service remain very high and improvement, led by the local government sector itself, remains a priority for the LGA. Latest figures show that:
 - the majority of FRAs have achieved level 3 or above in the Equality Standard for Local Government, a significant change since 2008, and,
 - 72% of FRAs have joined Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme to promote lesbian, gay and bisexual equality in the workplace.

5. One of the most significant internal challenges is a perceived tolerance of unacceptable behaviours which are an obstacle to change in the fire service. A survey of fire-fighters in 2008 showed that verbal abuse, bullying and harassment, the use and distribution of pornography, discrimination and physical assaults were still occurring. We do not tolerate this kind of behaviour in the rest of the local government sector and it is recognised that changing deep rooted cultural attitudes will not be easy or quick.
6. The advent of the Comprehensive Area Assessment and the Total Place initiative may well impact on local equality and diversity arrangements as areas look at how to avoid overlap and duplication between organisations, leading to better services at less cost.

LGA Group activity

7. Here we set out our achievements under the relevant work streams identified in the national strategy.

Leadership and promoting inclusion

- The Local Government Association launched a five point Charter for members with every FRA member in England asked to demonstrate their personal commitment to improving equality and diversity in the service by signing it. Seventy two percent of FRA members signed the Charter, sending a strong public message about the future direction of the service
- A network of Equality and Diversity Champions has been established and meets on a six monthly basis. It provides members with a forum for learning and discussion with guest speakers and workshop sessions
- LGA lead members and officers have, through active membership of the National Equality and Diversity Delivery Partnership and its predecessor body, been influential in ensuring that actions provide real benefit for FRAs.

Accountability

- The IDeA has developed, with CFOA, an operational assessment peer review programme for FRAs which has a focus on equalities and diversity. The peer review forms part of the organisational assessment that feeds into the Comprehensive Area Assessment
- The LGA, IDeA and CFOA have established an approach to improvement for those FRAs that perform least well that is sector led and proportionate
- The IDeA, working with CFOA, has created the Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework (FRS EF), a bespoke version of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). This has been sought by FRAs for some time and allows them to build on the work they have done with the EFLG, and the previous Equality Standard, while taking account of the five priority areas of the national strategy

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- The IDeA has created an Equality Framework Evidence Collection tool as an easy way to measure progress against the framework by creating an evidence library that only needs to be uploaded once. Information is then referenced so that a reporting facility can navigate and retrieve evidence from the library relating to particular issues, for example compliance with the public duties.

Elected member training and development

- The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) has developed a leadership academy for FRA members with a specific focus on equalities and diversity and has produced a workbook for elected members to complement training activity
- The IDeA with the Fire Service College has developed proposals for training for authority members around equalities and diversity in relation to community risk and strategic planning, involving the local community in shaping local services and scrutiny of policies and activities.

Sharing good practice

- The LGA, along with CLG and CFOA, jointly sponsor the annual Equality and Diversity Awards which celebrate outstanding performance and innovation and encourages dissemination of good practice
- Several sessions at the LGA's Annual Fire Conference in March 2009 were dedicated to equality and diversity issues. The feedback on those sessions was very positive and rated amongst the highest at the conference for delegate satisfaction
- A network of Equality and Diversity Champions has been established by the LGA and meets on a six monthly basis. It provides members with a forum for learning and discussion with guest FRAs showcasing good practice
- The IDeA website has examples of good practice and hosts an Equality community of practice (CoP, a dedicated online community) for sharing information and joint learning which has more than 900 members. It also discusses policy and is used to engage equality and diversity practitioners. There are also a number of sub-CoPs dealing with the Fire and Rescue Service, procurement, equality impact assessments and other issues.

Future activity

8. Fire and Rescue Services are facing internal and external challenges to making services more accessible to, and more representative of, the wider population. An ever tighter financial environment means that many FRAs are facing a slow-down in recruitment and reprioritisation of funding for community projects. For members of Fire and Rescue Authorities, in setting the strategic direction for the service, there is a need to both champion change and challenge senior management to maintain the pace of change.

9. While it is possible that the economic and political climate might affect implementation of the strategy, the LGA Group is committed to support FRAs in the coming year to:
- maintain and grow the member champions' network, including publishing a progress report at its meeting on 25 January 2010
 - devote a session at the LGA's Annual Fire Conference in March 2010 to equality and diversity issues
 - publish a discussion paper on member and senior management competencies, including whether senior officers need to have operational fire-fighting experience
 - ensure FRAs maintain their focus on advancing opportunity and fairness so as to improve community outcomes and attract the widest and best possible range of candidates for recruitment
 - promote greater understanding of the obstacles to cultural change and be realistic about the factors, such as low staff turnover, which mean that change may not be as fast as we might like
 - encourage FRAs to disseminate the outcomes of disciplinary hearings related to bullying or harassment in order to increase the confidence of staff in reporting incidents and to support management in taking action against perpetrators.
 - review career pathways so that the requirements for all stages of progression are clearly understood and seen to be fair
 - consider what action might need to be taken by FRAs should the Equality Bill, currently before Parliament, become law.

Financial Implications

10. The Department for Communities and Local Government has provided a total of £5m as an additional capital grant payment to those Fire and Rescue Authorities that commit to the achievement of higher recruitment targets.

Implications for Wales

11. The strategy applies to England only.

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