TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY   Item No 7

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE: 18 OCTOBER 2010

SUBJECT: LAUNCH OF E-NETWORK FOR LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL EMPLOYEES

JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER, THE CLERK TO THE AUTHORITY, THE FINANCE OFFICER AND THE PERSONNEL ADVISOR

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   This report provides Members with an overview of the recently launched e-network for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees of the Authority.

2   BACKGROUND

2.1   The Chief Fire Officer on behalf of the Authority has entered the Service in the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index Top 100 Employers[1] for four consecutive years. One key area for improvement identified as part of this process was to enhance engagement with LGB people, specifically with employees.

2.2   In order to address this development area an Employee Advisory Group (EAG) for Sexual Orientation was constituted to provide guidance in relation to LGB issues, advise on policy and procedural issues to ensure inclusivity for LGB people, and most importantly to provide a support mechanism for LGB employees.

2.3   Once established the EAG (including LGB and non-LGB members) undertook a project to develop an employee e-network to support the work of the EAG.

3   E-NETWORK SET-UP AND LAUNCH

3.1   Unfortunately, previous attempts to set up an employee network had not been as successful as hoped; this led to in-depth research into identifying successful models which existed in other organisations.

3.2   To try and ensure similar success of the new e-network the EAG decided to adopt a different approach in order to develop a useful, informative, supportive and practical network, which would be used by both LGB employees and non-LGB employees, to add value to the work of the Authority.

3.3   EAG group members carried out extensive consultation and research regarding e-networks and worked closely with the e-communications Officer to collate key details for the e-network and create an interesting and informative site.

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[1] *Stonewall is an organisation which works to achieve equality and justice for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and runs a national Index each year which showcases Britain's top 100 employers for the 1.7 million LGB people in Britain.*

3.4   Fully endorsed by the Chief Fire Officer, the Strategic Management Team, the Stonewall Diversity Champion and the EAG Champion, Vice Chair of the Fire Authority Councillor Nick Forbes, the first Service-wide LGB e-network was launched in September 2010.

4   E-NETWORK AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

4.1   It is vital that the Authority effectively engages with LGB employees to ensure as an employer it is providing the right support and creating an environment where LGB staff are comfortable, and feel safe and valued as an employee of the Authority.

4.2   Research shows that employees who can be themselves at work will perform to the best of their abilities, reaching their full potential, which provides many benefits for the organisation and in turn for the LGB community in terms of ensuring the provision of appropriate services.

4.3   To achieve a clear focus and direction for the LGB e-network the EAG identified six key objectives:

- Provide information and support for all employees on LGB issues;
- Advertise social and other networking events for LGB staff;
- Raise awareness for non LGB staff and managers;
- Provide links to other LGB employee network groups and support mechanisms;
- Provide contacts for LGB staff with issues at work; and
- Provide a confidential discussion forum for LGB staff.

5   E-NETWORK ACCESS

5.1   The e-network is housed within the Service intranet, and is accessible to all employees to raise awareness and understanding of LGB issues across the Service, equipping employees with the knowledge needed to be able to effectively serve LGB communities.

5.2   The e-network incorporates a confidential discussion forum, which is accessible only to LGB staff. LGB staff who wish to use the confidential discussion forum can request membership via the EAG.

5.3   The confidential discussion forum provides a facility for LGB employees to explore personal or sensitive issues they may be facing. Action can then be taken by EAG group members to support and assist individuals as required.

6   E-NETWORK BENEFITS

6.1   Committing to a LGB employee e-network demonstrates that the Authority is proactively supporting LGB employees and awareness of LGB issues can be raised throughout the organisation. Further engagement may also result in opportunities for improved partnership working, training, networking, etc.

6.2   An e-network is a more efficient method of communication in comparison to telephone calls, emails, etc. leading to improved communication within the Service and amongst the LGB group.

6.3   The e-network could facilitate the sharing of initiatives, ideas and common obstacles to help improve the overall Service.

7   E-NETWORK EVALUATION

7.1   An evaluation will be carried out in February 2011 (six months after implementation of the e-network) and will include an on-line survey for all employees. The survey will be designed to assess the success of the six objectives outlined in 4.3 and to consult with LGB employees on improvements. A focus group will also be undertaken with EAG members.

7.2   Quantitative information will be collected to inform the evaluation including the number of hits made to the e-network and discussion forum, as well as closed survey questions as part of the electronic survey.

8   RISK MANAGEMENT

8.1   There is a risk that the discussion forum may be misused however, this will be mitigated by the use of a moderator and managed in the same way as all electronic communications methods (email, internet use etc.) via the acceptable usage policy and code of conduct.

8.2   There is a risk that the purpose of the e-network is not communicated correctly, which may result in employees being overcautious about using it, or not using it at all. This risk will be controlled by clear communication as to the purpose of the e-network. There is also a risk the e-network is not used at all which will be reviewed at the evaluation stage.

8.3   A risk assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the risk to the Authority has been minimised as far as practicable. The assessment has considered an appropriate balance between risk and control; the realisation of efficiencies; the most appropriate use of limited resources; and a comprehensive evaluation of the benefits. The risk to the authority has been assessed as low utilising the standard risk matrix based on control measures being in place. The complete risk assessment is available on request from the Chief Fire Officer.

9   FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1   The work required to create and set up the e-network was undertaken as part of the e-Communications Officer and EAG roles and there are no direct costs associated with establishing the new intranet pages and a discussion forum.

10   DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

10.1   Some employees may not have the necessary ICT skills to use the facility and this could include LGB employees. Mitigation is via monitoring by line managers and addressed via the Personal Development Plan process. The e-Communications Officer upon request will provide extra training and support to use the discussion forum.

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10.2 There may be issues arising if any users have visual impairment or learning difficulties. Again, this should be identified via the line management structure and addressed through available support mechanisms.

11   HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no health and safety implications in respect of this report.

12   RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 Members are recommended to:

      a)   Note the contents of this report;

      b)   Endorse the actions taken by the Chief Fire Officer;

      c)   Receive further reports as appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The under mentioned Background Papers refer to the subject matter of the above report:

- TWFRS Intranet LGB E-Network

- Network Groups: setting up networks for lesbian, gay and bisexual employees - Stonewall Workplace Guide available via www.stonewall.org.uk

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