

SUBJECT: FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE EQUALITY FRAMEWORK

JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER AND PERSONNEL ADVISOR

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update for Members with regards to the Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework (FRSEF) and an overview of the Equality Peer Challenge process.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The FRS Equality Framework is a bespoke equality performance and improvement framework and was launched on 7 December 2009 by the Department for Communities for Local Government (DCLG). Currently the Authority had been externally assessed against level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG) and self-assessed at level 4.
- 2.2 The FRS Equality Framework has three performance levels: 'developing', 'achieving' and 'excellent'. Authorities who had achieved level 3 of the ESLG were migrated across to the 'achieving' level.
- 2.3 Having self-assessed at Level 4 the Authority was awarded the interim level of 'working towards excellence' (above 'achieving' and potentially at 'excellent' level; valid for a period of three years. An Equality Peer Challenge is therefore required to test the Authority's case for 'excellent' before the end of March 2013.

3 A NEW APPROACH

- 3.1 Local Government Association (LGA) has worked in partnership with Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) to revise the FRS Equality Framework to:
- Reflect the new national policy and requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty.
 - Bring the headings and structure more in line with other relevant equality frameworks to enable comparisons, information sharing and liaising with partners on local equality priorities and objectives.
 - Take into account the removal of the national 'Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Strategy 2008-18' (CLG).
- 3.2 The peer challenge is not an inspection but a process which plays a key part in 'Taking the Lead'; LGA's approach to self-regulation and improvement across the fire service sector. It aims to help Fire and Rescue Authorities to strengthen local accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services.

4 EQUALITY PEER CHALLENGE

- 4.1 During March 2013 the Authority is hosting a visit by a Fire and Rescue Improvement Team to conduct an Equality Peer Challenge against the 'excellent' level.
- 4.2 The team will be led by LGA Peer Challenge Manager, Ernest Opuni and will consist of two fire officer peers, one of which is usually a senior uniformed officer, a Member peer and an external peer from another part of the public sector.
- 4.3 The challenge will focus on the key performance areas of the FRS Equality Framework which include:
- Knowing your communities
 - Leadership, partnership and service commitment
 - Community engagement and satisfaction
 - Responsive services
 - A skilled and committed workforce
- 4.4 The first part of the challenge involves the Authority preparing a self-assessment, narrative and case studies to put forward the case for 'excellent'. The peer team will review documentary evidence and gather further information from a range of key sources, such as documents, interviews and focus groups as part of a three day on-site visit.
- 4.5 During their visit the team will speak to a range of internal and external stakeholders including partners, community and voluntary sector organisations, individuals from the community, Fire Authority Members, senior officers, firefighters and corporate staff to gain triangulating information.
- 4.6 Members of the challenge team are knowledgeable about, and experienced in, fire and rescue services and have experience of equalities. The role of the team is one of a 'critical friend' and allows for an open and honest exchange to drive improvements forward for the Service.
- 4.7 On the last day the team will present their conclusions and recommendations and this will be followed by a written report that the Authority will have the opportunity to consider and respond to.

5 WHAT IS 'EXCELLENT'?

- 5.1 The three levels of the FRS Equality Framework are referred to above in 2.2. Whilst the 'developing' level is about 'understanding the importance of equality', and the 'achieving' level considers whether a service is 'developing better outcomes', the 'excellent' level encompasses both of these levels and focuses on 'making a difference'.
- 5.2 A Fire and Rescue Service that is 'making a difference' will be able to provide evidence of positive outcomes which benefit employees and its diverse communities. The peer challenge team will be looking at the degree to which

the Service has effective self-regulation mechanisms in place, ensuring that its practice and the outcomes being achieved are regularly reviewed.

- 5.3 At 'excellent' level there is an expectation that the correct processes and structures are in place, and the emphasis is on consistently achieving outcomes across all the areas of the FRS Equality Framework, all protected characteristics*, and all areas of the Service.
- 5.4 Even if a Fire and Rescue Service is working at the 'excellent' level, there will still be areas for development that are progressing and this demonstrates continuous improvement. The team will make a judgement based on the submission provided by the Authority and the discussions they have had as part of the on-site visit.

** Protected characteristics, as set out in the Equality Act 2010, include; age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation.*

6 CRUCIAL ROLE FOR MEMBERS

- 6.1 The peer challenge team will wish to speak to Members as part of the challenge process as they believe Members play a crucial role in driving diversity and equality. High performing Fire and Rescue Authorities will be led by Members, officers and managers who champion equality issues, ensuring that objectives and activities are relevant to community needs.
- 6.2 Fire Authority Chairs will promote good community relations and ensure that the Service achieves equality outcomes and Members have an important role in ensuring that equality improvements are central to the Authority's strategic aims and performance. Their knowledge and understanding of the needs of their local communities should be used to inform service activities.

7 MOCK ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 A mock assessment was undertaken in mid-August 2012 and was carried out by Asha Pawar, Local Government Improvement and Development Consultant.
- 7.2 The mock assessment followed the same format as the Equality Peer Challenge and provided an opportunity for the Authority to determine any areas for development which can be addressed prior to the Equality Peer Challenge.
- 7.3 The mock assessment proved to be very useful with Asha stating that the Authority was almost in a position to be classed at 'Excellent'; however she did identify a small number of areas that needed to be addressed. The Chief Fire Officer has made the necessary arrangements to ensure that improvements are made in all those areas prior to the final assessment in March 2013.

8 NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 A series of briefings have been arranged for early 2013 for all staff including Members (who will receive a personal invite in due course). In addition, a leaflet

Creating the Safest Community

has been produced for attendees and further detailed guidance, along with the briefing presentation, will be made available via the diversity and equality intranet pages.

8.2 The internal project team are now focusing on preparing for the assessment by:

- Improving those areas identified during the mock assessment
- Finalising the self-assessment, writing a narrative and case studies.
- Preparing a timetable for the on-site visit.
- Collating all documentary evidence.

9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The estimated cost of the Equality Peer Challenge is £7,000 which is included in 2012/13 delegated budgets.

10 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Requesting an Equality Peer Challenge for the 'excellent' level of the FRS Equality Framework demonstrates a clear commitment by the Authority to equality and fairness for all.

11 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

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

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 The Authority is recommended to:

- a) Endorse the content of this report;
- b) Receive further reports as appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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

- Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority HR Committee paper: Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework, 1 March 2010.
- Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority HR Committee paper: Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework, 13 February 2012.