

In this exclusive *FIRE* white paper in response to damning culture reviews in the fire sector, **Jagtar Singh** and **Andrew Ledgerton-Lynch** report on the guiding principles fire and rescue services need to enact to embed a supportive, enriching and empowering culture

Ten key principles for creating a respectful Fire Service culture

This white paper sets out to address the key principles required to embed a supportive, enriching and empowering culture. There are ten key steps, which, if followed diligently, will become the enablers for a positive, progressive culture to be embedded within the organisation and in due course, across the UK Fire and Rescue Service. In spite of the high level of criticism levelled at fire services, the authors are confident that together, united as a sector, we can move forward.

Background: Racism, Sexism and Misogyny

Baroness Louise Casey's criticism of the Metropolitan Police as 'institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic' in *An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service* echoes the criticism of Afzal Nazir's *Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade*. Whilst Baroness Casey has called for a 'complete overhaul', Afzal Nazir addressed the similarly 'toxic elements' which threaten to undermine the Brigade.

Breaches of public trust and clearly inadequate standards of behaviour from fire and rescue personnel are reported on a weekly and sometimes daily basis, leading to a great deal of soul searching across the Fire and Rescue Service.

In the inspectorate's *State of Fire: The annual assessment of fire and rescue services in 2022*, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services Andy Cooke reports that many services need to improve



how they promote their values and culture. Seventeen services were issued a 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' grade.

Although encouraged by the progress in the partnership approach between NFCC, APCC and LGA in establishing the Core Code of Ethics, the report is concerned by 'unacceptable levels of bullying, harassment and discrimination'. Five causes of concern are in place in relation to values and culture.

Most services should also do more to improve equality, diversity and inclusion, the report states with some services not having taken 'enough meaningful steps to promote EDI'. A key problem, which will be addressed in this paper, is that whilst many services have a comprehensive EDI plan, 'they often don't lead to tangible changes in the diversity of their staff. And in many services, staff understanding of EDI is still poor'. The inspectorate has issued 26 'requires improvements' or 'inadequate grades' across the 44 services for fairness and diversity.

Chris Philp MP, Minister of State for Crime, Policing and Fire, has said that he was appalled by the London Fire Brigade report and believes it is not confined to the capital. "We cannot allow a small minority to taint the Fire and Rescue Service," he said. "Please leave no stone unturned in rooting out cultural problems. There should be zero tolerance to sexism, racism and homophobia."

London Fire Brigade Commissioner Andy Roe commissioned the independent review following the tragic death of black firefighter Jayden Francois-Esprit as he said that "we can no longer be blind to the worst kind of sexism and misogyny" and is now taking a zero tolerance approach to discrimination, harassment and bullying. Measures are being taken such as externalising the complaints procedure after the death of Jayden, introducing the Safe to Speak initiative.

It may be a long road back to regaining public trust but it is one that leaders such as Mark Hardingham, Chair of NFCC, are confident they can accomplish. "We have to re-earn that trust from the public but I believe we can go beyond

that and extend our reach into every community” as he urges the sector to unite: “We all have to come together to make the Fire and Rescue Service better.”

Positive cultures do exist, as pointed out by Nazir Afzal’s report, which is more balanced than media headlines would suggest. Commissioner Andy Roe is adamant that the watch culture should not be overhauled as it can foster a highly supportive working environment, as evinced at North Kensington Fire Station, which was recognised in the report as a supportive station with a strong and diverse culture, leading to a long list of firefighters and officers who want to work there.

Mr Hardingham has spoken of the 77 firefighters who went to Turkey. “A more positive culture and diverse group you could not hope to see.” Whilst acknowledging the vast amount of work that needs to be done, evidence to the negative contrary is everywhere, he says: “There is so much positive work in the fire cadets and those who go out and work in our communities.”

FIRE has extensively covered the progressive work of fire and rescue services over the years and featured Cheshire and Lancashire fire and rescue services in our February issue, focusing on staff networks, engagement and in Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service, its Equality Steering Groups, “the linchpin for all our EDI work,” according to Mark Shone, Head of Communications and Engagement. In Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service’s STRIVE – Services, Trust, Respect, Integrity, Value and Empowered – epitomises the values of the service in which the majority of its staff are proud to be employed. “The professionalism in the way every member of staff treat each other with respect, living out the STRIVE values daily, is something I’ve never experienced before,” says DCFO Steve Healy.

It is to these successes and equally importantly from the learnings of EDI professionals from within and outside the sector that we now address the key principles required to embed a supportive, enriching and empowering culture. The key drivers, however, have to be through listening and responding to those who have shown immense courage

in sharing their stories of abuse, victimisation and ill treatment in the service in which conversely, the vast majority act with humility, courage and compassion.

Applying Lessons Learned

After over 40 years’ experience in the Fire Service and over 15 years’ in the NHS, I feel well placed to offer an analysis of the recent London Fire Brigade report and provide an analysis of how this could and should be read across the fire sector and wider. We are ideally placed to offer advice, support and act as critical friends to all actors that have a key part to play in going beyond the conversations to make a positive difference. To date we have had too many reports and conferences that have failed to get the majority engaged. We accept that some in the Fire and Rescue Service have stived hard to drive the agenda. However, for the passionate leaders on EDI and those involved with and driving staff networks, it often feels that they are pushing snowballs uphill.

We believe that the rate of progress on EDI in the Fire Service and other sectors in the UK has been slow and the evidence of progress is not clear. Whilst all can agree some progress has been made over the last 30 or so years, Nazir Afzal’s report casts doubt on the rate of progress when considered against how far society has changed.

Andy Cooke, His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, has said: “Services have not done enough on equality, diversity and inclusion. Although they have had plans they have not led to change.”

Nazir Afzal’s finding that London Fire Brigade personnel are misogynist and racist is deeply disappointing but accurate and could apply to any fire and rescue service in the UK at different levels. Since his report we have seen many more cases emerging across the UK Fire Service, which has come as no surprise to our staff networks. In the last 40 years gender equality in the police and ambulance services has almost been achieved yet the Fire Service is still way behind. Race equality in all blue light services is

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dismal and fire again trails behind the other emergency services. One conclusion of the Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA) report *Smoke and Mirrors* was that the rate of progress is closely linked to the leadership of the Fire Service and also the political support from ministers and the inspectorate. The report tracked how recruitment of BAME staff and women fell when the Fire Service no longer had to report its progress to the Minister.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Issues to Note

As we look at the different tiers of responsibility for EDI in the Fire Service, we note:

- When ministers have made EDI a priority, progress has been made. The fastest progress was made under Home Secretary Jack Straw when he published targets and when the Department for Communities and Local Government published a national EDI strategy in 2004. This held the Fire Service to account through reporting on the national EDI strategy in the early 2000s. More progress was made than post-2006, once the national strategy was abandoned by government.
- In London we also know that under the leadership of Mayor Ken Livingston significant focus and resources were provided to support London Fire Brigade.
- With regard to NFCC now and the Chief Fire Officers Association in the past, we note that when the agenda has been given a greater profile, such as a chief officer being allocated responsibility across the board to prioritise EDI, progress was made. This occurred during the presidency of Steve McGuirk who led on the agenda and it was clear during that period that EDI was a core priority for CFOA.
- The first Fire Thematic Review on EDI recommended that all fire services should have an EDI lead that reported directly to the chief fire officer – something that is now not the case in many fire and rescue services. We are also aware that not all EDI leads have the strategic responsibility, resources and support to make an impact.
- The media has made the EDI agenda a topic of the ‘woke’ agenda and one that not many chief fire officers, local authority chairs, police fire and crime commissioners, and fire sector leaders have called out as incorrect. Chief Fire Officer David Russell, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, recent public support is commended.
- The structures set up for EDI in 2003 have virtually been eroded. The national, regional and local EDI structure that ensured the voice of all on EDI was heard is virtually non-existent and the EDI leads now compete with HR to drive the agenda.
- Our view is that EDI is much wider than HR. Equality, diversity and inclusion impacts on all aspects of the Fire and Rescue Service. We know from experience that the one tool that could be used to deliver change and reduce inequalities – Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA) – is poorly used by many services and in fact is not understood by those who lead the service at board level. Were a board member to be asked to show how they show due regard to EDI, we have no high expectation we would get a positive answer.

So, what needs to be done to improve the Fire Service culture across all areas, from fire stations to control rooms, HR and finance departments, to the board rooms?

We believe that in 2023, post McPherson report and the Jack Straw target era, we now need a concerted effort to create a positive and supportive work environment. This should be done through developing effective equality and diversity strategies that support the Fire and Rescue Service to deliver on the Equality Act 2010 and the business case for EDI. We need to create an inclusive workplace culture that values and supports all employees to deliver on the key objectives of the EDI strategies that have been coproduced with all stakeholders.

Recommendations

To do this we recommend:

1. **Conduct a structural review:** The Fire and Rescue Service should carry out a comprehensive audit at every level on EDI including the inspectorate, NFCC, LGA and trade unions. Identify the gaps and the opportunities and resources to drive the agenda faster.
2. **Set clear goals and objectives:** Identify what each fire and rescue organisation hopes to achieve through its equality and diversity strategies, such as increasing the number of underrepresented employees in leadership positions, creating a more inclusive workplace culture, or reducing discrimination and bias in hiring and promotion.
3. **Conduct a diversity audit:** Understand the current diversity and inclusion landscape by conducting a diversity audit. This can help identify areas where the focus needs to be targeted to improve and can help measure progress over time.
4. **Create an inclusive culture:** An inclusive culture is critical for ensuring that all employees feel valued and supported. This can be achieved through measures such as training, mentoring programs, flexible working policies, and regular communication.
5. **Ensure buy-in from all personnel:** Regularly review to make sure everyone is on the same track, then recheck and go round again to double-check that everyone is heading in the same direction.
6. **Prioritise diversity in recruitment:** Actively seek out diverse candidates using the tools of positive action and ensure that hiring practices are inclusive and fair.
7. **Ongoing training and development:** Provide development opportunities for all employees to help them understand the importance of diversity and inclusion and to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to support these values.
8. **Hold leaders accountable:** Leaders play a critical role in creating an inclusive workplace culture, so it is essential to hold them accountable for delivering on diversity and inclusion objectives. Use appraisal as a tool to link the organisation strategy to the personal goals of leaders across the organisation.
9. **Become a listening organisation:** Be led by leaders who listen. All personnel and under-represented groups should be given equality of access, a safe space to be heard and develop to their full potential.
10. **Monitor progress:** Regularly monitor progress against your diversity and inclusion objectives and adjust your strategies as required.

Prevention Strategy

We believe that ever since the first report on EDI by Tom Buke in 1994, the Fire and Rescue Service has had many opportunities to up its game and show commitment and clarity of focus on EDI by delivering outcomes that reduce inequalities. Marmot in his definition helpfully defines inequalities as ‘avoidable and preventable.’

The Fire Service has adopted that approach for fire deaths in the 1980s and then with that success used the same approach for RTC deaths. Why not use the same methodology for inequalities faced by our staff and communities as avoidable and preventable? By taking the same preventable and avoidable approach and using these strategies to drive the agenda, we will make a difference.

If the Fire and Rescue Service, like the NHS, was to use a data and a dashboard approach measuring its progress, we could monitor progress over a long period. Unless everyone at every level understands what they are accountable for and we have clear governance structures to progress EDI, we will still be talking about EDI as an abstract topic in years to come.

The first Thematic Review on EDI concluded that the Fire and Rescue Service should have a review every three years. To date only AFSA, with the support of the Fire Service Research and Training Trust, has carried out a comprehensive review of EDI with its *Smoke and Mirrors* report.

Nazir Afzal's report touches on only one of aspect of the Fire and Rescue Service EDI agenda so let us take this moment to reflect on what more we need to do. We look forward to the forthcoming NFCC culture conference and we live in hope that the actions will deliver real outcomes for all as we seek to reduce avoidable and preventable inequalities for our staff and communities.

About the Authors



Jagtar Singh OBE

served in in West Midlands Fire Service and in Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. Jagtar also was the first national EDI lead for the government and led on EDI in the first national

committee for EDI – Diversity Happens – chaired by HM Chief Inspector Sir Graham Meldrum.

Jagtar has written many papers for *FIRE* magazine and produced a number of toolkits on the subject of EDI for AFSA and the NHS. Jagtar is a National Advisor for AFSA.



Andrew Ledgerton-

Lynch has been Editor of *FIRE* magazine since 2000 and has reported and commented on diversity issues in the UK Fire Service since joining the magazine in 1998.

Partnering with leading

equality, diversity and inclusion organisations such as AFSA and Women in the Fire Service, Andrew has championed EDI through the Excellence in Fire & Emergency Awards and events such as Changing the Face of the UK Fire and Rescue Service.

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Fire Service Culture: Ten Key Principles

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