

Exploring Employee Attitudes towards Under-Representation. A Report on Consultation at Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service.

Executive Summary

The Consultation

The employees of TWFRS are the means by which the Service delivers its responsibilities to its communities. Staff consultation supports TWFRS in maintaining a high quality provision. TWFRS aims to reflect the communities it serves and to encourage a workplace that is underpinned by fair practices. The consultation is in line with the Strategic Community Safety Plan 2013-18, which contains workforce profile targets and the Equality Strategy 2012-16, which aims for an improvement in the number of individuals from under-represented groups applying for promotion.

It took place in autumn 2014, a period of ongoing resource challenges following grant reductions under the Government's Spending Review. This climate will impact on the achieving of targets due to decreased employee mobility. The consultation captured perceptions on aspects of workplace culture such as respect, personal development and inclusion that the Service through its values works to promote.

Twenty-four interviews were undertaken, twenty on a one-to-one basis and four by extended questionnaire. Confidentiality was assured, although most were relaxed on this, an indicator of a positive workplace environment. As the consultation explored under-representation, it was unsurprising that most volunteers were women. A varied profile of staff contributed, in terms of diversity and occupation, drawn from corporate (58%) and operational (42%), based at Service Headquarters (SHQ) and at stations. This equates to 14 corporate staff (12 from SHQ and 2 from station) and 10 operational staff (3 from SHQ and 7 from station).

Care has been taken to reflect the flavour of responses, in order to reflect the themes that emerged. These contributions are in the words of the interviewees. More detailed feedback is included in the full Report that accompanies this Summary. The interviews covered five main areas, which are outlined below.

Workplace environment and culture

"The culture is great. As a BME member of staff I feel valued; it is a great service to work for. The workplace culture is open and supportive.

"Respect is well embedded...You can see the benefit of the training we've had."

"We still have a way to go with the way that women are viewed."

"This is a brilliant organisation to work for."

"This is a very structured organisation; it can still have a role and rank aspect."

"We give importance to labels, for example operational and corporate; it took me by surprise when I started working here...We are one organisation."

“It’s natural to have different perceptions between the centre and the stations, and between groups of staff, but the service is full of good people.”

“The policies are based on fairness, but they are not always put into practice. Some people are on message but they don’t always walk the walk.”

“The theory is fine, it is pot luck as to whether you get a good operational manager.”

“We have made great strides but we are still a work in progress.”

“In view of the cuts I think that the Service is doing what it can.”

There is tremendous loyalty to TWFRS from employees. There is recognition that the Service encourages respect and of progress made internally and with communities. Within this context, a number of staff perceive a gap between organisational policies and their actual work experiences. Of these, most are women. It was evident that the attitudes of line managers, as well as colleagues, play a crucial role in shaping the culture of their immediate workplaces. Responses were influenced by factors such as occupational group and geographical location, as well as by personal experience.

Organisational structures are recognised by employees due to the importance of operational work, but opinions become sensitive when boundaries between groups begin to blur. They can be seen as barriers to flexibility, equality and consistency of experience, concepts that are especially relevant to under-represented groups. In large organisations there can be gaps between policy and practice. The successful mapping of TWFRS values into real experience can continue to be achieved through clear leadership, aligned management behaviours and employee interaction.

Career opportunities, aspirations and expectations

“I like it here but I feel stuck.”

“I crossed over from Green to Grey Book, but still watched male managers walk into positions.”

“Sometimes our equality and diversity principles can rub up against the different structures within the service...It is very difficult because of the nature of our work.”

“Roles have been filled that people who have been through the ADC have not had the opportunity to apply for.”

“There are some roles that are deemed operational that I wouldn’t be appointed for but that I would be interested in if they were more open.”

“It was easier for men in my [operational] area to get on, and that was down to my manager at the time. Women need longer to prove themselves to their peers.”

“We all understand that the cuts are necessary. Sometimes we can’t go for a higher post, yet agency staff can be brought in at a higher level.”

“I understand that there are few opportunities at a time of austerity measures, but you would like to think that routes may become available in the longer term.”

There is frustration with the austerity programme, tempered by the acceptance that circumstances are outside the control of TWFRS. There is an appreciation of the Service's specialisms and traditions, but not of practices seen as less essential.

A lack of understanding over progression routes or inconsistency of application can be a barrier to the flexibility TWFRS is seeking. Employees were losing faith in the former Assessment Development Centre process. This has been replaced by the Management Assessment Process (MAP), a competency-based set of criteria that supports progression. Improved clarity on the promotion pathways can benefit managers and staff, and enable development that can better deliver expectations.

Training and development

"I am comfortable with my appraisal process, I have an excellent manager. We sit down and review any development opportunities."

"My affinity to the Service increased when they supported me through a work-related qualification; it dipped when the qualification did not lead to anything."

"I would welcome any retraining, coaching or mentoring; it might help me to gain confidence or move into another area. My support is closely linked to my appraisal, I understand this but I feel that it is simply keeping me where I am."

"I understand that the cuts have been the main influence behind the lack of movement but the systems that are in place have not helped. I feel boxed in. If there was more flexibility it would help people to come through."

The consultation revealed a very good application of appraisals between managers and staff. Although interviewees are receiving developmental support, they do not necessarily feel professionally mobile. The consideration of succession principles has recognised that employees from a broad base should not be precluded from contributing at senior level, if a more diverse management group is to be achieved. Exploring competency as well as status will avoid a replication of the status quo that could inadvertently result from developing talent from the traditional managerial pool.

There are several qualified coaches at TWFRS. The Service has invested in their skills; yet their use appears piecemeal. A coaching and mentoring culture would benefit all staff, particularly those moving into areas of under-representation. This would complement the Equality Strategy 2012-16, which aims to raise participation from under-represented groups in the Coaching and Leadership programme.

The Service and under-represented groups

"The Service has done a lot on under-representation; if you do too much it can backfire if someone is not suited to a role."

"The fire service did need to change; it was male-dominated. It's gone too far the other way now; it's de-motivating. It is doing too much for under-represented groups, it creates resentment, what about everyone else?"

“We think we’ve cracked it but we haven’t. As a woman, I feel I have to take longer to convince people I can do the job; attitudes are still taking time to change.”

“I think the service is very supportive towards me as a member of an under-represented group; they have helped me in many respects. It would be hard for them to do more, but we still need to continue, it is essential.”

“We have a nice balance of supporting under-represented groups at the moment; we have got it about right. It’s not easy to achieve things quickly because we do not recruit and appoint much at the moment, but the equality work still helps the culture.”

“I would like to find a way where I can get there on merit; I don’t want to be seen as a special case.”

“Mutual respect has improved significantly over the years and we are all more accepted than we were before. Building on this doesn’t just mean monitoring; it will be about how we relate to each other.”

A goal of TWFRS is “to deliver a modern, effective service, ensuring value for money with staff who reflect the communities we serve”. The responses indicate that this work is seen as integral to the Service. Significant differences of opinion arise over how this can be achieved. Previous initiatives have increased female and BME staff recruitment, particularly in operational roles. There is still a long way to go before TWFRS can fully reflect its communities but, within this context, there is little desire for staff from under-represented groups to be treated as a special case.

TWFRS ratios of Black and Minority Ethnic, female and disabled staff compare well with regional and sectoral averages, although there remains, for example, gender segregation by occupation, with women heavily represented in support roles. When reviewing workforce composition, the impact of both external social attitudes and internal practices can be recognised. As the staff profile evolves, care should be taken to minimise barriers and ensure that practices respond to this evolution.

Work-life balance

“The shining light of the job is the flexibility it gives, this is incredibly important to me. With my personal commitments, I couldn’t work rigid hours.”

“Flexitime enables me to finish something properly rather than clock-watch.”

“I work shifts. It’s the nature of the role. It works for me and for the service.”

“I could work more from home but we’re a bit nervous about it, I won’t be pursuing this at the moment.”

“I used to work full-time, I now work part-time. The Service has been very supportive. It has helped me to stay here and I appreciate the flexibility I have. It also helps the Service in covering the office and working through during busy periods.”

“The options for flexible working are very good. Whenever I have considered other employment, I have realised the value and options that I have here. It has actually increased my loyalty to the Service.”

Good work-life balance is particularly useful for employees from under-represented groups, as working patterns can be influenced by their disability or faith, childcare or other caring responsibilities. In line with UK social and occupational trends, women at TWFRS have a greater take-up of flexible working than men. True flexibility works both ways, and can be enhanced across a wider range of roles when practical.

A crucial factor in successful work-life balance arrangements is the giving and receiving of trust between employer and employee. The indications from interviews were positive; staff value arrangements and are committed to delivering their responsibilities within their flexible framework. The evidence suggests that any extension of these principles can bring both employee and operational benefits.

Options Moving Forward

Workplace environment and culture: *Communicating and Reinforcing Values*

A continuation of communication from the top will be central to the ongoing strengthening of TWFRS values. Leaders need to talk confidently about principles such as fairness, respect, personal development and inclusive working. Leadership is also about exhibiting the behaviours required to turn values into practice. This will reinforce the expectations of all managers, who are required to effectively deliver management of employee talent, clarity of role and performance, and a workforce that is aligned to the aims and objectives of the Service.

Career opportunities, aspirations and expectations: *Defensible and accessible structures; Encouraging real opportunities*

Clarity of recruitment procedures is key to encouraging applications from employees who are less represented in fields of work. Skills, experience and qualifications in a selection process should be justifiable and understood. A widening of eligibility criteria to larger numbers of employees must be relevant to the Service's operations, but would access more talent and serve to gradually influence the profile and culture.

Although the reasons behind recruitment arrangements in the austerity climate are recognised, they are having a negative impact on morale. A targeted re-introduction of internal opportunities would increase internal movement. Agency staff could continue to be employed for logistical reasons, but on the basis of filling appropriate resource gaps as a result of a selection process, rather than instead of one.

Training and development: *Encouraging a coaching and mentoring culture; Widening the opportunities*

A coaching resource can have many uses, for example, for employees who change roles, become managers or wish to further enhance their contribution. Although it is clear that participants from under-represented groups do not wish to be seen as a special case, access to and interventions from an embedded coaching culture can be particularly powerful for staff moving into non-traditional areas of employment.

The accessing of development opportunities, including MAP, can be reviewed to as to whether eligibility includes not only grade and role but also merit and competency. This work can involve clearly signposting existing routes. By delivering targets on the participation of staff from under-represented groups, increased empowerment can move TWFRS towards what is known as an agile organisation, whereby women and men are productive and engaged, benefitting the organisation and service users.

The Service and under-represented groups: *Identifying pay gaps and taking steps to address them*

TWFRS has targets to raise the incidence of female, BME and disabled staff in the top 5% of earners. The defined pay structure means that there will be no significant pay gaps within comparable grades. However, the average pay of women and men indicates a holistic gender pay gap of 24.19%. This is due to the incidence of women and men across the grading structure, reflected in organisations across the UK. It is nevertheless a gap that can be reduced by removing barriers that will better enable women to achieve, and by encouraging flexibility of role for men in their careers.

In order to encourage the reduction of gaps across the diversity strands, TWFRS will need to review staff profiles and pay gaps across departments, staff groups and the wider workforce. A broader representation of employees from under-represented groups, together with more flexible progression, would contribute to meeting targets. The feedback from staff is that such movement need not be delivered by positive action, but by transparent procedures and an increasingly inclusive workplace.

Work-life balance: *Building upon good practice*

Employees clearly value their work-life balance provisions, which benefit personal choice for women and men as well as caring commitments. These arrangements can cover working hours, locations and terms of engagement. Such developments can provide options to employers as well as employees.

The nature of roles within TWFRS will restrict flexible working for logistical reasons. However, realistic moves towards greater flexibility will increase workforce agility and make employees more likely to move into non-traditional areas. The trust and loyalty from employees towards the Service indicate that any further moves in this direction, for example through emerging practices such as home-working and by widening work-life balance in general, can deliver both cultural and business benefits.

This consultation has been welcomed by participants and is in line with TWFRS' approach of learning from the input of their stakeholders. The responses reveal high levels of loyalty from employees towards their Service. This can encourage TWFRS to make further progress in delivering a workplace built upon respect, fairness and inclusion, which works in partnership with and reflects the communities it serves.