HMICFRS

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary
and Fire & Rescue Services

Values and culture in fire and rescue services

Contents

Scope

This report focuses on the values and culture of all 44 fire and rescue services (FRSs) in England and draws on the evidence collected through our inspections of FRSs since 2018. We define values as principles or standards of behaviour, and culture as ideas, customs and behaviours. We define 'poor', 'unacceptable' and 'inappropriate' cultures and behaviours as those which have or have the potential to negatively affect others. These behaviours include bullying, harassment and discrimination.

We have particularly focused on issues that have been seen in more than half (at least 26) of FRSs and are having a detrimental impact across the sector. These include:

- bullying, harassment, and discrimination;
- lack of fairness and diversity; and
- reporting and handling of concerns, including allegations of misconduct.

We know that the culture in an FRS can be heavily influenced by the behaviour of individuals, including those in positions of senior responsibility. We have, therefore, reviewed the competence of leaders from station level to chief fire officers in all services. This includes how they are trained and developed and how they behave. We have reviewed the training given to managers and staff to help them perform their roles effectively. Those who oversee FRSs' performance – including elected members of fire and rescue authorities and police, fire and crime commissioners – have a responsibility for scrutinising services and making sure they promote positive cultures.

It is vitally important that services promote equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace to make sure they are as fair and diverse as possible. When equality, diversity and inclusion are incorporated well into a service, staff feel included, valued and able to speak freely. This creates a positive professional culture in which staff can provide a safe and effective service for the public.

This report examines what is working well, what needs to change and the barriers to making improvements.

To help services to improve and learn from each other, we have highlighted some examples of promising and innovative practices we found during our inspections.

We use:

- promising practice to describe activities that we found to be working well in a service where there are positive measurable outcomes which have been observed or monitored;

- innovative practice to describe new ways of working in a service that may not have been formally evaluated but that have the potential to produce more positive outcomes but haven't been subject to any testing or monitoring.

Foreword

Fire and rescue services (FRSs) carry out a vital public service, helping people in our communities every day. But since we started inspecting them in 2018, we have repeatedly found evidence of poor values, culture and behaviour, including bullying, harassment and discrimination, in many of the 44 FRSs in England.

While some services have made some improvements since our first round of inspections in respect of values and culture, too many need to do more. It is well documented that compassionate and fair working cultures are vital to staff well-being, productivity, efficiency, retention and motivation.

I, therefore, welcome the commissioning of this spotlight report by the Minister of State for Crime, Policing and Fire. It is an opportunity to pay much-needed attention to this area and to take action to improve the values, culture, fairness and diversity of FRSs which are still so clearly in urgent need of change.

We have repeatedly expressed concerns that the culture evident in too many FRSs is unacceptable and needs to change. This led us to recommend that the sector should have a code of ethics. The code was developed by the Fire Standards Board in partnership with the Local Government Association and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. The Fire Standards Board published the code in May 2021.

Some individuals within the sector have argued that such behaviours are confined to 'pockets' of services. We disagree. In previous reports, we have described how some of what we found is toxic. We have been criticised by some for using this language. Again, we disagree. Our evidence shows that such concerns are widespread, and this report brings together evidence from a number of sources.

As an independent inspectorate, when we believe services or their senior leaders are failing to demonstrate and promote positive values and cultures, we will continue to bring this to the public's attention.

Between February 2021 and August 2022, we carried out our second full round of inspections. Based on our findings on values and culture, we issued:

- causes of concern to five services;
- requires improvement or inadequate grades to 17 services; and
- 66 areas for improvement across 35 services.

On the basis of our findings on fairness and diversity, we issued:

- causes of concern to five services;
- requires improvement or inadequate grades to 26 services; and
- 72 areas for improvement across 32 services.

Even services that we have graded as good in these areas have some staff who behave inappropriately. Therefore, the service can still be issued with an area for improvement. Grades represent a snapshot of evidence that was available to us at a point in time. And, of course, inspection may not uncover every instance of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. This spotlight report has helped us to review these issues in greater detail and in a more systemic way than individual FRS inspections ordinarily allow us to.

Between 28 June 2018 and 1 February 2023, we received 842 submissions to our independent reporting line from staff in every single service in England. A substantial number (218) of them related to these themes.

In February 2023, we asked every service to give us information about all allegations of gross misconduct currently under investigation or consideration from the last year. We also asked for cases of alleged misconduct and other grievances and complaints where the alleged behaviour of individuals calls into question the culture and values of the organisation.

The information provided shows that inappropriate language/behaviour and bullying and harassment associated with a protected characteristic accounted for more than half of the cases. Almost half of the case information shared by services related to closed cases. Investigations into some of these cases resulted in:

- approximately a quarter of individuals leaving the service, of which almost half left through retirement or resignation; and
- police involvement in one in ten cases.

Because the responses we received contained varying levels of detail, we aren't confident that this presents a complete picture. We also have concerns about the adequacy of reporting, investigation and outcomes in respect of the handling of conduct and misconduct matters. It is important to note that just because a service has misconduct cases, it doesn't necessarily mean its culture is poor.

Services must make sure that they are psychologically safe places to work in. This includes offering secure ways for staff to raise concerns and give feedback, without fear of repercussion and in the knowledge that concerns and allegations will be robustly investigated. We believe that further inspection is required in this area.

Our findings about two services (Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and London Fire Brigade) were serious enough to contribute to their being placed in our 'engage' enhanced monitoring process. Our inspection reports for these services were

published in July 2022. In late 2022, London Fire Brigade published a report *Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade*. The review's disturbing findings, as well as recent media disclosures, have quite rightly heightened public, sector and staff awareness and concerns about these issues.

Unacceptable behaviours sadly exist throughout society, and no workforce is completely immune to bullying, harassment and discrimination. But in those organisations with a responsibility to keep the public safe, and where public trust and confidence are so important, it is right that higher standards are demanded. There is no place in FRSs for any person who is unfit to fulfil a role that protects the public. Not only do communities need to be able to trust FRS staff, but in highly pressured scenarios and in a working environment where colleagues spend so much time together, staff need to be able to trust and depend on one another for their own safety.

In recent years, there have been increasing concerns about the extent of shocking behaviour by police officers. Much of this behaviour, including the investigation into allegations of bullying and harassment at Charing Cross police station (Operation Hotton) attracted adverse media reporting. These, and many other incidents, have led many to conclude that a police culture of misogyny and predatory and improper behaviour has been allowed to develop and thrive.

We reported on the link between organisational culture and 'prejudicial and improper behaviour' in policing in our 2022 report, *An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny within the police service*.

The report defines prejudicial and improper behaviour as:

> "Any attitude and/or behaviour demonstrated by a police officer or police staff that could be reasonably considered to reveal misogyny, sexism, antipathy towards women or be an indication of, or precursor to, abuse of position for a sexual purpose."

While this definition relates to misogyny, for our purposes, we apply prejudicial and improper behaviour more broadly to cover all protected characteristics. The report contains examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, towards both force staff and members of the public. It stated that:

> "During the inspection, we heard numerous examples, mainly from female police officers and staff, of such attitudes and behaviour towards them. This was usually, but not exclusively, from their male colleagues. When police officers and staff don't treat colleagues with respect and courtesy, it suggests that they may be more likely to behave in a similar way towards the public and towards vulnerable women."

I have no reason to believe this link doesn't also apply to fire services. This report contains examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, towards both service staff and members of the public.

Recent allegations against staff in several services, which have been featured in the media, are both shocking and saddening. These have only deepened my concern that we are looking at the tip of an iceberg.

Posts by popular, albeit unofficial, fire and rescue-specific social media accounts appear to portray misogyny, racism and homophobia as banter. One Instagram account had over 7,500 followers at the time of writing this report (though at the time of publication it appears to have been deleted). While there is no way of knowing how many of these followers are current FRS staff, the account was aimed at firefighters, so it is fair to assume a substantial number of them were from services. This is concerning, considering there are only 44,350 FRS staff in total in England, 34,960 of which are firefighters.

While following these accounts doesn't mean that all members hold such views, membership implies support (at least tacit support) for such behaviours. I urge staff to think carefully about the message that this sends to their colleagues and the public. Societal norms and 'laddish' cultures are no excuse – bullying, harassment and discrimination have detrimental effects on staff, services and the communities they serve.

The public trust emergency service staff with their lives and call for their support at times of greatest need; they have a right to expect a certain standard of behaviour from them. As Sir William Macpherson commented in the _Stephen Lawrence Inquiry_:

> "The argument that there is some excuse for poor behaviour because the culture of the Service can only be expected to mirror that of wider society and its behaviours, since that is from where we draw our personnel, is simply specious. We demand exemplary conduct from those we employ."

It is evident that the development of informal subcultures has led to staff being sometimes expected to conform to certain ways of thinking and behaving. This has led to the prevalence of 'in groups' and 'out groups' – for example, in some watch arrangements. We explain this in more detail in our section on subgroups. This need for conformity risks reducing space for or recognition of individual thought or personal preference; something we found aligns with the findings of our _An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny within the police service_ report, where some female police officers and staff told us they felt they needed to acquiesce to prejudicial and improper behaviour. The findings also highlighted that people may be ostracised if they are seen to speak out against their peers. As we have said repeatedly, the culture across too much of the fire sector is stagnant and needs to be brought into the 21st century.

The lack of workforce diversity in every FRS throughout England also inhibits the ability to tackle these cultural issues. According to data gathered by the Cabinet Office in 2018, compared to other public sector staff, firefighters were the least ethnically

diverse workforce. In the four years between 2014 and 2018, FRSs made the least improvement in diversity.

But FRSs should focus on more than just recruitment as a way of improving diversity. Making sure workplaces are inclusive for all and improving staff understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion will also help them to retain staff and to encourage those with talent and potential to progress through the organisation, irrespective of background. This is an essential building block to the cultural and behavioural improvements that are so clearly needed.

The public has a right to know that not only will they receive an effective service from those working in FRSs but that the staff they encounter are safe and suitable to work, not only in terms of operational competence but also in respect of conduct. Our report *An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny within the police service* found that effective background checks can help prevent a culture of misogyny and predatory behaviour from developing and thriving.

But currently, there are insufficient standards in relation to background checks for FRSs to follow, and there are no legal obligations for them to check new or existing staff. Although many FRSs do choose to carry out Disclosure and Barring Service checks, it is currently for services to decide if or how they conduct any background checks; this creates an unacceptable risk which must be addressed.

The *Independent Cultural Review of London Fire Brigade* contains a worrying number of examples of appalling behaviour towards members of the public, including searching through women's drawers looking for underwear and sex toys during home fire safety visits. We currently have no way of knowing how many unsuitable people are in these trusted roles, especially those that are public-facing.

A recent review of FRS background check arrangements found that these varied from service to service. As a result, we have little assurance that all FRS staff, many of whom are working directly with some of society's most vulnerable people, are safe and suitable to carry out these roles. The Fire Standards Board's safeguarding standard states that FRSs must "implement appropriate and proportionate processes that minimise the risk of recruiting people who may be unsuitable to work with those who are at risk of harm". Chief fire officers and the National Fire Chiefs Council have, in the past, called on the Government to introduce, as a minimum, Disclosure and Barring Service checks for all new staff; this is no longer simply desirable, it is an essential first step.

Although consistent background check processes may not prevent all unsuitable individuals from working in FRSs, a statutory requirement and a background check standard are needed as a bare minimum to mitigate this issue and help services make informed decisions about who works for them.

Some staff told us that they didn't trust the processes for raising concerns and described a culture where they have been, or fear they will be, targeted because of reporting. This may mean that however good FRSs are at taking appropriate action to remedy concerns, including handling misconduct allegations appropriately, they might miss cases which should be investigated.

The recommendations made in this spotlight report are intended to assist FRSs to improve values, culture, fairness and diversity. Our recommendations are aimed at both national bodies that have the power to make changes and at FRSs. These recommendations and improved values and culture must also be supported by those organisations we don't inspect, such as fire and rescue authorities and trade unions.

I urge:

- leaders of FRSs to accept the findings set out in this report and our service reports in full;
- the relevant bodies to prioritise these recommendations;
- national organisations with influence to consider how they can work with and support FRSs to act on the findings set out in this report; and
- staff at every level of every FRS to reflect on our findings and take whatever personal steps necessary to treat those they work with, and members of the public, with the utmost dignity and respect.

To the FRS staff who have shared their experiences with us: thank you. While it isn't for the inspectorate to investigate specific allegations, without your insight, we wouldn't have been able to write this report. Such insight continues to be invaluable, including through our staff surveys and during our inspections.

I would also like to extend my thanks to those who are already doing all they can to improve the cultures nationally and in their services. To go against the grain can take real courage. Please continue; your efforts aren't going unnoticed.

There are many thousands of professional people working in fire and rescue who provide a great service to their communities. It continues to concern me that some members of the service don't treat each other or members of the public with respect and in some cases, have intentionally caused harm.

It is time for this behaviour to stop.

Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM
HM Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services

Our recommendations

Raising concerns

Recommendation 1

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns and that staff are aware of whistleblowing processes.

Recommendation 2

By 1 October 2023, National Employers, the Local Government Association and the National Fire Chiefs Council should review any current independent arrangements whereby staff can raise concerns outside their FRS. They should then ensure that all FRS staff have access to an independent reporting line that can be used as a confidential way to raise concerns outside their own FRS.

Recommendation 3

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review the support available for those who have raised concerns and take any action needed to make sure these provisions are suitable.

Recommendation 4

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should assure themselves that updates on how concerns are being handled are shared with those who have raised them. The updates should be given in an accessible way that encourages trust and confidence in the service response. Consideration should be given to creating a professional standards function to handle conduct concerns in service (or from an external service) to have oversight of cases, to make sure they are conducted in a fair and transparent way and to act as a point of contact for all staff involved.

Recommendation 5

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure they provide accessible information for all staff and members of the public on how they can raise concerns and access confidential support (including through external agencies). Chief fire officers should also make sure accessible information is provided on how concerns and allegations will be investigated in a way that ensures confidentiality and is independent of the alleged perpetrator.

Background checks

Recommendation 6

By 1 January 2024, the Home Office, working with the Ministry of Justice, should make sure that the Government incorporates fire and rescue authority employees within the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975 so that they are eligible for the appropriate DBS checks.

Recommendation 7

By 1 May 2024, the Home Office, working with the fire and rescue sector, should make sure that the Police Act 1997 (Criminal Records) Regulations 2002, or a similar appropriate legislatively enabled solution, makes detailed provisions for fire and rescue services.

Recommendation 8

By 1 December 2023, the Fire Standards Board, in liaison with the National Fire Chiefs Council, should review the existing relevant standard(s) and underpinning guidance. It should:

- clearly state the requirements for background checks undertaken by services;
- clarify the minimum requirements (including levels of DBS checks) for all roles, particularly roles where staff have access to vulnerable members of the public;
- define the standards required to embed a culture across fire and rescue services that empowers all members of staff and local communities to report concerns; and
- be subject to review following any legislative change.

Recommendation 9

By 1 January 2024, chief fire officers should:

- immediately review their current background checks arrangements, and make sure that suitable and sufficient background checks are in place to safeguard their staff and communities they serve; and
- make sure that appropriate DBS check requests have been submitted for all existing, new staff, and volunteers, according to their roles as identified by the Fire Standards Board.

Recommendation 10

By 1 September 2023, chief constables should make sure they are appropriately using their Common Law Police Disclosure powers in circumstances involving employees of fire and rescue services.

Misconduct handling

Recommendation 11

By 1 December 2023, the Fire Standards Board, in liaison with the National Fire Chiefs Council, should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle staff disclosures, complaints and grievances.

Recommendation 12

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on staff disclosure, complaint and grievance handling.

Recommendation 13

By 1 December 2023, the Fire Standards Board, in liaison with the National Fire Chiefs Council, should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle misconduct and safeguarding-related allegations and outcomes. These should include requirements to:

- conduct and complete investigations, whether or not the staff member under investigation leaves;
- consider whether the incident requires immediate dismissal;
- provide training for staff who are carrying out investigations; and
- ensure the diversity/neutrality of the investigation panel/person.

Recommendation 14

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on misconduct allegations and outcomes handling.

Recommendation 15

By 1 October 2023, the Home Office should work with the National Fire Chiefs Council and fire and rescue service employers to make sure there is a process to handle misconduct allegations against chief fire officers. The Home Office should immediately notify HMICFRS of any allegations and outcomes that it is aware of.

Recommendation 16

By 1 October 2023, the National Fire Chiefs Council should develop and manage a national barred list that holds details of staff who have been dismissed for gross misconduct (including staff who have already left services). It should ensure that this list is referred to in all appointment processes to prevent those who are barred from rejoining another service. After the College of Fire and Rescue has been established (see recommendation 25), it should take responsibility for managing the list.

Recommendation 17

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should notify HMICFRS of any allegations that have the potential to constitute staff gross misconduct that:

- involve allegations of a criminal nature that have the potential to affect public confidence in FRSs;
- are of a serious nature; or
- relate to assistant chief fire officers or those at equivalent or higher grades.

Recommendation 18

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that all parties are supported in relation to ongoing investigations.

Recommendation 19

By 1 July 2023, the Home Office should examine whether any appeal processes for fire and rescue misconduct cases are appropriate.

Leadership

Recommendation 20

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should have plans in place to ensure they meet the Fire Standards Board's leading the service standard and its leading and developing people standard.

Recommendation 21

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all senior leaders and managers (assistant chief fire officer equivalent and above) in service.

Recommendation 22

By 1 September 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all other leaders and managers in service. The process should include gathering feedback from a wide range of sources including colleagues and direct reports.

Recommendation 23

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should seek regular feedback from staff about values, culture, fairness and diversity, with due regard to the leading and developing people standard. They should show how they act on this feedback.

Recommendation 24

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should put plans in place to monitor, including through the gathering and analysis of staff feedback, watch and team cultures and provide prompt remedial action for any issues they identify.

Management and leadership training and development

Recommendation 25

By 1 January 2025, the Government should establish a College of Fire and Rescue, as proposed by the *White Paper Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service*. There should be no further delay to its implementation.

Recommendation 26

By 1 October 2023, as a precursor to the development of the College of Fire and Rescue, chief fire officers and the National Fire Chiefs Council should work with the Home Office to consider how they can improve the training and support they offer to staff in management and leadership development. This should include authority members in respect of their assurance leadership roles and should ensure that opportunities are offered fairly across all staff groups.

Diversity data

Recommendation 27

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their equality impact assessments are fit for purpose and, as a minimum, meet the requirements of the National Fire Chiefs Council equality impact assessment toolkit.

Recommendation 28

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review how they gather and use equality and diversity data to improve their understanding of their staff demographics, including applying and meeting the requirements of the National Fire Chiefs Council equality, diversity and inclusion data toolkit.

Recommendation 29

By 1 December 2023, the Home Office should publish greater detail on the protected characteristic data it collects about FRS staff, including joiners and leavers, by rank and role.

Recommendation 30

By 30 December 2024, the Home Office should align the data it collects on protected characteristics with the Office for National Statistics harmonised standard and publish this data.

Recommendation 31

By 1 December 2024, the Home Office should collect and publish experimental statistics on public complaints and conduct matters in relation to FRS staff, similar to that which it currently publishes on police forces in England and Wales.

Improving diversity

Recommendation 32

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should, as a priority, specify in succession plans how they intend to improve diversity across all levels of the service. This should include offering increased direct-entry opportunities.

Recommendation 33

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should develop plans to promote progression paths for existing staff in non-operational roles and put plans in place to reduce any inequalities of opportunity.

The Core Code of Ethics

Recommendation 34

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should review their implementation of the Core Code of Ethics and make sure it is being applied across their services.

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England

Recommendation 35

By the end of this Parliament, the Government should consider the findings and recommendations in this report when refreshing the *Fire and Rescue National Framework for England*.

Summary

We have repeatedly expressed concern about values and culture in the fire and rescue service since we began inspections in 2018

Since our first fire and rescue service (FRS) inspections in 2018, failure to demonstrate positive values as well as evidence of poor behaviours (such as bullying, harassment and discrimination) and culture have been a recurring theme throughout our reports. In 2018 and 2019, in our first round of inspections (Round 1), our findings were stark. We found long-standing and apparently deep-rooted issues relating to values, culture, fairness and diversity. The situation was described to us by some in the sector as an "old boys' club".

As a result, we recommended that England's FRSs would benefit from a code of ethics. In May 2021, part-way through our Round 2 inspections, the Fire Standards Board in partnership with the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the Local Government Association, established the Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services and a Code of Ethics Fire Standards Code. We are encouraged that many services are working to implement these.

Not enough progress has been made

Everyone has a right to be treated with dignity and respect at work and to feel safe. While some progress has been made, it is clear that there is more to be done to improve values and culture in FRSs. The scale and pace of progress must improve.

From February 2021 to August 2022, we carried out our second full round of inspections (Round 2). We continued to find that:

- some services need to get better at promoting positive professional cultures;
- most services need to do more to improve equality, diversity and inclusion; and
- progression opportunities for staff aren't equal, which is hindering the potential for greater diversity of thought in services' leadership teams.

In our first round of inspections, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades to half (22) of the 44 services in relation to our findings on their values and cultures. In our Round 2 inspections, although we found that around a quarter (12) of services had improved, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades to just under half (17) of FRSs and to around a fifth (8) which had deteriorated.

Causes of concern are currently in place in relation to values and culture in five services.

In Round 2, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to fairness and diversity to over half (26) of the services. In our first round of inspections, we issued these to roughly the same number (28) of services. Similarly, causes of concern are currently in place in relation to fairness and diversity in five services.

We continued to find examples of bullying, harassment and discrimination in some services

We were deeply concerned by some of our findings in our Round 2 inspections. For example, staff survey results provided examples of bullying, harassment and discrimination in all services. This often included staff behaving towards each other in inappropriate and unacceptable ways.

In at least 11 services, we found evidence of racism, sexism and homophobia and a culture where staff, including managers, didn't always feel confident to challenge poor behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. Many people we spoke to told us they felt they couldn't challenge ideas or poor behaviour without detriment and that staff were scared to speak out. We also heard that those who did speak out were sometimes victimised. However, this wasn't always the case – some services handled concerns appropriately.

Some examples of unacceptable behaviours include:

- a senior officer referring to a Black colleague using the 'n-word' and putting it down to "having a laugh";
- two male firefighters joking with a female firefighter that they were "going to rape her" and the three of them acting out the rape together;
- homophobic abuse written on a firefighter's locker;
- no action being taken by senior leaders against reported or witnessed discriminatory or bullying behaviour;
- inappropriate language about female members of staff;
- bullying new recruits and humiliating them; and
- staff feeling it is unsafe to report inappropriate behaviour.

Further examples are included in our detailed findings.

We moved two services into our engage phase of enhanced monitoring

Our findings about the values, cultures, fairness and diversity at Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and London Fire Brigade were serious enough to contribute to the services being placed into our engage process of enhanced monitoring. We will continue to monitor values and culture and other issues in these services.

Defining the problem

What do we mean by values and culture?

For this report, values are defined as principles or standards of behaviour and culture is defined as ideas, customs and behaviours in fire and rescue services (FRSs).

What do we mean by equality, diversity and inclusion?

Equality, diversity and inclusion are closely linked to values and culture. In this report, it is defined as ensuring fair treatment and opportunity for all. It aims to eradicate prejudice and discrimination against an individual or a group of individuals' protected characteristics.

Why are values and culture important?

It is well documented that staff well-being, productivity, efficiency and motivation are linked to compassionate and fair working cultures. It states in the *Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Strategy 2008–18* that:

> "They [FRSs] must drive how we treat each other as members of the Service; how we treat each of our customers; how we interact with the diverse communities we serve, and how we deliver our services to those communities. To be an effective Service our policies, practices and procedures must be fair, providing equality of opportunity to all employees and an appropriate and effective service to all parts of the community."

Ensuring staff safety, well-being and productivity

Our evidence shows that some FRS staff have behaved poorly over many years and that this has negatively affected other staff and, in some cases, the public. Where these behaviours go unchallenged, there is a risk that they are accepted and normalised.

FRS staff at times work under pressure and in dangerous scenarios. They need to be able to trust and depend on one another for their own safety. In extreme examples, the effect of a poor culture can mean that individuals don't believe they can rely on colleagues to protect them.

Providing a safe and effective service to the public

Values and culture have an effect on the quality of service provided. Research by NHS England has found evidence of a clear link between staff experience and patient satisfaction (*Links between NHS staff experience and patient satisfaction: analysis of surveys from 2014 and 2015*). And in 2011, research funded by the Department of Health showed:

> "Good management of NHS staff leads to higher quality of care, more satisfied patients and lower patient mortality. Good staff management offers significant financial savings for the NHS, as its leaders respond to the challenge of sustainability in the face of increasing costs and demands."

While such extensive research isn't available for the fire and rescue sector, it is reasonable to suggest there may be a similar link between services' effectiveness and their cultures.

In our second round of inspections, almost two thirds (12) of the 17 services that we issued a requires improvement or inadequate grade in relation to values and culture were also issued requires improvement or inadequate grades for their effectiveness. And a key finding of the 2015 *Independent review of conditions of service for fire and rescue staff in England* (the Thomas review) was that culture and trust are at the centre of many of the changes needed to create a high-performing service aligned with the needs of the people it serves.

The *Independent Cultural Review of London Fire Brigade* includes examples of firefighter behaviour towards members of the public that are completely inexcusable. As one member of staff in the review commented: "It's now reached a point with me that I tell my female friends not to let male firefighters in the house. I would advise any single woman not to let them in to check smoke alarms."

Alongside the allegations recently covered in the media, it is clear why some members of the public might mistrust FRS staff and why the standing and reputation of services might be damaged. No one should feel they can't rely on or trust their FRS. Cultures must improve to make sure that the public trusts FRS staff to provide a quality and safe service for all.

Services have legal obligations

All public sector organisations have a legal obligation to deal effectively with bullying, harassment and discrimination. As far as possible, they must prevent it and tackle it properly when it happens.

This obligation includes fostering good relations between those who have protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010) and those who don't. FRSs are no different and penalties for breaking the law can be severe. Services should carry out

this duty in everything they do. This includes making sure their equality impact assessments are fit for purpose.

Culture is linked to discrimination

During our second round of inspections, all but one of the services that we issued a requires improvement or inadequate grade in relation to values and culture were also issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to their fairness and diversity.

As Sir William Macpherson, who led the 1999 inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, pointed out, individuals tend to conform to the norms of occupational cultures.

We cover in the main body of this report how watches, which operational staff in most services are a part of, can particularly lead to the development of subcultures, which in turn can foster unacceptable behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. We have reported on the negative side of watch cultures in some FRSs (which is similar to the negative side of canteen culture referenced in the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*).

These cultures and subcultures can shape perceptions of certain communities or those with protected characteristics and negatively affect how they are treated, both as colleagues and as members of the public receiving a service.

This has been going on for far too long.

Methodology

Our approach

On 16 January 2023, we published the [terms of reference](#) for this review. We aimed for publication by April 2023. We adopted a targeted approach to researching, gathering and analysing evidence. As part of our terms of reference, we considered the following specific themes, which align with our inspection framework:

- values and culture, including bullying, harassment and discrimination
- training and skills
- fairness and diversity
- leadership.

We focused predominantly on evidence collected from our second round of fire and rescue service (FRS) inspections and prioritised the services which:

- were issued a cause of concern or area for improvement in these areas;
- were issued an outstanding grade in these areas; or
- have shown examples of innovative or promising practice in these areas.

We also reviewed evidence relating to:

- how services are using the [Core Code of Ethics](#);
- [watch](#) cultures; and
- the influence of other factors or organisations.

We used the following sources of evidence:

- our service inspection reports
- our evidence gathering templates
- our independent reporting line
- our staff survey (to which we received 11,486 FRS staff responses)
- our national reports
- our policing reports on similar matters
- relevant external research in this area
- relevant literature sources, including evidence from other sectors

- publicly available evidence on how FRS cultures may be influenced.

This approach meant we could consider in detail and at a sector level both positive and negative cumulative evidence. It also supported the identification and analysis of trends and behaviours across services.

Our findings

As set out in the summary of findings, issues concerning values and culture in fire and rescue services (FRSs) aren't new. We have been reporting our concerns in this area since 2018 when we carried out our first round of inspections (Round 1), and we have described the culture in some services as toxic. While we found, in our second full round of inspections (Round 2), that some services' values and culture had improved since then, the grades and causes of concern we issued highlight a continued need for change.

In our second round of inspections, we were particularly concerned to find that there are still unacceptable levels of bullying, harassment and discrimination in some services.

Improvements in some services' values aren't always reflected in staff behaviours

In Round 2, it was encouraging to find that many services have invested in attempts to improve their values and culture and that most do have a clear set of values.

Approximately a quarter of services (12) have made some progress with their values, communication with staff and visibility of leaders since our first round of inspections. The services that have made these improvements have seen these changes result in improved behaviours among staff.

In one service, staff talked positively about the service's approach to values and the introduction of a behavioural competency framework. For example, the main staff communications, including the intranet, staff magazine and manager information sheet, are based on the service values. In this service, the new behavioural competency framework and employee code of conduct had been sent to every employee. We saw behaviours that reflected the values at all levels in this service.

In Round 1, another service received a cause of concern for its values and culture. This was removed in Round 2. The progress it has made also translated into a grade improvement. This service fosters positive cultures, and we found limited examples of bullying and harassment.

But in many services, efforts to improve values and culture haven't always translated into improvements in staff behaviours.

This finding is reflected in the outcomes of our Round 2 staff survey, to which we received 11,486 FRS staff responses. The survey showed that 94 percent of respondents are aware of their service's statement of values, but only 52 percent of respondents thought their service was extremely or very effective at providing a positive culture that reflects the service's values.

Services need to find ways to bridge the gap between their values and how they proactively promote them to staff. To make improvements to cultures that staff can feel, services need to make sure that staff adhere to these values through regular use and demonstration by managers. If they aren't already, services might find helpful solutions by looking outside the sector, such as to NHS organisations that are performing highly in this area.

Bullying, harassment and discrimination are, to varying degrees, still problems in all services

We identified examples of poor behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, in all services we inspected in Round 2. The services with the worst examples and toxic cultures are the ones to which we issued causes of concern. But there are many other services with serious issues, ranging from examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, to cases of gross misconduct and criminal conduct. Information shared by services in relation to misconduct, grievance and complaint cases shows that over half involved inappropriate language/behaviour and bullying and harassment associated with a protected characteristic. Some of the specific examples reported to us include:

- no action being taken against reported discriminatory behaviour. This includes a firefighter who reported a senior officer for a racist comment and felt that his account of events was questioned. He was then questioned and told the alleged offender "wouldn't behave in such a way". The senior officer then threatened "to make his life hell";

- a senior officer referring to a Black colleague using the 'n-word' and putting it down to "having a laugh";

- homophobic abuse found written on a firefighter's locker;

- men using women's toilets and women not feeling confident to challenge this;

- no action being taken by managers who witnessed bullying behaviour and inappropriate comments;

- a perception among staff that women are appointed due to their gender, rather than on merit. Several people expressed this view, with individual experiences described using inappropriate language, including "if you menstruate or have a vagina, you're more likely to get the job" and "you have to be a woman to get on";

- staff not wishing to work in specific areas of the service because of poor behaviours;

- humiliating staff during training sessions if they made mistakes;

- staff being 'shouted down' by senior teams if they challenged decisions;

- staff feeling it is unsafe to report inappropriate behaviour and that their concerns wouldn't be listened to or acted on appropriately or confidentially;

- staff being reluctant to speak up about or challenge inappropriate behaviours as they felt that doing so would affect their prospects, have adverse consequences for them or lead to a 'negative mark' against their name and being told it would be "career suicide" to do so;

- staff being reluctant to raise issues with middle and senior management, as they were told they would be moved if they did; and

- a watch manager refusing to support positive action to promote the FRS as a career for under-represented groups.

The results of our Round 2 staff survey provide another indication that there is a problem in relation to staff behaviours.

- In the 17 services that we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to values and culture, we found that reports of bullying, harassment and discrimination were higher. Of the staff from these services who responded to our survey, 15 percent reported experiencing bullying or harassment and 20 percent reported experiencing discrimination, compared with 11 and 14 percent from those we issued good or outstanding values and culture grades to.

- These reports came from FRS staff at all levels but were most often about alleged cases of senior staff bullying more junior staff (75 percent of 1,478 reports of bullying and 85 percent of discrimination reports in the staff survey). This was also reflected in the information we received relating to misconduct allegations.

- Some groups of staff, such as those with under-represented protected characteristics, are more likely to experience bullying and harassment. (For more detail, see the section titled Most services need to do more to improve their equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).)

Services need to do more to address these problems.

Subgroups, including watches, can foster unacceptable behaviours and poor cultures

We have seen and heard the potentially damaging effects of subgroups and subcultures within FRSs leading to the development of significant 'in groups' and 'out groups'. The example of watch cultures is covered below. Other examples identified during our inspections, such as the differences in staff experience between operational and non-operational staff are also highlighted elsewhere in this report.

Similarly, Fire Brigades Union slogans, such as 'member with backbone' printed on t-shirts and the term 'scab' used openly on social media, have the potential to

also cause rifts. This undermines the positive effect that a strong staff association can bring. These all risk harming the culture in a service by ostracising people who don't conform rather than supporting colleagues to, for example, raise concerns.

During our first round of inspections, we expressed concerns about the effect of watches on service cultures. Watches are common across services and are a long-standing workforce model.

The way watches operate is unique to the fire service and often results in staff working on the same team together for many years. Operational staff work, train and eat in close proximity to each other and often sleep at the station overnight. They are considered families by some operational staff, but they can exclude others and affect individuals not seen to fit in. We heard that it takes a strong leader to be a watch commander who doesn't become part of the watch subculture.

We found that, in some services, watches had created their own subcultures, which were contrary to service values and are impenetrable for new staff. As a result, we found some watches had normalised certain unacceptable behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. They were resistant to change, and members of the watch were reluctant to seek professional support out of fear of being viewed as weak.

The _Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade_ drew the same conclusion. Examples of this behaviour from brigade watches featured in the report include continually mocking people's religion, taking bets on who would be the first person in a team to sleep with a woman and filling people's helmets with urine. And, as pointed out in the foreword, there are similarities between watch culture and the canteen culture described in the _Stephen Lawrence Inquiry_.

During our Round 1 inspections, we advised that FRSs should carefully review the future of watches and consider the advantages of alternative working arrangements. The _Independent review of conditions of service for fire and rescue staff in England_ also found that watch cultures need to change – this report was published eight years ago and yet we are still finding problems in this area.

In our Round 2 inspections, at one service, a firefighter told us they had witnessed two male firefighters joking with a female firefighter that they were "going to rape her", and the three of them acted out the rape together. We also found instances where new recruits joined the service with a positive attitude and no apparent disposition to certain behaviours but soon felt the need to assimilate into the prevailing culture to "fit in".

In another service, staff told us that the culture in general was "toxic" and behaviours on watches were "pack-like". And they told us that on watches, people didn't always challenge inappropriateness towards race.

In another service, we heard of station managers making off-the-cuff comments and inappropriate banter about female and gay staff. There was an expectation that female staff should make the tea. Bullying of new recruits led to one on-call firefighter needing to move station.

We also found instances of:

- on-call firefighters being treated differently from wholetime firefighters;
- people who challenged inappropriate comments being shunned by colleagues who said their comments were banter; and
- watch managers refusing to support positive action.

Some services have revised their working arrangements with positive results. Other services would do well to consider whether watches are still the most appropriate way to manage teams. They should also consider how those teams can be made more inclusive and how behaviour of the type set out in this section of the report can be eliminated.

Staff can feel unable to challenge or report poor behaviours

Non or under-reporting of bullying, harassment and discrimination is common in organisations with poor cultures. As a result of the subgroups and subcultures previously mentioned, we were told that a lack of action by some services in previous cases led to a belief that reporting wouldn't help. Some staff reported to us that they don't trust the processes and described a culture where they have been, or fear they will be, targeted as a result of raising concerns. When staff have challenged inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, they have been told they must have misheard or that it was merely banter.

One firefighter reported feeling that their "card would be marked" if they raised concerns. They told us that there was an "us and them" atmosphere between firefighters and senior managers. They felt that the service may not reach an appropriate outcome in response to a grievance.

In one service, a female firefighter reported bullying to the assistant chief fire officer, as she felt unable to formally report it through the correct leadership channels.

In several services, we found a worrying trend of staff not raising concerns if they felt they weren't part of an 'old boys' club'. We also heard from staff who felt others could get away with inappropriate behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, "if they know the right people". Some groups of staff we met in some services reported that they didn't have the confidence to challenge poor behaviours, and we were told that managers dealt with reports either inconsistently or not at all. In another service, after a firefighter's reports regarding a senior officer making a racist comment were dismissed, he was threatened. He was told "friends investigate friends" in services and that it was "career suicide" to challenge the status quo.

In another service, the staff told us that on watches, people didn't challenge inappropriateness towards race: "So people lie and stick together in pack mentality, even though they know it's wrong, as they're afraid of being ostracised."

We found evidence of low trust in grievance processes in 13 services. In one service, we were told the main reasons for staff not raising grievances were concerns about being labelled as a troublemaker and feeling there would be no action taken.

In another, staff told us some senior leaders didn't try to identify and resolve workforce concerns. They detailed examples of raising concerns with senior managers, with no positive results for staff.

And in yet another service, staff told us that some longer-serving members of staff sometimes used language or displayed behaviours that didn't align with service expectations (we found this in more than one service). Newer members of staff told us that they were willing to challenge this, which has helped to change the organisational culture. Staff also told us that, while the service is trying to tackle the issue, they felt that the culture wouldn't really change "until the older generation retires". However, some watch cultures are so strong that they survive beyond the retirement of staff members who behaved inappropriately. Staff told us of racist, sexist and homophobic comments and behaviours which had gone unchallenged or been dismissed as banter.

Our Round 2 staff survey found that in services with good or outstanding grades around values and culture, staff felt more able to challenge than in services with requires improvement or inadequate grades. Similarly, in good or outstanding graded services, staff felt more confident about how to give feedback to all levels.

Staff from ethnic minority backgrounds who have experienced bullying or harassment are less likely to report it than White members of staff. The results of our staff survey showed that 62 percent of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds didn't report it, compared to 41 percent of White respondents.

Many staff members who didn't report bullying or harassment said this was because they believed nothing would be done. Services need to make sure they understand why some staff believe this and take action to rectify the issue.

Some managers are unable to deal with or challenge inappropriate behaviours

One potential reason why some staff might be reluctant to raise concerns is that they have little faith in their manager's ability to handle them in the right way. In our Round 2 inspections, we found that some managers didn't manage or challenge bullying or inappropriate behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, even if they witnessed them.

One station (middle) manager told us that they didn't feel confident raising grievances, as they believed it would adversely affect their position and future career. Managers need to know that if they raise concerns, they will be supported and that they won't face adverse consequences. Support, including giving managers the necessary training and a zero-tolerance and early intervention approach to inappropriate behaviours, needs to come from the top. Unless managers receive support themselves, they can't effectively support their staff.

One service has heavily invested in openly discussing positive action and EDI-related topics. For example, it has established what it calls 'brave space talks', where sensitive issues can be discussed in a safe environment. As a result, staff are well engaged and have improved their understanding of positive action.

Staff need a secure way to raise concerns

Services need honest staff feedback so they can identify areas for improvement and take appropriate action where misconduct allegations are concerned. If they ignore these problems, serious issues may go unnoticed and potentially get worse.

All staff – and particularly those in emergency service roles where the lives of both staff and members of the public are at risk – need reporting processes they trust as safe, without fear of any reprisals. They also need to know that their concerns will be taken seriously and investigated properly and that outcomes or sanctions will be appropriate.

Staff reporting certain matters are protected by law under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. These include:

- a criminal offence, such as fraud;
- that someone's health and safety are in danger;
- risk or actual damage to the environment;
- a miscarriage of justice;
- that the company is breaking the law (for example, by not having the right insurance); and
- that they believe someone is covering up wrongdoing.

Making a declaration covered by this legislation gives an employee certain protections.

There is no consistent process, policy or standard for FRS staff to raise concerns either nationally or locally. This means we don't have evidence of the efficacy of any current reporting processes, besides the fact that staff don't always feel comfortable raising concerns.

Given the particular cultural issues set out in this report and the reluctance of some staff to raise concerns, the sector is in need of such a process.

Other sectors with such processes have reported successes. For example, the NHS in England has [freedom to speak up guardians](#). The freedom to speak up initiative gives staff an alternative route to line managers and encourages a "positive culture where people feel they can speak up and their voices will be heard, and their suggestions acted upon".

One FRS has introduced a 'speak up champion', and concerns have been brought to its attention this way. This initiative allows staff to raise concerns in an informal manner. It has helped the service to see and hear the challenges it faces with regard to embedding an understanding of EDI. The process is seen as complementary to the grievance procedure and provides an alternative/informal way of raising concerns without fear of recrimination. We will consider how well this approach is working in our next inspection.

The police service in England has the [Independent Office for Police Conduct report line](#). Police officers and staff can email or call the line to report concerns of wrongdoing, that a criminal offence has been committed or where there is evidence of conduct that would justify disciplinary proceedings. While a reporting method of this kind for FRSs would help, it alone isn't the answer to the challenges that surround raising concerns.

Recommendation 1

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns and that staff are aware of whistleblowing processes.

Recommendation 2

By 1 October 2023, National Employers, the [Local Government Association](#) and the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should review any current independent arrangements whereby staff can raise concerns outside their FRS. They should then ensure that all FRS staff have access to an independent reporting line that can be used as a confidential way to raise concerns outside their own FRS.

Recommendation 3

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review the support available for those who have raised concerns and take any action needed to make sure these provisions are suitable.

Recommendation 4

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should assure themselves that updates on how concerns are being handled are shared with those who have raised them. The updates should be given in an accessible way that encourages trust and confidence in the service response. Consideration should be given to creating a professional standards function to handle conduct concerns in service (or from an external service) to have oversight of cases, to make sure they are conducted in a fair and transparent way and to act as a point of contact for all staff involved.

Recommendation 5

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure they provide accessible information for all staff and members of the public on how they can raise concerns and access confidential support (including through external agencies). Chief fire officers should also make sure accessible information is provided on how concerns and allegations will be investigated in a way that ensures confidentiality and is independent of the alleged perpetrator.

Background checks of fire and rescue service staff need to improve to reduce risk of harm to both staff and the public

FRS employees hold positions of trust, especially given the role of the firefighter in prevention and protection activities. Each service has a duty to make sure that its staff and volunteers are equipped and trained to support and carry out their safeguarding work. They should also ensure that robust and rigorous checks are in place to make sure staff are suitable for their jobs.

Services also have a legal obligation to have appropriate safeguarding arrangements in place. These duties are underpinned by the standards set out in section 11 of the Children Act 2004 and sections 42 to 46 of the Care Act 2014.

But there are no consistent standards for FRSs to follow in relation to background checks, and there are no specific legal obligations for fire and rescue services/authorities to conduct particular checks on new or existing staff. Therefore, despite the above obligations, it is for authorities to decide if and how they conduct any background checks before appointing staff. Greater consistency of approach is needed.

A recent review of information provided by FRSs regarding their employee background checks showed that there is wide variation and inconsistency in approach.

As we said in our 2022 report, *An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny in the police service*, police forces need effective systems to prevent unsuitable job applicants from joining. FRS staff are also in positions of power and have access to vulnerable individuals. We see no reason why FRSs shouldn't also have effective and robust background check processes, especially as FRS staff face less professional scrutiny than their policing peers, as there is no equivalent to the Independent Office for Police Conduct.

We also see no reason why these processes can't be applied retrospectively to make sure not only that new recruits are suitable and safe to work but that the current workforce is, too.

The public deserves assurance that the FRS staff they come into contact with have been subject to background checks prior to carrying out these roles. This is particularly important when considering the link between effective background checks and cultures of misogyny and predatory behaviour seen in policing. It is also important in light of the examples of inappropriate behaviour from firefighters towards members of their communities set out in recent allegations.

We welcome the progress made by the Home Office and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) to incorporate members of FRSs in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975. This would mean staff must disclose any caution or conviction to the service.

We also encourage services and authorities to consider the need for an increased level of checks for those roles that carry out specific or regulated activities as defined by the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975, and the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006.

Where there is a public protection risk and a pressing social need to share information, Common Law Police Disclosure gives police forces in England (and Wales) a power to pass information to the employer or regulatory body. However, it was beyond the scope of this report to examine the extent to which police forces are currently using this power to pass information to fire and rescue services about their staff. Chief constables should make sure they are appropriately using this power in circumstances involving employees of fire and rescue services.

> **Recommendation 6**
>
> By 1 January 2024, the Home Office, working with the Ministry of Justice, should make sure that the Government incorporates fire and rescue authority employees within the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975 so that they are eligible for the appropriate DBS checks.

Recommendation 7

By 1 May 2024, the Home Office, working with the fire and rescue sector, should make sure that the Police Act 1997 (Criminal Records) Regulations 2002, or a similar appropriate legislatively enabled solution, makes detailed provisions for fire and rescue services.

Recommendation 8

By 1 December 2023, the Fire Standards Board, in liaison with the National Fire Chiefs Council, should review the existing relevant standard(s) and underpinning guidance. It should:

- clearly state the requirements for background checks undertaken by services;
- clarify the minimum requirements (including levels of DBS checks) for all roles, particularly roles where staff have access to vulnerable members of the public;
- define the standards required to embed a culture across fire and rescue services that empowers all members of staff and local communities to report concerns; and
- be subject to review following any legislative change.

Recommendation 9

By 1 January 2024, chief fire officers should:

- immediately review their current background checks arrangements, and make sure that suitable and sufficient background checks are in place to safeguard their staff and communities they serve; and
- make sure that appropriate DBS check requests have been submitted for all existing, new staff, and volunteers, according to their roles as identified by the Fire Standards Board.

Recommendation 10

By 1 September 2023, chief constables should make sure they are appropriately using their Common Law Police Disclosure powers in circumstances involving employees of fire and rescue services.

Allegations of misconduct should be handled appropriately

There is no room in any FRS for someone who behaves inappropriately or perpetuates toxic cultures. As we have reported in relation to police background checks, some individuals who are assessed as suitable when they first join a service may become unsuitable later in their career. When this happens, services need effective systems to identify these individuals and, if necessary, dismiss them.

We have seen a recent instance where, despite serious allegations amounting to gross misconduct being upheld following an investigation, a senior officer was able to retire rather than be dismissed. This sends the wrong message to staff, would-be perpetrators and the public.

Information shared by services in relation to a misconduct, grievance and complaint case shows that in the course of the associated investigations, approximately a quarter of individuals were dismissed, and almost half of those individuals were permitted to resign or retire. The proportion of staff who can apparently avoid sanction points to a significant flaw in current misconduct arrangements.

Recommendation 11

By 1 December 2023, the Fire Standards Board, in liaison with the National Fire Chiefs Council, should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle staff disclosures, complaints and grievances.

Recommendation 12

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on staff disclosure, complaint and grievance handling.

Recommendation 13

By 1 December 2023, the Fire Standards Board, in liaison with the National Fire Chiefs Council, should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle misconduct and safeguarding-related allegations and outcomes. These should include requirements to:

- conduct and complete investigations, whether or not the staff member under investigation leaves;
- consider whether the incident requires immediate dismissal;
- provide training for staff who are carrying out investigations; and
- ensure the diversity/neutrality of the investigation panel/person.

Recommendation 14

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on misconduct allegations and outcomes handling.

Recommendation 15

By 1 October 2023, the Home Office should work with the National Fire Chiefs Council and fire and rescue service employers to make sure there is a process to handle misconduct allegations against chief fire officers. The Home Office should immediately notify HMICFRS of any allegations and outcomes that it is aware of.

Recommendation 16

By 1 October 2023, the National Fire Chiefs Council should develop and manage a national barred list that holds details of staff who have been dismissed for gross misconduct (including staff who have already left services). It should ensure that this list is referred to in all appointment processes to prevent those who are barred from rejoining another service. After the College of Fire and Rescue has been established (see recommendation 25), it should take responsibility for managing the list.

Recommendation 17

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should notify HMICFRS of any allegations that have the potential to constitute staff gross misconduct that:

- involve allegations of a criminal nature that have the potential to affect public confidence in FRSs;
- are of a serious nature; or
- relate to assistant chief fire officers or those at equivalent or higher grades.

Recommendation 18

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that all parties are supported in relation to ongoing investigations.

Recommendation 19

By 1 July 2023, the Home Office should examine whether any appeal processes for fire and rescue misconduct cases are appropriate.

A positive culture is created in services where the leadership is visible, transparent and fair

How individual leaders behave sets the tone for the rest of the service. In our Round 2 staff survey, 94 percent of respondents said they are aware of their service's statement of values. But only 27 percent of those respondents agreed that senior leaders consistently model and maintain service values. This apparent gap indicates a disconnect between policy intent and observed behaviour.

In our inspections, we have found that services with leaders who are visible to their staff, lead by example and are open to challenge appear to have fewer bullying, harassment and discrimination issues than services with less visible, autocratic leaders. For example, the new chief fire officer in one service has reportedly had a direct positive influence on the service culture.

In services with a clear understanding of discipline and grievances, promotions, retention and successful recruitment processes, a lower proportion of staff who responded to our staff survey indicated that they had experienced bullying, harassment and discrimination. These services provide good training, use equality impact assessments effectively and promote positive action while ensuring that staff understand it. Senior leadership teams are visible and consult with staff.

These services also have strong internal staff networks, clearly understood and demonstrated values and a positive health and safety culture. All of this helps to create a sense of inclusion, trust and support.

We found that staff were also more positive about the culture of the service when leaders were accountable for their behaviours. For example, in one service, staff told us managers admitted when they had made a mistake and were open and honest about it. And in another service, the deputy chief fire officer gave a personal apology to staff who had been subject to bullying and harassment. In both cases, staff felt that this was a positive demonstration of service values.

But these behaviours aren't reflected in all services. In one service, it was clear that limited senior leader visibility had led to mistrust across parts of the organisation. We saw a similar lack of visibility in several other services. This was often attributed to either an unwillingness to listen or to an autocratic style of management. Lack of visibility makes it difficult for senior leaders to create a positive culture where staff adhere to the values expected of them.

The British Army has also encountered cultural issues and inappropriate behaviours. As part of an independent audit of army culture, it is seeking to "reinforce the best and weed out the worst", including extending its reporting to include middle-ranking officers, to improve transparency and identify the very best contemporary leaders to drive cultural change throughout the organisation.

Leaders at all levels of all FRSs should know if they are meeting the needs of their staff, including how they respond to allegations of bullying, harassment or discrimination. They should use staff feedback to make improvements and continually assess how they can lead compassionately and improve the cultures in their services.

The Fire Standards Board has recently implemented two professional standards, called leading the service and leading and developing people, which build on the Core Code of Ethics. We discuss these further in the section titled National work is supporting fire service improvements.

> **Recommendation 20**
>
> By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should have plans in place to ensure they meet the Fire Standards Board's leading the service standard and its leading and developing people standard.

Recommendation 21

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all senior leaders and managers (assistant chief fire officer equivalent and above) in service.

Recommendation 22

By 1 September 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all other leaders and managers in service. The process should include gathering feedback from a wide range of sources including colleagues and direct reports.

Recommendation 23

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should seek regular feedback from staff about values, culture, fairness and diversity, with due regard to the leading and developing people standard. They should show how they act on this feedback.

Recommendation 24

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should put plans in place to monitor, including through the gathering and analysis of staff feedback, watch and team cultures and provide prompt remedial action for any issues they identify.

Supervisors and middle managers need to be better trained in how to effectively manage, develop and support their staff

Services generally focus heavily on maintaining the operational competence of their staff, but in too many services, we found little or no training about the leadership and management skills that are needed to effectively manage staff. Leadership and management training is an essential element of handling grievances, managing absences, conducting performance development reviews and supporting the development and progression of staff.

This lack of leadership and management training means that managers sometimes aren't equipped to appropriately challenge, or that they lack the confidence to address, poor behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. This can be a particularly acute problem in watches, where poor behaviour often goes unchallenged. It can also be very difficult for newly promoted staff, as many services don't provide appropriate or timely training, instead expecting them to learn on the job.

In one service, staff reported that they felt managers aren't always able to empathise. We found that one watch commander hadn't had any training in relation to mental health, despite being in the role for 14 years.

Most services to which we issued good or outstanding grades in relation to this area have good performance development review processes and completion rates. We found that services with gateways for promotion processes showed the most improvement between our inspections in terms of values and culture, and the processes were received positively by staff.

Also, formal and informal conversations about learning, development and performance are more likely to take place in services with positive cultures. Staff in these services are more likely to have had a conversation with their manager about their learning and development. Services with a positive culture have a better understanding of their workforce's skills and capabilities and how to manage them.

One service has a range of online learning resources. It also has access to external learning providers to help all staff (not just supervisors or managers) to do their jobs effectively. Clear training plans are in place, and it provides learning hubs where staff can access additional learning and development.

Aspiring and current managers would benefit from acquiring leadership and management skills to become more effective leaders. Training to improve these skills would improve the cultures within their services and could include the following:

- inclusive leadership training
- training on how to create compassionate working cultures
- training on how to handle difficult conversations for managers
- specific development opportunities for staff with protected characteristics.

The NFCC's leadership project was commissioned in response to the challenges facing current and future leaders in the fire sector. It consists of a suite of national products and tools that are being developed in line with the NFCC leadership framework.

A lack of leadership and management skills isn't a problem unique to FRSs, and other organisations have found ways to mitigate it. For example, the NHS leadership academy develops NHS leaders at a national level through a variety of programmes, resources and activities.

The Civil Service accelerated development schemes aim to develop high-potential individuals to build a robust and diverse pipeline to the most senior and critical Civil Service roles. As part of this, the future leaders' scheme provides a leadership development curriculum, which supports civil servants in accelerating their development as well as learning more about their personal leadership effectiveness.

In May 2022, the Home Office published the *White Paper Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service*, in which it set out a proposal for a College of Fire and Rescue. The college could provide a central, consistent source of learning and development resources for staff to use to help them become better managers and leaders. But progress towards its inception has been too slow.

Recommendation 25

By 1 January 2025, the Government should establish a College of Fire and Rescue, as proposed by the *White Paper Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service*. There should be no further delay to its implementation.

Recommendation 26

By 1 October 2023, as a precursor to the development of the College of Fire and Rescue, chief fire officers and the National Fire Chiefs Council should work with the Home Office to consider how they can improve the training and support they offer to staff in management and leadership development. This should include authority members in respect of their assurance leadership roles and should ensure that opportunities are offered fairly across all staff groups.

Most services need to do more to improve their equality, diversity and inclusion

Culture and inclusion go hand in hand, and greater diversity improves performance and innovation.

As set out earlier in this report, during our second round of inspections all but one of the 17 services that we issued a requires improvement or inadequate grade in relation to values and culture were also issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to their fairness and diversity. This is no coincidence.

Throughout all 44 services, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades to over half (26) and causes of concern to five in relation to fairness and diversity.

These problems are long-standing. In 1999 (19 years before we started inspecting FRSs), the then Fire Service Inspectorate carried out its *Thematic Review of Equality and Fairness in the Fire Service*. It issued 23 recommendations targeting greater equality and fairness for FRS staff. And since 2018, when HMICFRS started inspecting FRSs, we have highlighted the lack of fairness and diversity across all services in England.

Progress to improve EDI in FRSs is far too slow.

There isn't enough diversity in fire and rescue services

It is important that FRSs reflect the diversity of the communities they serve to maintain public trust and provide a better service to the public.

But the workforce of England's FRSs still doesn't represent many of the communities that it serves.

In 2018, according to data gathered for a government report, only 4 percent of firefighters were from an ethnic minority background compared to 16 percent of the working-age population. The FRSs were the least ethnically diverse workforce out of the 12 public sector workforces explored in the report.

The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background increased from 3.8 percent in 2014 to 4.1 percent in 2018. This was the smallest increase out of the 12 public sector workforces. It is clear, therefore, that services must do more to recruit and retain people from diverse backgrounds.

One service has introduced a ten-week course which aims to give support, training and guidance to people from under-represented groups who are interested in joining the FRS. It is run at fire stations, before the formal recruitment process, and gives applicants a realistic understanding of the varied role of a firefighter.

Another service is investing in recruitment and using positive action to improve recruitment diversity. It has adapted and targeted how it approaches and interacts with potential candidates and has employed a positive action officer. The chief fire officer is also the 'positive action champion'. It makes sure its assessment panels are diverse so that all candidates can relate more to the service, including under-represented groups.

In 2017, another service implemented an effective and successful apprenticeship programme. The apprentices have been recruited to a variety of roles across the service. This has helped positively change the organisation's culture. In the last cohort, 50 percent were women and 25 percent were from an ethnic minority background.

Services need to be more inclusive to support and retain staff

Our most recent public perceptions survey found that the diversity of a service was a prominent barrier to considering a career in the FRS for 23 percent of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to only 9 percent of White respondents. And inclusivity of the FRS was seen as a barrier for 19 percent of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to 10 percent of White respondents. Services need to promote EDI meaningfully to both current staff and potential joiners.

Some senior leaders have pointed to challenges in recruiting diverse workforces as being connected to the issues surrounding fairness, diversity and culture within their services. But representation of different walks of life alone isn't enough.

Recruitment isn't the sole solution to improving services' values, cultures, fairness and diversity.

As an example, the NHS is very well represented by staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. In 2018, 46 percent of hospital doctors in England were from an ethnic minority background. But despite this representation, NHS staff still face discrimination. In more than three quarters (77 percent) of all NHS trusts, staff with ethnic minority backgrounds reported higher rates of bullying, harassment and abuse from colleagues than White staff did.

Senior leaders who are focused on recruitment would do well to also consider if they are doing everything they can to improve the inclusivity of their organisational cultures. Their existing staff who should feel respected and valued are more likely to be positive advocates for others to join.

As a minimum, senior leaders should encourage staff to report discrimination and inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, and then act on these reports promptly and appropriately. This is one reason why the steps outlined earlier in this report, about raising concerns and handling misconduct allegations, are so important.

While some services have attempted to improve their EDI, including the production of EDI plans, these good intentions often don't lead to actual changes in the diversity of the workforce or to improvements that staff can perceive. This may mean potential staff don't join or current staff may leave services prematurely.

Discrimination is prevalent

Failing to deal with issues of fairness and diversity may have a wider negative effect on services' cultures and if unchallenged, may in turn perpetuate unacceptable behaviours. Some groups of staff, such as those from ethnic minority backgrounds and those who are disabled, neurodiverse and/or from the LGBTQ+ community, are more likely to experience bullying and harassment.

In our Round 2 staff survey, we asked staff throughout England about their experiences of discrimination. We found:

- Of the 11,486 staff survey respondents, 17 percent (1,920) had experienced discrimination in the past 12 months.

- There were higher rates of reported discrimination from respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds than from White respondents: of the respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds, 20 percent had experienced discrimination compared to 16 percent of White respondents.

- Of the female respondents who had experienced discrimination, 41 percent said gender was a factor compared with 16 percent of the male respondents.

- Those who self-reported as disabled, neurodiverse or from the LGBTQ+ community were also more likely to report that they had experienced discrimination in the last 12 months.

In one service, staff told us of homophobic and racial slurs being dismissed as banter. They gave us examples of racist and sexist comments and behaviours which had gone unchallenged.

Previous reviews have found that bullying, harassment and discrimination were a daily feature of some female firefighters' lives. Some reviews have found that women, staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ and neurodiverse staff experience poor treatment and do less well in their careers. One review cited an example where a Black firefighter had had a noose put above his locker.

In November 2022, the Home Office published a report on *Pathways and barriers to leadership in fire and rescue services*, based on research carried out in 2020. The report found:

> "Many (predominantly female) staff consider the workplace a very male-dominant, macho environment with some hostility towards women's place in the service. There were also a couple of reports of hostile comments towards the ethnicity of some staff; some participants, however, mentioned that the culture in their service had improved in recent years with the recruitment of new staff."

Inclusive practices are crucial to give all staff a voice and influence

Inclusive practices mean people from all backgrounds are able to influence key decisions and processes in their teams and organisations. This results in a wider range of experiences, perspectives and views being available, leading to more comprehensive decision-making and better staff attitudes. Services should take steps to make sure that the needs of staff more likely to be perceived as outsiders or under-represented are considered and that these staff have a voice and influence.

In eight services we inspected in Round 2, we found examples of innovative and promising EDI practice. In most cases, the services have invested in promoting EDI, with measurable strategies to improve diversity. Each service has introduced a broad range of new initiatives internally as well as positive action programmes to improve recruitment from under-represented groups.

One service has established a positive approach to EDI through several staff networks and an equality and inclusion working group. These groups organise a range of different activities in the service and are led by senior leaders. Staff are confident to address inappropriate language and behaviour. They also feel sure that the service will act on matters raised using the most appropriate and open approach.

Services should complete equality impact assessments to a high standard

While services are generally completing equality impact assessments, their quality varies, and some don't seek staff input. By not involving their staff with the equality impact of their processes, services may exacerbate existing divisions relating to EDI. Services should understand the effect their work has on those with protected characteristics, both in their communities and at work.

Recommendation 27

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their equality impact assessments are fit for purpose and, as a minimum, meet the requirements of the National Fire Chiefs Council equality impact assessment toolkit.

Staff aren't being trained well enough in equality, diversity and inclusion

Our inspections show that a lack of robust EDI training is directly linked to staff not properly understanding EDI. We found that too many services don't give staff enough ongoing and relevant EDI training. It is in these services that staff rarely understand the benefits of positive action. Some services rely heavily on e-learning rather than using face-to-face interaction and workshops which can be more beneficial for staff understanding.

Services often don't carry out training frequently enough. And, while most services provide some form of EDI training, in some it isn't mandatory and is focused on new recruits. As a result, it isn't always completed by the longer-serving staff, who invariably need it most. At one service, we found that formal EDI training hadn't been carried out in ten years.

Our local representative survey found that EDI training is offered more readily in services with good culture. In services that we issued a good grade in relation to this area, there is a big difference between those who are simply ticking a box by providing EDI training via e-learning every two or three years and those who are providing regular update EDI sessions through different learning platforms and methods, such as webinars, 'lunch and learns' or lived-experience discussions. When we spoke with staff on inspection at these services, we found strong evidence that this training was being well received by them. This is in contrast to other services where staff simply stated they have completed the expected mandatory learning.

As the staff in services aren't representative of the communities they serve, services must make sure they are receiving EDI training.

Positive action is misunderstood by many staff, and can lead to division

We found that across many services staff didn't understand the benefits of positive action. In one service, many staff incorrectly believed that the service lowers

its entry standards to recruit individuals with specific protected characteristics. And in another service, staff described positive action as "positive racism". This could lead to some feeling that diversity is 'being done to them'.

Some staff from ethnic minority backgrounds told us that positive action made them uncomfortable and felt that, rather than seeking high-calibre staff, services were trying to fill quotas. One group of staff we met said they felt the lack of understanding of positive action wasn't just a service problem but a societal one, including a belief that women aren't strong enough to be firefighters.

Some services are doing well to improve staff understanding and appreciation of positive action, but awareness of the nature, purpose and benefit of positive action needs to improve across the sector.

At one service, new recruits are given positive action awareness training as part of their induction. The service has also provided a range of information (including 'myth-busting information') for existing members of staff to help improve understanding. This information is distributed through, for example, in-person visits by the executive team.

Services don't understand the diversity of their staff

Services that view activities to support EDI as box-ticking exercises also tend not to recognise the value of equality impact assessments and gathering quality diversity data.

Many services don't have a good understanding of the diversity of their staff at all levels, including in senior leadership teams. And many aren't using their data or making it readily available. This means services aren't using diversity data to drive their EDI plans. And they aren't clear on what action they need to take to improve the diversity of their workforces. Therefore, EDI initiatives risk being aimless and lacking momentum. This also limits understanding of these issues nationally.

From our inspection evidence, we have found there are a few possible reasons for this, including:

• staff not understanding the reasons and benefits of declaring their diversity;

• staff not understanding the benefits of positive action;

• staff being actively hostile to declaring their diversity to the service; and

• services not effectively gathering the data, particularly at the employment stage.

One service encourages all staff to provide their diversity data, but the current level of declaration of this information throughout that service is consistently below the England level. As of 31 March 2021, 22 percent of the service's staff hadn't declared their ethnicity. This is higher than the England figure of 9 percent.

Another service doesn't have enough meaningful workforce equality data to inform its impact assessments. This means it can't effectively understand how potential changes may affect its workforce. It also can't accurately say how well its workforce represents the residential population, as it doesn't hold ethnicity data for a high proportion of its workforce. As of 31 March 2021, 38 percent of this service's staff members hadn't declared their ethnicity to the service.

This lack of understanding might prevent services from identifying and remedying problems. For example, there are still some services that don't have adequate facilities for female staff at operational stations. This includes female and male changing lockers located next to one another and beds in dormitories only separated by a row of lockers or a privacy curtain. At one station in a service, there are no changing facilities for females, so female firefighters have to get changed in the toilets.

More publicly available equality data is needed to better understand the challenges the sector faces. In particular, more published data is needed to understand the diversity of leadership in FRSs nationally.

Recommendation 28

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review how they gather and use equality and diversity data to improve their understanding of their staff demographics, including applying and meeting the requirements of the National Fire Chiefs Council equality, diversity and inclusion data toolkit.

Recommendation 29

By 1 December 2023, the Home Office should publish greater detail on the protected characteristic data it collects about FRS staff, including joiners and leavers, by rank and role.

Recommendation 30

By 30 December 2024, the Home Office should align the data it collects on protected characteristics with the Office for National Statistics harmonised standard and publish this data.

Recommendation 31

By 1 December 2024, the Home Office should collect and publish experimental statistics on public complaints and conduct matters in relation to FRS staff, similar to that which it currently publishes on police forces in England and Wales.

Not all staff are treated fairly

We found that in many services, staff experiences of being treated fairly are dependent on their job type. Non-operational or on-call members of staff often report experiencing worse treatment than their operational or wholetime counterparts.

Negative behaviour towards certain groups of staff can adversely affect career progression and opportunities for them in the service. It can also lead to poor treatment from other staff groups and, in some cases, senior managers.

Compared to other staff groups, on-call staff reported greater levels of discrimination in services with requires improvement or inadequate grades for values and culture. All staff should be treated fairly and with respect. They should be given the same opportunities, regardless of their role or rank.

In one service, we found there are different recruitment arrangements in place in the fire protection team for operational and non-operational staff. In another, some non-operational staff told us they felt their career paths were limited and that they were pigeonholed. In another service, the chief fire officer excluded non-operational staff from a staff engagement session, perpetuating an 'us and them' culture.

In one service, non-operational managers can't investigate a grievance against an operational member of staff. In another, some staff told us they felt it was difficult for operational staff to raise grievances, as they felt "it creates an awkward atmosphere" in the station. They said that in stations there is a lot of mistrust around the grievance process. This may lead to fewer issues being raised and resolved, increasing the likelihood of a poor culture prevailing.

In another, some groups of staff told us that they felt they were treated differently. Some on-call staff felt ostracised in some locations, and some non-operational staff said they don't always feel valued.

But there are examples of services that are making sure there are opportunities for all staff.

In one service, there are good opportunities for non-operational staff to develop and progress. It gave us examples which included a staff member being given an opportunity to embark on a two-year management apprenticeship qualification. The service acknowledged that, given there isn't a gateway process for non-operational staff, these opportunities should be better advertised. A 'metro map' is being produced to show staff what development and qualifications are needed to get from one place (role) to another.

Since our last inspection, one service's fire prevention department has created non-operational line manager roles. Operational staff previously carried out these roles. This means there are more progression opportunities for non-operational staff, and the service can better select the right people for the job.

Progression opportunities limit diversity in leadership teams

Effective understanding of workforce skills and capability is linked to culture. We have highlighted here, and in our annual and national reports, that progression opportunities aren't equally available for all staff – on-call and non-operational staff generally don't receive the same opportunities as their wholetime operational colleagues. This can lead to services failing to recognise and develop talent. It can also reduce opportunities to improve diversity in senior leadership teams; most female staff and staff from ethnic minority backgrounds work in non-operational roles so this affects them disproportionately.

Some leadership job adverts require incident command experience, which would generally be gained from operational roles. This experience should only be required if absolutely necessary for the role or to maintain operational rotas, particularly for senior management roles.

In one service, promotion processes aren't fair and accessible for all staff. We were told that if female members of staff who work flexible hours are offered a promotion, the service tries "to force [staff] back into normal shifts". One woman had to decline a promotion offer because she couldn't work the shift pattern.

But we did find some positive examples. One service runs a high development potential scheme which is open to internal and external applicants. The most recent intake was two female candidates who applied after seeing the posts advertised at their local rugby club.

In its research and analysis report, _Pathways and barriers to leadership in fire and rescue services_, the Home Office found that staff felt there were few opportunities for promotion. It found that non-operational staff who participated in the research "felt especially aggrieved by limited opportunities, citing no visible pathway in their specialism". And it found that on-call staff and non-operational staff "believed they had fewer promotion opportunities compared with wholetime staff".

The Home Office also said that barriers to progression can include:

> "Issues related to personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, family situation and age. Meanwhile, other wider barriers were linked to organisational cultures, such as issues related to perceived favouritism in leadership chains. These perceived barriers were typically considered to reflect the culture and attitudes within FRSs and leadership chains and were often seen to impede staff progression."

The Home Office points to several areas in which FRSs could focus their attention regarding talent management and progression. These include:

> "Providing greater levels of consistency in the delivery of development programmes, which may be fostered through nationally backed programmes to increase the consistency in delivery and access."

This is an area that some services have spent considerable time and effort improving, and the NFCC's talent management toolkit was developed to support FRSs at every stage of the talent management cycle, making sure people with the right skills, behaviours and values are in the right roles at the right time. But when the career pathways for staff are ineffective, and when combined with poor succession planning, it isn't surprising that staff in these services don't think the process is fair.

We hope that the College of Fire and Rescue proposed in the *White Paper Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service*, when established, will give greater support to services and a more consistent approach to developing staff and nurturing talent.

Poor talent management, promotion processes and succession planning can lead to unfairness

We found that most services have a fair and transparent promotion process, but many staff (49 percent of our Round 2 staff survey respondents) perceived them as unfair. Recruitment and promotion processes are perceived to be fairer by staff in services that are good or outstanding in relation to values and culture.

Some staff in one service described its promotion processes as "feeling corrupt". They expressed this frustration after applying for promotions many times and, despite being unsuccessful, not receiving any feedback or support. They told us: "If your face doesn't fit – you won't get in."

Some staff in another service talked about a "new club in town". They commented that it was easy to predict who was going to be promoted based on who they socialised with.

Perceptions of nepotism are particularly apparent in services where there is no effective talent management in place and where staff development is limited.

In one service, we heard that the promotion policy is distorted or blatantly ignored when individuals are cherry-picked for senior roles. We were told some individuals are permitted to "leapfrog" through the promotion progress. This is despite them not having the necessary accreditations or even sitting the exams that are required.

A senior leader at another service was offered a temporary promotion while a replacement was found. Once this period ended, they were offered another senior position without needing to go through any promotion process. The role they were offered didn't previously exist in the service.

Some services need to improve their succession plans, particularly at a senior level

Perceptions of, and actual unfair, promotion processes are sometimes linked to poor succession planning. We found that some services didn't actively seek to diversify their senior leadership. This can lead to staff lacking confidence in the services' promotion processes.

One service has improved the way it manages succession planning for senior leadership roles. This service has signed a regional agreement to allow opportunities for the secondment of senior managers between services. This is to fill gaps while a full and open recruitment process takes place. The secondees gain experience of working as a principal officer, while the service benefits from a mutual exchange of knowledge and development.

Recommendation 32

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should, as a priority, specify in succession plans how they intend to improve diversity across all levels of the service. This should include offering increased direct-entry opportunities.

Recommendation 33

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should develop plans to promote progression paths for existing staff in non-operational roles and put plans in place to reduce any inequalities of opportunity.

National work is supporting fire service improvements

The Fire Standards Board recently introduced its leadership and people fire standards

In December 2022, the Fire Standards Board introduced two professional standards called leading the service and leading and developing people. They build on the Core Code of Ethics.

The leading the service standard sets out how senior leaders in the fire and rescue service (FRS) can make sure organisations provides excellent service to the community, built on positive relationships and trust.

The leading and developing people standard sets out how to establish, maintain and deploy a competent, diverse and motivated workforce. This includes carrying out robust workforce planning, having effective policies and processes and developing a variety of entry routes to attract and recruit a diverse workforce.

HMICFRS takes fire standards into consideration when conducting inspections but doesn't assess FRSs directly against these standards.

The National Fire Chiefs Council is promoting values and culture

The National Fire Chief Council's (NFCC) people programme is committed to making sure that the public has the most capable FRSs and that their cultural values and behaviours make them great places to work. As the NFCC is a strategic organisation, it is the responsibility of the leaders in each service to implement NFCC guidance.

The programme's work includes promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in FRSs, highlighting the values of their services and encouraging open, flexible and inclusive cultures. It does this by working with FRS employers, the workforce and trade unions to identify and promote best practice.

The NFCC's people programme is in its second phase. It is focusing on cultural reform and strengthening leadership, including working on diversity and recruitment.

The NFCC produces tools and guidance for FRSs to use and has started to map the Fire Standards Board's standards against the programme.

A key development has been the introduction of the Core Code of Ethics. The code was developed by the Fire Standards Board in partnership with the NFCC, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the Local Government Association, in response to our recommendation in the 2019 *State of Fire* Report. The Fire Standards Board published the code in May 2021.

The code sets out five ethical principles:

- putting communities first
- integrity
- dignity and respect
- leadership
- equality, diversity and inclusion.

The NFCC suggested that services use the Core Code of Ethics to carry out a gap analysis of their existing behavioural frameworks, values, and cultural approaches, and to make sure that the principles of the code are incorporated into them. Everyone in every FRS in England is expected to follow the code.

Most services are adopting the Core Code of Ethics

In our Round 2 inspections, we found most services are adopting the Core Code of Ethics, though to varying degrees.

One service has incorporated the Core Code of Ethics into its own 'code of ethical conduct', which has been signed by all staff. And members of the senior leadership team have signed up to a 'senior code'. The service has also laid out a set of behavioural expectations in its initiatives 'a customer promise' and 'a promise to each other'. We saw during our inspection that these initiatives have worked well. Staff gave us positive accounts, such as people being respectful of each other and feeling looked after by the service.

Another service has a workplace charter that incorporates the Core Code of Ethics. It sets out the standards of behaviour expected in the service. It was evident throughout our last inspection that there was a positive culture in the organisation. Senior leaders have a clear plan for the service. All staff understand that having a positive culture is a service priority. Positive behaviours are firmly in place, accepted, carried out and understood across the whole organisation.

In our Round 3 inspections, we hope to continue to see services taking the implementation of the code seriously.

Recommendation 34

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should review their implementation of the Core Code of Ethics and make sure it is being applied across their services.

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England should be strengthened

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England is prepared by the Secretary of State. It sets out guidance and priorities that fire and rescue authorities must comply with. The Government has a duty under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 to produce the framework and keep it current.

Recommendation 35

By the end of this Parliament, the Government should consider the findings and recommendations in this report when refreshing the *Fire and Rescue National Framework for England*.

Conclusion

Implementing the recommendations in this report is crucial for change

Some services have improved since our first round of inspections. And national efforts, including the Core Code of Ethics, have certainly helped bring the issue of poor cultures in fire and rescue services (FRSs) into focus. We also understand that many people working in FRSs have made a significant effort to improve their values, culture and diversity. But the findings from our most recent inspections have shown that a great deal more work is needed to improve values and culture. Even some services that are good in this area have more to do. This isn't a time to be complacent.

The recommendations in this report are designed to guide the relevant individuals and organisations in the right direction. But they are the minimum of work that we expect those involved to carry out. Services and national organisations should continuously consider what more they can do to improve values and culture in FRSs.

Some changes may take time, but for others, there is no reason why they can't be implemented immediately. A joint, concerted effort is needed by every single person and organisation at every level of the fire and rescue sector and those aligned to it. Every single person working in an FRS, and every member of the public, deserves to be treated with respect and compassion.