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NATIONAL JOINT COUNCIL FOR LOCAL AUTHORITY FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES

Employees' Secretary, Matt
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**To: Chief Fire Officers Chief Executives/Clerks to Fire Authorities
Chairs of Fire Authorities Directors of HR (Fire Authorities)**

Members of the National Joint Council

5th June 2017

CIRCULAR NJC/8/17

INCLUSIVE FIRE SERVICE GROUP – IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

1. You will be aware that a group led by the NJC has been undertaking a comprehensive piece of work engaging directly with fire and rescue services and their employees to consider equality, diversity, cultural and behavioural issues with the purpose of developing improvement strategies which could be supported across the board and used at local level to deliver improvement.
2. The group, which is independently chaired by Professor Linda Dickens, includes employer and employee representation from the National Joint Council and representation from the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Fire Officers Association and the Retained Firefighters Union. It has also engaged with special interest groups such as Stonewall, Asian Fire Service Association, Women in the Fire Service, Women in the Police Service, FBU women's, BME and LGBT groups, Unison, GMB etc.
3. Attached is the latest report from the group, which includes the improvement strategies and seeks the support of employers and employees alike in taking them forward and delivering improvement.
4. We know from your support to date that you share the commitment of the group to delivering improvements across the service and are therefore sure that you will wish to continue to support this work going forward. As such you are asked to consider the strategies suggested positively at both member and officer levels, how they can be taken forward in your own service, and provide a response by **28th July 2017**. Please return responses to Rachel Stevens - rachel.stevens@local.gov.uk).

Yours faithfully

SIMON PANNELL MATT WRACK
Joint Secretaries

Report of the Inclusive Fire Service Group – June 2017

BACKGROUND

1. The remit of the Inclusive Fire Service Group is as follows:
 - (i) the purpose of this group is assessment of the current position in respect of equality, diversity, behavioural and cultural issues; and
 - (ii) identification of guidance in relation to any further strategies that could be used at local level to further encourage improvement.
 - (iii) in respect of (i) above, to consider whether it is necessary to gather new monitoring data or whether there is sufficient monitoring data already available that can be drawn from e.g. the NJC survey, the survey conducted by the FBU, local employee satisfaction surveys, and other sources.
2. The group has undertaken a substantial amount of work in respect of (i) and (ii) above:
 - (i) The Behaviour and Cultural Survey - detailed research with fire and rescue services to assess the starting position (circulated to fire authorities - [NJC/6/16](#)).
 - (ii) Engagement with special interest groups
 - (iii) Focus groups with female, BME and LGBT employees
 - (iv) An all staff employee survey, whether uniformed or non-uniformed
 - (v) Four regional workshops with Equality and Diversity Officers and local union representatives (FBU, RFU and FOA) who lead on or have an interest in that area.
 - (vi) Two workshops with senior fire service managers (majority CFOs)
3. Consistent messages have emerged across the work undertaken, which has allowed the group to be able to identify improvement strategies relating to four key areas: promoting an inclusive culture (which includes tackling bullying and harassment; recruitment; progression and retention. These follow some important general points.

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

4. In general:
 - (i) Inclusivity should be embedded in every aspect of the fire and rescue service

- (ii) There is a need for visible senior ownership and leadership - to lead by example and to ensure that local strategies and initiatives become reality on the ground, thereby embedding inclusion as the norm. Within a service this should be at chief officer level. Within a fire authority a specific member of the authority should hold the portfolio
- (iii) Union involvement should be recognised as an important factor in delivering improvement, particularly in respect of peer to peer involvement
- (iv) Fire and Rescue Services should ensure the workplace is fit for purpose for all groups of employees including correct Personal Protective Equipment and gender specific station and fireground facilities

5. Promoting an Inclusive Culture

- (i) Fire and Rescue Services should ensure that all managers are trained in people management including skills such as how to have difficult conversations and that all managers recognise their responsibilities in promoting an inclusive culture.
- (ii) Senior managers should lead by positive example. They should challenge bullying and harassment behaviours at every level, ensuring where necessary that management styles change in order to drive a different and improved culture
- (iii) Fire and Rescue Services should promote a culture where challenge is accepted and welcomed as a positive contribution. This should be in both directions.
- (iv) Fire and Rescue Services should ensure that all employees are aware of, and understand, the relevant policies. Where an incident is reported and found to be accurate it is important that action is taken and is seen to be taken as a result. Everyone needs to be confident in the process.
- (v) Fire and Rescue Services should monitor the use of discipline and grievance procedures in order to identify and correct any problematic trends. This should also include an element of monitoring at the informal level in order to pick up issues at an early stage.
- (vi) Fire and Rescue Services should consider the creation of trained Equality and Diversity champions. These are voluntary roles based on enthusiasm and commitment and irrespective of seniority. Champions play a central role in actively supporting the mainstreaming of equality and diversity initiatives and disseminating equality and diversity good practice, whilst also supporting the strategic development of initiatives to create an inclusive culture. Consideration should also be given to the role Allies can play. In relation to LGBT for example, 'allies' is a term used to describe heterosexual people who believe that lesbian, gay and bisexual people should experience full equality in the workplace and use their role within the organisation to create a culture that is inclusive of everyone.
- (vii) Fire and Rescue Services should also consider the creation of mediators (and may wish to consider whether they should be provided externally as well as internally).

6. Recruitment

- (i) There should be a national media campaign covering the full range of the modern firefighter role (similar to the current Army campaign) and what the fire service does in order to inform perception. It should:
 - be supported by a website which would also include information on recruitment and potentially divert the interested person to their 'home' fire and rescue service
 - include information on selection (based on national guidance, not prescription) recognising that the skill set needs to be wider than operational ie people skills, and provide information on fitness requirements

This suggestion was seen, by far, as the most influential way to alter perceptions and improve diversity. It would be useful in terms of recruitment and retention. Recruitment because it would dispel the myth that the job is just about fighting fires and retention to avoid the job not living up to expectations.

- (ii) Fire and Rescue Services should explore, and where appropriate utilise, recruitment opportunities such as apprenticeships and cadets in order to increase diversity in the workforce
- (iii) Fire and Rescue Services should undertake greater and early engagement with specific communities/schools/colleges and not just when recruitment is on the horizon. This would further reinforce understanding of the role as it is today. This should utilise employee role models whilst being careful to maintain a balance with their core work.
- (iv) Fire and Rescue Services should ensure they have visible family friendly working policies supported by a greater use of flexible working arrangements.
- (v) Fire and Rescue Services should develop an internal communications strategy to explain the difference between positive action and positive discrimination in order to counteract the view of some that an individual has only been employed/promoted because they are female/BME/LGBT. This would be supportive to such individuals and also be helpful in terms of encouraging progression.
- (vi) Fire and Rescue Services should consider commissioning work in their own areas to identify any obstacles that local communities feel there are to applying to work with the service.

7. Progression

- (i) Fire and Rescue Services should ensure that promotion processes which are fair and transparent are applied consistently and clearly explained to all employees.
- (ii) Fire and Rescue Services should develop support networks and meaningful mentor/coaching programmes. (Note - mentors/coaches do not need to come from the particular group eg a BME mentor for a BME crew manager).

- (iii) Fire and Rescue Services should encourage interest in promotion in general and through talent spotting by including leadership training, opportunities for development such as job swaps, taster weeks and acting up/temporary promotion (so that an individual can experience the different role). This should be underpinned by a fair and transparent policy which sets out clearly the criteria by which such opportunities will be offered.
- (iv) Fire and Rescue Services should explore the greater use of flexible working arrangements which may also assist with improving e.g. the bottle neck at Station Manager level given the extent of on-call commitment which for some may conflict with caring responsibilities.

8. Retention

- (i) Introduction of a national media campaign as set out under 'recruitment' should ensure that recruits are fully aware of the work of the service and the part they will play in that. Therefore they should not become disappointed or disengaged as they progress in their career.
- (ii) Fire and Rescue Services should ensure that expectations around fitness levels are clearly explained, and support provided, including the potential impact of female only issues such as maternity or the menopause.
- (iii) As with recruitment and progression, Fire and Rescue Services should explore greater use of flexible working arrangements
- (iv) Where Fire and Rescue Services do not already conduct exit interviews they should now do so. The outcomes from such interviews should be recorded and monitored to ensure early identification of any themes which can then be resolved for the future.
- (v) Fire and Rescue Services should consider how best to maintain the interest and commitment of employees through the variety of the work undertaken within the role.

NEXT STEPS

- 9. Given the comprehensive evidence upon which the strategies are based together with the support and consistency of message across services and union representatives alike, the group believes that the above strategies should be welcomed by the sector and quickly progressed.
- 10. With that in mind, each service is asked to consider the strategies in detail and to advise the group of its response by no later than **28th July 2017**, including the areas it intends to take forward, the timescale within which it expects to do so, the improvement it expects will result (and by when), and who will take the lead from a member perspective (the assumption being it will be the chief fire officer from a senior officer perspective - ref. paragraph 4(ii) above). Responses should be returned to firequeries@local.gov.uk marked as 'Improvement Strategies and the name of your service' in the subject heading.
- 11. This will inform the future work of the group which will include a monitoring role to identify and measure improvement.

12. Guidance in respect of relevant data collection, recording and monitoring will be issued by the group once it has had an opportunity to explore the practicalities of doing so in more detail with FRAs.
13. Given the level of employee engagement in this work services are asked to ensure that a copy of this circular is made available to them in order that they too can see the suggested improvement strategies especially given the comments of many involved that they were pleased to see a joint employer and employee approach to the problems. Similarly we would also be grateful for circulation to Equality and Diversity Officers within services.

CONCLUDING COMMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT CHAIR

14. I am pleased to present this Report on behalf of the Inclusive Fire Service Group. Its members have contributed their considerable expertise and experience, time and energy to fulfil its remit and I wish to record my thanks to them and to the NJC Secretariat.
15. The work of the group has been informed by a range of activities and assisted by various individuals and bodies to whom thanks are also due.
16. These include LGA Research which was commissioned by the group to undertake the focus groups and the employee survey. The group also wants to thank all those employees who took part. A copy of the employee survey report is **attached**.
17. The group would also like to thank those involved in the well-attended workshops, and the fire and rescue services who provided the venues. All of the workshops were well received, with a good level of debate and consensus. The group also benefitted from its engagement with special interest groups.
18. There is a lot of general guidance in the area of equality and diversity but the group did not want simply to provide 'top down' prescription. As is clear from the report, the Improvement Strategies presented here reflect and respond to the experience and views on what needs to be done from those within the sector itself. This enhances the likelihood that their implementation will deliver meaningful progress.
19. The group is aware of work also now being undertaken through other channels such as the NFCC Workforce Committee, the review of the Equality Framework in England and the Memorandum of Understanding developed by the LGA which reflects a partnership between it, the NFCC and a number of trade unions and special interest groups to also support improvement in these areas. The group, and its members in their various capacities, have engaged with this work. It is important that these various areas of activity complement and reinforce each other.
20. These developments are very welcome, not least since they further emphasise that delivering improvement in this area is something to which the sector is firmly committed.

21. Members of the Inclusive Fire Service Group look forward to continuing to work with you in delivering that improvement.

Professor Linda Dickens
(on behalf of the Inclusive Fire Service Group)

