CULTURAL AUDIT 2023 MAIN REPORT

Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service

Dr Debra Willoughby & Emily Mellors

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[1] Permission to use names provided.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction by the Research Team

The experienced **ioda** Cultural Audit Research Team (RT) wishes to make some personal observations in this Executive Summary and respectfully requests readers' indulgence.

Whilst there are a number of important, developmental recommendations in this report, this unprecedented move is being made by the RT to formally recognise the significant number of outstanding, positive findings within Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service (HWFRS), which are a credit to the Service and those who serve within it. Some indicative examples are highlighted below.

94% of respondents stated that HWFRS is on a forward-thinking, positive and progressive equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) journey. In addition, they were able to provide many credible and validated examples, which are detailed in the main report. Moreover, the majority emphasised how proud and happy they are to be a part of HWFRS, which is more positive than elsewhere in the FRS sector (as identified by People Insight[2]). This view was buttressed by significant numbers of respondents asserting that their experiences in HWFRS far surpassed the other fire services they had worked in. For example, a female firefighter respondent described HWFRS as '*a breath of fresh air, where I felt respected and welcomed'*; another stated that it was *'like the old me was back after three weeks of being* here'; and a minority group respondent stressed that *'it was the first time I was accepted for who I am'*.

The majority also stressed that HWFRS is a *'good'* or *'very good'* service, made up of people who understand its values – and care about the organisation and the communities they work for/with.   Whilst there was recognition that there are '*a handful*'; '*a few pockets*'; '*one or two people'* who are not aligned to the values of HWFRS, it was mitigated by the intent to educate, train, challenge and, when necessary, formally confront and manage any clumsy, inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour. As one middle manager summarised *'I have a duty to manage any issues that arise. If I don't, I am equally to blame and I believe that it proper and right'*.

Most respondents felt able to challenge inappropriate behaviour among their peer group and thought their line manager or more experienced members of staff would help them to deal with any troubling EDI issues.[3]

In terms of knowledge, 100% of respondents who spoke on the subject or answered a questionnaire had a good level of understanding of the Core Code of Ethics; HWFRS' approach to managing harassment and discrimination (in line with the Equality Act 2010); other forms of discrimination, including bullying; and grievance and disciplinary matters. They also understood the importance of those processes[4].

Background

As part of its commitment to meeting the diverse needs of its communities, an ongoing priority for HWFRS is building a diverse and inclusive workforce. Accordingly, the Service recognises the importance of creating a healthy and fair environment, in harmony with the Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services in England, as the following HWFRS graphic highlights.
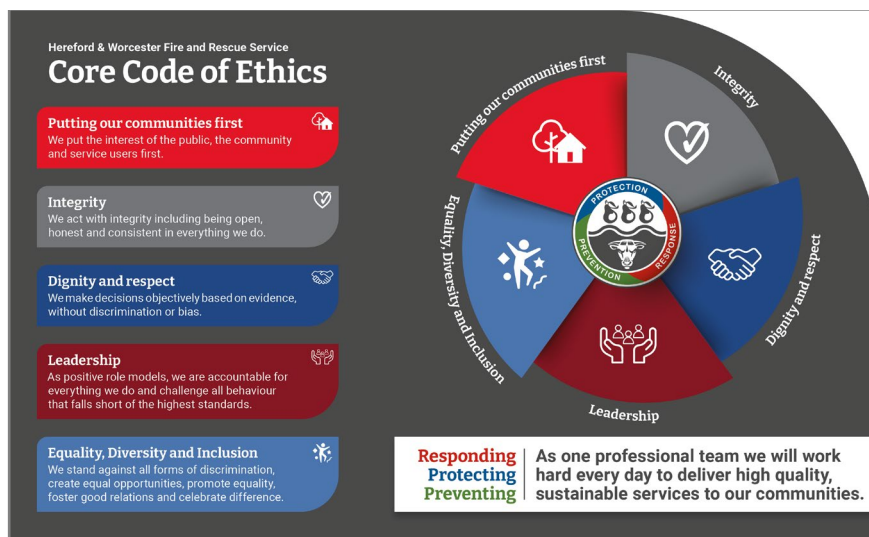
Figure 1

To help facilitate this process, HWFRS procured **ioda**'s services to '*undertake an audit across the organisation to gather detailed information and data on organisational culture and practices, and staff and management views, and levels of understanding of EDI to inform future development*'.[5]

Consequently, this report provides a holistic view of HWFRS' culture and practices in terms of EDI, as well as providing information that will inform the development and refinement of strategies to facilitate targeted cultural benefits.

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colleagues and the organisation'; and 95% of the survey respondents knew how to report inappropriate behaviour, with 75% believing appropriate action would be taken.

[4] Also identified by the HMICFRS IR (2021-22).

[5] See HWFRS Terms of Reference: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Cultural Audit to Understand People, their Behaviours and Workplace Practices (17 March 2023)

Methodology and sample

In line with research ethics, respondents were invited to take part in the Cultural Audit in an appropriate, relevant, and acceptable way, which encompassed the legal doctrine of informed consent (capacity, information and voluntariness)[6].

The RT (Dr Debra Willoughby and Emily Mellors) spoke with **181 respondents** (37 females and 144 males) through 19 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs); 26 Face-to-Face One-to-One interviews (1-2-1s); and 24 telephone/video conferencing 1-2-1 interviews. This represents approximately 23% of the workforce, which in **ioda**'s experience, is an exceptional response, particularly as the majority of respondents provided open and candid information. Similar qualitative, face-to-face audits in comparable public sector institutions have resulted in 60-100 respondents coming forward.

The goal of qualitative research is to attain saturation, which occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information. The qualified and experienced RT is confident that saturation occurred in this research.[7] Importantly, the Cultural Audit builds on the findings of the HWFRS Staff Survey (People Insights, 2023) which had a survey response rate of 65% (440 responses of 678 surveys were returned).

Culture and practices

In accord with the Terms of Reference, Section 4.2 of the main report examines **i)** positive cultural elements; **ii)** the progressive nature of HWFRS; and **iii)** how the majority of staff behave to a high standard. It highlights that the majority of respondents are proud to be a part of HWFRS, which is more positive than elsewhere in the FRS sector[8], as supported by a significant number of respondents who explained that their experiences in HWFRS far surpass other fire services they had worked in.

Moreover, with 13 exceptions (7.5%)[9], respondents stated that HWFRS is on a forward thinking, positive and progressive 'EDI journey' and provided many examples. The majority also stressed that HWFRS is a *'good'* or *'very good'* service, made up of people who understand its values; and care about the organisation and the communities they serve.

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[6] There exists a 'duty of confidentiality' in UK law, which has been developed through case law rather than established by statute. In summary, a duty of confidentiality can be established in situations where information is passed, in confidence, to the receiver of the information.

[7] The researchers used thematic saturation in inductive analysis of qualitative interviews. This process was applied prospectively during the data collection and analysis process. A key advantage of this process is that the metrics are flexible as new themes arise, affording the RT, in partnership with the SLB, the ability to choose different run lengths and/or new information thresholds.

[8] A strength that was identified in the Staff Survey (People Insight, March 2023).

[9] The researchers recognise that FGD participants do not make a verbal contribution to every topic under discussion, therefore this number refers to those people who commented on the subject in question during a FGD or 1-2-1.

Culture and practices: recommendations

Whilst the RT recognises the overall positive culture of HWFRS, as detailed in the 'Introduction by the Research Team' and Section 4.2 of the main report, the data has identified that it could be enhanced by the following 15 recommendations:

R1 **Making HWFRS' EDI Strategic Intent more explicit across the organisation,** such as identifying HWFRS's current EDI baseline and its EDI Business Case for both the service *and* the community – including how it links to the Service's strategic priorities and how the Service can embed it.

The RT is aware that HWFRS has recently reinforced its ongoing commitment to the Core Code of Ethics (see Figure 1) and that this audit, coupled with the Staff Survey, will contribute to this recommendation.

R2 **Introducing Induction Training for newly promoted Station Commanders (SCs) and a handover period for all SCs.**

R3 **Providing face-to-face or on-line 'Allyship Training'** for the EDI Allies and other interested stakeholders, to ensure maximum benefit from this positive initiative (see Microsoft on-line example[10]).

R4 **Continuing the 'Difficult Conversations Training'**, as it is well received. Moreover, participants feel able to put it into practice, particularly when challenging or formally confronting inappropriate behaviour.

R5 **Offering welfare support to Corporate Staff [11] when they are involved in the active administration of sensitive and/or serious issues**, such as notetaking.

R6 **Continue to provide promotion candidates with feedback and, whenever possible, ensure this is from person who was involved in the actual process, avoiding the use of delegated third parties.** *It is noteworthy that three respondents stated that HWFRS follows the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) guidelines on Candidate Feedback.*

R7 **Implementing the current plan to cascade Neurodiversity training sessions service wide.**

R8 **Implementing the current plan to cascade Menopause Awareness training sessions to managers and leaders.**

One of the reoccurring staff recommendations from this section is too wide to be considered as an objective, but is worthy of reinforcing here, as all other recommendations and subsequent action plans will contribute to it:

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[10] https://mslearningcontent.microsoft.com/IntroductionToAllyshipAtWork/story.html

[11] The term 'Corporate Staff' is being used in this report until the ongoing consultation process has concluded and an agreed descriptor has been decided.

'EDI and ethics need to become the fabric of HWFRS…'
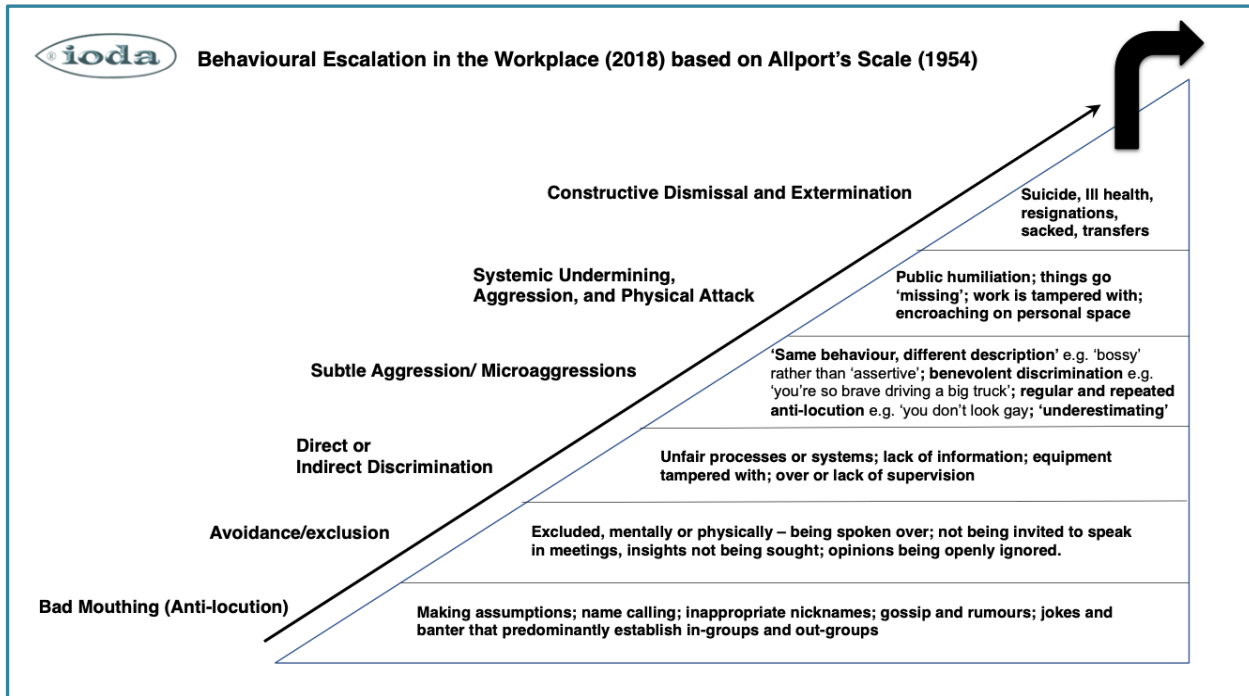
Areas of poor behaviour

In accord with the Terms of Reference, Section 4.3 of the report examines areas of poor behaviour to help management and staff target areas for improvement. They are mapped against the levels of the revised Allport's Scale, 'Behavioural Escalation in the Workplace' (**ioda**, 2018).

Areas of poor behaviour: recommendations

In summary, the Cultural Audit has identified that the majority of areas for improvement relate to 'Level 1' (**anti-locution/bad-mouthing**) with only limited examples of behaviour that exceeded this initial level. The presenting evidence demonstrated that physical abuse (such as that reported in other organisations) was not taking place.

The majority of respondents particularly (but not solely) those working in fire stations, provided a number of 'anti-locution/bad-mouthing' examples ranging from **'clumsy comments'** (such as referring to corporate colleagues as *'non…'*) to '**inappropriate banter'** (including *'you're so gay'*); up to '**unacceptable behaviour'** including *'You got this job because you're a woman'; 'I'm talking to a brick wall'; 'This* [names a HWFRS initiative] *is crap, so I'm not wasting my breath telling you about it – if any of you have insomnia, you can read it yourselves as a remedy'*; and *'man up and get on with it'*.

A relatively smaller number of isolated, but triangulated, incidents were described as occurring at the higher levels of the scale (see Section 4.3 of the main report).

Behavioural Escalation in the Workplace (2018) based on Allport's Scale (1954)

Level	Description
Constructive Dismissal and Extermination	Suicide, Ill health, resignations, sacked, transfers
Systemic Undermining, Aggression, and Physical Attack	Public humiliation; things go 'missing'; work is tampered with; encroaching on personal space
Subtle Aggression/ Microaggressions	'Same behaviour, different description' e.g. 'bossy' rather than 'assertive'; **benevolent discrimination** e.g. 'you're so brave driving a big truck'; **regular and repeated anti-locution** e.g. 'you don't look gay; 'underestimating'
Direct or Indirect Discrimination	Unfair processes or systems; lack of information; equipment tampered with; over or lack of supervision
Avoidance/exclusion	Excluded, mentally or physically – being spoken over; not being invited to speak in meetings, insights not being sought; opinions being openly ignored.
Bad Mouthing (Anti-locution)	Making assumptions; name calling; inappropriate nicknames; gossip and rumours; jokes and banter that predominantly establish in-groups and out-groups

In a number of these more serious cases, which had been dealt with by HWFRS, it was highlighted that individuals' behaviour had been escalating for considerable periods of time but had not been challenged at a local level and, in the majority of the incidents, senior managers were not aware. This 'bystanderism'[12] contributed to escalation 'up the scale' to the point where the behaviour had become unacceptable.

It was also identified that the current **national** fitness tests may constitute 'Indirect Discrimination' under the Equality Act 2010[13] in relation to 'age' and 'sex'. The RT recognizes that this is a national issue that has extant national guidance in place which HWFRS is currently obliged to follow. The team also acknowledges that a level of fitness is required to ensure Firefighters are able to carry out their roles safely and effectively.

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[12] **Bystanderism** is the phenomenon of a person or people not intervening despite awareness of another person's needs (see, for example, **i)** Latané´, B., & Darley, J. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Croft; and **ii)** Rendsvig, R. (2014). Pluralistic ignorance in the bystander effect: Informational dynamics of unresponsive witnesses in situations calling for intervention. Synthese (Dordrecht), 191.

[13] **Indirect discrimination** can occur where a workplace rule, practice or procedure is applied to all employees, but disadvantages those of a particular sex.

Importantly, the Service agrees that the concerns around certain staff groups being disadvantaged require further exploration at a national level. To this end, the CFO has raised this issue with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the HWFRS Service Fitness Policy has been revised to allow for a medical assessment; risk assessment; and staff to undertake the 'Drill Ground Assessment' (see Section 4.3 of the main report). The RT recommends the following actions.

R9 **The forthcoming EDI training should incorporate all key aspects identified by the Cultural Audit, to ensure that it is needs-driven,** with a particular focus on increasing participants' skills and confidence in relation to challenging behaviour, as well as providing them with the tools to do so (see Annex 5 for more details) – and **ensuring** all other training contains an EDI 'golden thread' such as 'good leadership' training becoming 'good *inclusive* leadership'.

R10 **Continue to work with NFCC to review the national guidance with a view to appraising and updating the current HWFRS fitness tests,** to ensure they do not constitute 'Indirect Discrimination' under the Equality Act 2010 in relation to 'age' and 'sex'. Ensure that the support mechanisms outlined in the new policy are in place and that any staff group that may be vulnerable to the issues raised in this regard are offered additional support as necessary and appropriate.

EDI views and levels of understanding

In accord with the Terms of Reference, Section 4.4 of the main report examines staff and management views on, and levels of understanding of EDI.

The majority of respondents (100% of those who spoke on the subject or answered a questionnaire) had a good level of 'remembering' and 'understanding' (Anderson et al 2001[14]) **the Core Code of Ethics and HWFRS' approach to managing harassment and discrimination** (in line with the Equality Act 2010)**; other forms of discrimination, including bullying; and grievances and disciplinary matters. They also understood the importance of those processes.**

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[14] **The cognitive domain** details how knowledge encompasses six levels as outlined here using the Core Code of Ethics (CCofE) as an example. The first levels are **i) remembering** (rote learning – such as being able to recite the CCofE) then **ii) understanding** (being able to describe, discuss and explain the CCofE) followed by **iii) applying** (implementing, using and interpreting the CCofE in various situations). The higher levels are **iv) analysing** (using analytical skills to identify where the CCoE fits in the 'bigger HWFRS picture' and how it can support the EDI journey); **v) evaluating** (appraising, supporting and critiquing the CCofE); and **vi) creating** (investigating and developing new ways of ensuring the CCofE is embedded). See Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (see Anderson, L., Krathwohl, D., Airasian, P., Cruikshank, K., Mayer, R., Pintrich, P., Raths, J., Wittrock, M. (2001). A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. New York: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon).

Additionally, all the respondents had heard of the recent introduction of 'Say So', and most had received an input that enhanced their **understanding**, but many were still unsure about its **application** and how comments/information would be actioned (especially if they were anonymous). A small number of respondents also identified the need to ensure welfare support was signposted by 'Say So'.

In terms of **applying**, most felt able to challenge inappropriate behaviour *among their peer group* and thought their line manager or more experienced members of staff would help them to deal with any troubling EDI issues that they felt unable to deal with.

This is reflected in both HMICFRS IR (2021-22) and the aforementioned Staff Survey. The former recorded that '*staff have a good understanding of what bullying, harassment and discrimination are, and the negative effect they have on both colleagues and the organisation*'; and 95% of the survey respondents knew how to report inappropriate behaviour, and 75% believed appropriate action would be taken.

Despite this, some respondents felt unable to challenge or report because they were worried about being seen as a '*killjoy*' or '*oversensitive*', with some being concerned that this would upset the team dynamics and/or prevent them fitting in the team. Others were concerned about ending someone's career for '*making a mistake*'.

EDI views and levels of understanding: recommendation

Although they did not cite the taxonomy theory, a significant number of respondents provided examples that highlighted difficulties in relation to **i) 'creating'** strategic EDI plans **ii)** '**creating**' ways of improving Black, Asian and minority ethnic diversity; **iii) 'analysing'** and **'evaluating'** responses to majority/dominant groups; and **iv)** poor **'understanding'** of Positive Action by some personnel, resulting in diametrically opposed views on the issue.

A number of respondents recommendations/ideas were provided in relation to **i**, **ii** and **iii** above. However, the RT recognises that this work is already in the planning stages or ongoing at HWFRS (identified in the original and interim Key Stakeholder Interviews). Therefore, they are provided in Section 4.6 of the main report for reference, rather than included as RT recommendations. In relation to **iv**, the following recommendation is made.

R11 Recognising that the **'Positive Action Plan: Increasing Workforce Diversity' (2020-22) is under review, the RT recommends that the relevant issues from this report be included in the updated version**, particularly in view of the aforementioned diametrically opposed views.

Review of historical conduct cases

In accord with the Terms of Reference, Section 4.5 of the main report concludes with a review of historical conduct cases, investigations and outcomes in order to correlate results against the Cultural Audit findings and identify strengths, lessons learned and potential areas for improvement.

The RT reviewed cases from 2018 to 2023 consisting of 12 disciplinaries (2018); five disciplinaries and one grievance (2019); five disciplinaries and one grievance (2020); five disciplinaries (2021); and five disciplinaries and one grievance (2023) including the associated suspensions and final outcomes, which highlighted good practice such as the positive welfare steps that have been taken to support people through grievance and discipline processes.

A number of respondents also stated that the CFO insists on completing investigations even when the staff member under investigation resigns, as the results should be on record. These comments were made prior to the release of the 'Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services' report (HMICFRS, 2023). However, the RT notes that this correlates with Recommendation 13 of the report.

Review of historical conduct cases: recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the review of cases, FGDs and SSIs.

R12 **Provide training for discipline and grievance investigators** (comparable with that given to fire investigators) including, as a minimum, **i)** interviewing skills; **ii)** remaining independent and objective; **iii)** unconscious bias; and **iv)** personal and organisational values. Respondents added that this could result in a team/pool of appropriately qualified investigators.

   Three respondents told the RT that this is currently being planned.

R13 **Continue to review the coaching and mentoring process for investigators on their first one or two investigations** – this could involve supporting the new investigator with the preparation of an Action Plan; discussing the types of questions that could be asked; talking through potentially problematic areas (such as when the person under investigation states that they are 'probably neurodiverse' but has not been diagnosed); supporting the management of time frames; and proof-reading drafts for content. As one respondent highlighted, '*this prevents people being thrown in at the deep end!'*.

R14 **Within legal guidance, consider how best to disseminate appropriate information about discipline and grievance cases** – '*to prevent the rumours getting out of hand*'.

R15 Maintain records of informal discipline in accordance with Section 4.1 to 4.5 of the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure[15] so that it may be referred to in the event of repeated or similar behaviour in the future, as evidence of the Service's stated expectations.   Moreover, as this requires an element of manager judgement to operate within the Services policy, managers may benefit from specific training in this area.

Strategic and management considerations

Following interim Cultural Audit briefings with the CFO and other (Strategic Leadership Board members, a number of issues raised by respondents were immediately acted upon; and others will inform medium- and long- term EDI initiatives and/or actions. Key examples are outlined below and further detailed in Section 4.6 of the main report.

1. **Descriptor for Corporate Staff:** a consultation process began with Corporate Staff to identify their preferred title/descriptor as a number of respondents were unhappy with the use of the term 'non' (as in non-uniformed or non-operational), although the results of the first survey seem to indicate that only a minority of staff hold this view.

2. **Highlighting career path opportunities for Corporate Staff:** a letter was sent to Corporate Staff from the CFO advising them to raise their career pathway ambitions during their annual appraisal and, if required, to apply for personal development sponsorship. It is noted that Corporate Staff are on different Terms and Conditions and are often employed in specialist roles and, whilst this does not preclude development, it is harder to achieve.[16]

   It was also highlighted that there are many examples of Corporate Staff moving into more senior roles (including SLB) and through different departments/disciplines.

3. **Respondents were concerned that the wording of letters/documents that notify staff about discipline procedures**, could **i)** cause people to think they will be dismissed; and/or **ii)** sound 'worse than they actually are'. The RT identified

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[15] Disciplinary Policy and Procedure states '**Informal Stage:** Cases involving low level matters are usually best dealt with informally by the line manager... quickly and confidentially. The line manager (or manager dealing with the issue) ... should confirm in writing with the employee, a record of what was discussed and if applicable, any improvements required. The line manager may choose to do this on a 'Record of Discussion' form... or by sending an email to the employee... to be recorded on the employee's Personal Record File (PRF)... will not form any part of the employee's disciplinary record... may be referred to in the event of repeated or similar behaviour in the future...'

[16] The RT identified that HWFRS has a desire to invest, grow and develop all staff.   It is recognised by the CFO that it does require Corporate Staff to be self-motivated and lead their own development, whilst accepting that this process is not as challenging for uniformed staff, who have a clearer, more defined career pathway due to their larger staff numbers and roles within HWFRS.

that this feedback had previously been raised with HR and had been acted upon, including obtaining legal guidance.

4. **The off-boarding/exit process:** whilst HWFRS has a robust process in place, SLB has identified from this audit, that this data can be analysed further to inform future actions.

5. **In-depth research within diverse communities to ascertain their reasons for not joining the FRS[17]:** this need is recognised by the SLB and will be addressed when finances allow. Whilst it cannot form a significant element of HWFRS short/medium term plan, the On-Call (OC) Project is addressing some of these issues.

6. **The hours worked by OC Firefighters,** will be reviewed to ensure they are not called to a second incident in too short a period of time, however all On Call staff have always had an ability to work with their local managers and 'book off' for a variety of legitimate reasons, especially if it unreasonably affects their health and safety or primary employment.

7. **The promotion process will continue to be reviewed**, with due regard to the feedback in the audit.

8. **Members of Corporate Staff identified a number of staffing practices, which will be reviewed,** including having operational colleagues as their line managers, who have no/limited experience in the relevant area of expertise; the Corporate Staff team 'loses them' when on active fire and rescue duties; and many are moved to another role or promoted after a short time (see 4.2.2 in the main body of the report for details).

9. **Members of the Fire Station Staff respondents identified a number of staffing practices, which will be reviewed,** including Station Commanders changing too frequently; communication between senior leaders and fire station personnel; and a small number of middle managers deliberately 'sabotaging corporate messages' (internal communications) and others who do so due to a lack of understanding (see 4.2.2 in the main body of the report for full details).

10. **The roles Fire Service Volunteers and Cadets can have in EDI activities** will be reviewed.

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[17] Possible examples from respondents included the Asian Fire Service Association; Worcestershire LGBT Hub; Gay Herefordshire; the Mosques in Redditch; Worcestershire Polish Association; and Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire

11. **To reduce the time spent away from their families attending training events, a number of OC firefighters suggested the following alternatives i) revising topics themselves at home, then taking an examination; and ii) introducing an accreditation of prior learning (APL) process.** Whilst HWFRS will review this, due to the high-risk nature of firefighting duties, the Service's need to ensure all firefighters meet the required standards may mean it is not possible.

HEREFORD & WORCESTER FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE CULTURAL AUDIT 2023

We continually recognise and promote the value of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion both within the Fire and Rescue Service and the wider communities in which we serve. We stand against all forms of discrimination, create equal opportunities, promote equality, foster good relations, and celebrate difference.

Core Code of Ethics or Fire & Rescue Service, England 2021

1. Introduction and background

Building a diverse and inclusive workforce is an ongoing priority for Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service (HWFRS). The service is committed to meeting the diverse needs of its communities and recognises the importance of creating a healthy and fair environment, in harmony with the Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in England.

To this end, the service continually strives to increase diversity in its people and embed the importance of inclusion. For instance, HWFRS has recently commenced a mandatory Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training programme for all employees at all levels – including Corporate Staff; Fire Control teams; and On-Call and Wholetime firefighters.

HWFRS wishes to ensure that the content of the training programme is both comprehensive and bespoke to the needs of the service, its employees and, ultimately, the communities it serves.

To achieve this, as well as providing information that will inform the development and refinement of strategies that facilitate targeted cultural benefits, HWFRS procured **ioda**'s services to '*undertake an audit across the organisation to gather detailed information and data on organisational culture and practices, and staff and management views and levels of understanding of EDI to inform future development*'.[18]

This report details the empirical data and functional information from the Cultural Audit, with a focus on the following areas.

    i. Positive cultural elements including the progressive nature of HWFRS and how the majority of staff behave to a high standard.

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[18] See HWFRS Terms of Reference: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Cultural Audit to Understand People, their Behaviours and Workplace Practices (17 March 2023)

ii. Areas of poor behaviour[19] to help management and staff target areas for improvement.

iii. Historical conduct cases, investigations, and outcomes – including **a)** the reporting and management of concerns about behavioural issues; and **b)** associated HR practices – to build on strengths; identify lessons learned and recognise areas for improvement.

Consequently, this report provides a holistic view of HWFRS' culture and practices in terms of EDI. Following this brief Introduction and Background, Section 2 details the Research Team; Section 3 the Methodology; and finally, Section 4 provides the Research Findings, Recommendations, and Strategic and Management Considerations.

For ease of reference, Section 4 is divided into the areas identified in the Terms of Reference (TORs) i.e., Culture and Practices; Areas of Poor Behaviour; EDI: Views and Levels of Understanding; and Review of Historical Conduct Cases.

2. Research team

The Research Team (RT) was led by Dr Debra Willoughby, supported by Emily Mellors and the **ioda** corporate team.

Dr Debra served as a UK police officer for over two decades, retiring in 1994. She then began working with **ioda** and has become an internationally recognised consultant, researcher, evaluator, equalities advisor, trainer, and development expert. Debra's experience is enhanced by a Doctorate focusing on communication in sensitive environments; and a master's degree (education and evaluation), concentrating on the reduction of bias and discrimination in the workplace, to enhance equality, diversity and inclusion.

Emily is a senior **ioda** EDI trainer and practitioner – responsible for delivering training, coaching and mentoring support across the UK. Among others, Emily currently delivers professional standards training for West Yorkshire FRS, as well as EDI and Leadership training for South Yorkshire FRS.

3. Methodology

The Cultural Audit methodology had four distinct phases:

3.1 Phase One: Literature review, key stakeholder interviews, and preparation for data collection

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[19] Including bullying and harassment; misogyny; other breaches of the expected standards of behaviour in relation to EDI both inside, and outside of the working environment (if the actions have the potential to bring HWFRS into disrepute); and any reporting processes associated with such poor behaviour.

A literature review was carried out – including, but not limited to, the following:

- Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services (CCofE); related Guidance; and Fire Standard FSC-ETH01 *(National Fire Chiefs Council [NFCC]; Local Government Association [LGA]; and Association of Police and Crime Commissioners [APCC], 2021)*

- Inspection of HWFRS (HMICFRS, 2021/22)

- HWFRS Staff Survey Results Presentation (People Insights, 2023)

- Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services' (HMICFRS, 2023)

- Annual Service Plan (HWFRS, 2022-23)

- People Strategy (HWFRS, 2022-2025)

- EDI Plan and its Equality Objectives (HWFRS, 2020-2025)

- HWFRS Positive Action Plan: Increasing Workforce Diversity (acknowledging that it is currently under review)

- Equality and Gender Pay Gap Report (HWFRS, 2021-22)

- Human Resource documentation such as the Appraisal Review Form, Attendance Management document, Disciplinary Policy and Procedure, and Capability Policy (HWFRS, 2023)

- Physical Employment Standards for UK Fire and Rescue Service Personnel (Occupational Medicine, 2015)

- Managing Physical Fitness Guidance (CFQA, 2014)

- Equality Impact on Fitness Standards (Inclusion Professionals Group, Chief Fire Officers Association, January 2015)

- People Impact Assessment: Fitness Policy (HWFRS, 2023)

- People Impact Assessment: Fitness Service Policy Instruction (HWFRS, 2023)

- Contemporary research from the FRS sector and EDI researchers or institutions

- Documentation provided to the RT by respondents.

During this phase, the RT also carried out semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with HWFRS research sponsors and key stakeholders, along with external stakeholders including representatives from Trans2 Performance Training Programme and the Effective Manager Training Company.

This process provided the researchers with an in-depth understanding of the context, enabling them to finalise robust qualitative and quantitative research instruments and complete the Data Collection Plan.

3.2 Phase Two: Data collection

The data collection phase included Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and individual SSIs, which predominantly focused on qualitative data. This was supplemented by respondents voluntarily completing anonymous questionnaires at the end of FGDs, which provided supporting quantitative data.

3.2.1 Sample

A qualitative sample size should be large enough to sufficiently describe the phenomenon of interest and address the research question at hand. However, too large a sample size risks having repetitive data. Therefore, the goal of qualitative research is to attain saturation, which occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information i.e., more data that does not lead to more information. The qualified and experienced RT is confident that saturation occurred in this research.

The RT completed a Data Collection Plan in conjunction with the Senior Leadership Board (SLB), which ensured a representative sample of both corporate and operational respondents of different ranks and roles from Service Headquarters and Fire Stations (FS). See Annex 4 for details.

FGDs and 1-2-1s took place at the following FS: Bromsgrove; Evesham (including Broadway and Pershore personnel); Worcester; Malvern; Wyre Forest; Hereford; Ross-on-Wye (including Fownhope personnel); Droitwich; and Kingsland.

A number of 1-2-1s also took place at non-HWFRS locations whenever respondents requested it.

The RT met or spoke with **181 respondents** (37 females and 144 males) through 19 FGDs; 26 Face-to-Face 1-2-1s; and 24 telephone/video conferencing 1-2-1s. This represents approximately 23% of the workforce. This represents approximately 23% of the workforce, which in **ioda**'s experience, is an exceptional response, particularly as the majority of respondents provided open and candid information. Similar qualitative, face-to-face audits in comparable public sector institutions resulted in 60-100 respondents coming forward.

Importantly, the Cultural Audit builds on the findings of the HWFRS Staff Survey (People Insights, 2023) which had a survey response rate of 65% (440 responses of 678 surveys were returned).

In line with research ethics, respondents were invited to take part in the Cultural Audit in an appropriate, relevant, and acceptable way, which was compatible with their

understanding of the construct being measured. This also encompassed the legal doctrine[20] of informed consent (capacity, information and voluntariness). This was practically achieved by respondents being invited to read and sign a 'consent form' in the presence of the researchers (see Annex 3). To further ensure confidentiality, they were able to take the form with them, if they so wished. Axiomatically, it was not possible to obtain a consent form from telephone/video conferencing respondents, although they were verbally guaranteed confidentiality and, in terms of research ethics, this is known as a 'waiver of informed consent' due to prevailing circumstances.

With a very small number of exceptions (predominantly demonstrated through non-verbal communication), respondents' attitude towards the Cultural Audit was very positive, with a significant number attending FGDs or 1-2-1s on their rest days; or once they had finished work.

Without exception, the RT was warmly welcomed and treated with 'dignity and respect' at every venue. Moreover, the embodiment of the ethical principle '*putting our communities first*', was apparent in every fire station the RT visited, as all operational personnel spoke about service to the community being paramount and their Corporate Staff colleagues emphasised their role in facilitating that service as part of a team.

3.2.2 Focus Group discussions

In relation to FGDs, it is academically recognised that status and hierarchy may adversely affect the flow of the discussion.   Therefore, 'homogeneous groups' predominantly attended the FGDs i.e., similar participants in terms of departments, seniority, and other relevant characteristics, such as Operational and Corporate Senior Managers; Support Personnel; Operational and Corporate Middle Managers; Fire Control personnel; Staff Networks (Women@HWFire and the Neurodiverse Support Group); Watch or Crew Managers; and Fire Station Watch and Corporate Staff.

However, on a few occasions, it was not possible to ensure a homogeneous group, principally due to timings and geographical location. To counteract this and ensure confidentiality for all respondents who required it, they were supplied with the RT's business cards and personal telephone numbers. This enabled those who wished, to have a 1-2-1 session (face-to-face at a venue of their choosing, or via another medium), which 13 respondents made use of.

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[20] There exists a 'duty of confidentiality' in UK law, which has been developed through case law rather than established by statute. In summary, a duty of confidentiality can be established in situations where information is passed, in confidence, to the receiver of the information.

ioda's experience dictates that a long list of questions is not an appropriate way to run sensitive SSIs or FGDs, therefore a Question Guide (Annex 1) was prepared, which is more suited because:

- It is deductive data coded, in line with the desired outcomes of the research.

- It enables FGD moderators to move around the guide *in any order* until it has been completed – consequently they follow the respondents' leads. For example, if the answer to element 2 is "*The culture is really positive in most areas, but I have witnessed a few problems*…", the researcher can immediately go to question 2b regarding "*hotspots or areas of problematic environments*" and probe further into that issue – then move to 2c to probe for "*best practice examples*".

- Assistant FGD moderators can follow the moderator's lead, simply by noting the relevant number/letter in the margin as they take notes (in the case above, 2 followed by 2b and 2c).

When time allowed, FGD participants were asked to complete a questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously at the end of the discussion, which is based around the intended outcomes of the Service's EDI activities, particularly training (see Annex 2).

3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

The SSIs were conducted by one or both of the **ioda** researchers, using the Question Guide. The SSIs were less structured than the FGDs, enabling the respondents to focus on their chosen areas of the Question Guide.

3.3 Phase Three: Data analysis

A hybrid qualitative data coding process was used to categorise the qualitative data and derive robust themes and patterns (incorporating deductive and inductive coding). In summary, **a)** deductive coding (having a set of pre-established codes, as highlighted in the Question Guide) was applied to the data set (predominantly documents; and FGD and SSI transcripts); and **b)** inductive coding was used to create additional codes based on the data itself i.e., the codes emerged from the FGDs and SSIs (such as Fire Service volunteers; and specific age; sex; or sexual orientation issues).

The RT selected this methodology because whilst deductive coding enabled them to quickly identify relevant data using the Question Guide, it could have resulted in some valuable insights (such as those relating to Fire Service Volunteers and the national fitness tests) being missed because of the predetermined focus. This risk was minimised through the use inductive coding, which facilitated a deeper exploration of the subject. Colloquially, the hybrid coding approach provided *the best of both worlds*.

3.4 Phase Four: Preparation of the draft report

In accord with the Terms of Reference, the draft was shared with the Authority to obtain, discuss and integrate their insight and feedback, which will result in the submission of a comprehensive final evaluation report. The findings and recommendations are underpinned with fundamental, pragmatic management models (see Annex 5), which facilitate action and provide academic rigour – rather than espousing academic theory for the sake of it.

4. Research findings, recommendations, and strategic and management considerations

4.1 Introduction

This section provides a holistic view of HWFRS culture and practices in relation to EDI. Please note that **i)** quotes used in this section are predominantly indicative of the majority view, rather than standing in isolation; and **ii)** the report will clearly identify any quotes that are made by an individual – in such cases, we do not refer to a specific gender, unless permission has been granted, to maintain confidentiality.

4.2 Culture and Practices

> Staff and management views… positive cultural elements; the progressive nature of HWFRS and how the majority of staff behave to a high standard…
>
> HWFRS (2023) TORs
> EDI Cultural Audit to Understand People, their Behaviours and Workplace Practices

Whilst intrinsically linked, the three areas from this element of the TORs will be dealt with individually, for ease of reference.

4.2.1 Positive cultural elements

The majority of respondents stressed that they were proud to be a part of HWFRS, including the comment "...*if you cut me in half, it says HWFRS all the way through*". Another stated, *"As a service, HWFRS has a 'growth mind set – they are prepared to look at issues through a different lens".*

This finding is more positive than elsewhere in the FRS sector[21], as buttressed by a significant number of respondents who explained how their HWFRS experiences far surpassed other fire services they had worked in. In three cases, respondents became visibly upset when recalling their experiences with another FRS – for instance:

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[21] A strength that was identified in the Staff Survey (People Insight, March 2023).

- *'My previous workplace was hostile, ignorant and rude – here I have been respected and welcomed… the ongoing approach to EDI is exceptional'.*

- *'Hereford and Worcester [FRS] is a breath of fresh air from other services… the culture was so bad at [names other FRS] we had to prove ourselves all the time. I really felt like the 'old me' was back after three weeks of being here… strategic leaders are more approachable, supportive, visible and open to conversations. They welcomed me… they are well respected.'*

- *'The difference is marked… we are treated so well here. It's the first time that I am accepted for who I am [talked about their minority group status]. First job I have felt supported in, even at times of stress and trouble [provided a detailed example]'.*

- *'…Middle management (at previous FRS) did not believe in the Equality Act and would openly give that view… the SLB here is consultative and the CFO wants to take all the people with him in making it a really good service. There are still pockets of people here that are not aligned to our values, but that reflects society.'*

- *'We've done a lot of work with unconscious motivators (good moods and bad moods) … by learning how to recognise the bad days we can manage them. Before this training we could actually have ruined people's careers. It also helps us to give feedback to each other when we spot someone's shadow side coming into play…'*

The majority also spoke highly of the organisation's culture – particularly in relation to the positive support and guidance they received from their peers and line managers, which is supported by the qualitative feedback themes in the Staff Survey (People Insight, 2023) as 197 respondents identified '*colleagues*' as '*the best thing*'.

The following areas were regarded as 'exceptional' or 'excellent' drivers of the positive culture, by those that had used them or knew colleagues that had.

- **Welfare services**, particularly the support they received in relation to their health and wellbeing when undergoing difficult periods (many in-depth examples of those times were detailed).

- The **Critical Incident Support Team** (CIST).

- **Sonja Sinclair-Elechi**[22] was consistently mentioned, by name, as being a key driver of HWFRS's positive culture, particularly in relation to CIST, welfare and mediation. A considerable number of firefighter respondents said that Sonja and her team had made it acceptable/normal to be upset

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[22] Permission to use name granted.

about serious incidents, which reduced stress as there was no need to hide those emotions.

- Being supplied with **excellent equipment**, including information and communication technology (ICT), which made them feel valued.

- **Neurodiversity training and services**, which respondents felt should become service-wide and be allocated more staff.

These findings echo the HMICFRS Inspection Report (IR) of 2021-22, which stated that HWFRS has a good workforce-wellbeing provision – exampling that staff were especially positive about the support they receive from CIST, following traumatic incidents.

Other positive cultural elements, highlighted by a significant number of respondents included:

- **The recent Staff Survey**, as one respondent said, '*It came just at the right time as I was struggling with issues',* and another felt that it demonstrated that the SLB was interested in staff experiences.

- **The Service is working towards a 'solution-focused' rather than a 'blame-focused culture'** (paradoxically, a concern was raised that some people are too nervous to fully embrace this approach in case they make a wrong decision and are blamed).

- The **professionalism of new apprentices** who behave appropriately, challenge inappropriate behaviour and '*teach us new things'*.

- **Training is developmental and supportive** – without any bullying, intimidation or belittling of recruits or trainees. Respondents stated that is now more constructive than destructive and generally enhances the progress HWFRS is making in relation to ethics, EDI and professionalism.

- There are a **range of training and development options** available to everyone[23].

- The **increasing number of female Fire Fighters**, including those in senior positions.

  This is supported by the HMICFRS IR of 2021-22, which noted that '*the service has increased the overall percentage of whole-time female firefighters to well above the England average*'.

- The **increasing number of senior women** in HWFRS, which provides competent role models that change perceptions for the better. In the strategic

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[23] A significant number of OC firefighters thought that the available training options were very positive, but stressed the reality of taking them up would require more time away from their families, so they are unable to make use of them.

Workforce Plan, HWFRS states there are 61 substantive senior managers of which there are 24 women i.e. 39% of those in a managerial role are women.

- **Being corporate members of Women in the Fire Service (WFS) UK**.

- **Belonging to the Hate Incident Partnership** forums in Herefordshire, and Worcestershire.

- **The EDI Officer supports the 'Station Prevention Champions'**, who concentrate on community engagement and promoting HWFRS safety messages.

- The **Scrutiny Panels** involved in selection processes help to maintain fair processes.

- **Fire Station personnel** being warm and welcoming to visiting Corporate Staff.

- **Headquarters Corporate Staff being involved in fire station activities,** such as Away Days' and training exercises, which enhances their understanding of the operational role in an enjoyable and productive way.

- **'Veena's training' being valuable and helpful in promoting a positive culture** (referring to 'Respectful Workplace' and 'Difficult Conversation' training by Employment Law Specialist Veena Allison[24] of the Effective Manager Training Company).

- *'Our watch is like a family, which creates an amazing culture because, although some think it's bad, we need to be a family at incidents as it's what makes us work at 100% effectiveness and do a good job'.*
  A number of respondents held contrary views and asserted that family members can allow their relatives to be inappropriate, without challenging them. Whereas in a work situation they must challenge that behaviour in accord with HWFRS's professional standards. One respondent stated, "*we are **not** a family, we are a professional team. We tolerate bad behaviour in families but never in professional teams*'. Emphasis by respondent.

Other triangulated, but less frequently expressed, examples of a positive culture involved:

- **Senior managers are much more approachable than before, including the SLB.**

- **The Trans2 Training is really good,** as we learn about ourselves and the impact we have on others.

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[24] Permission to use name provided.

- **Taster sessions** for the WT firefighter recruitment campaign.

- **Women@HWFire,** which anyone from the organisation can join. It focuses on issues relating to career progression; equipment, including Personal Protective Equipment and uniform; maternity; facilities and training – including "How to have difficult conversations". The RT was told that '*ensuring tangible, sustainable changes is the big issue*'.

- **EDI Allies** are staff from across the Service who explain how they wish to support and promote an inclusive workplace. Their personal statements on what allyship means to them are published on the HWFRS Intranet. Additionally, the Service shares learning, practices and related events with the EDI Allies, so they can better understand experiences different from their own.

- **Menopause awareness sessions,** which would also be very useful for all managers and leaders to attend.

- **The SLB is actively behind EDI and 'putting the community first',** its members listen to suggestions and support initiatives whenever they can (a number of relevant examples were provided) and is keen for the positive EDI and community engagement trajectory to continue.

- **Corporate Staff members being treated with dignity and respect** when role playing casualties in training exercises. Indicative comments from two of the respondents follow.

  - *'As I was playing the casualty the firefighters used the word 'dignity' a number of times – obviously ensuring that they respected my personal dignity. At the end, I asked if that was simply because I was a colleague. They all replied that it wasn't, and that the dignity of casualties must be maintained at all times.'*

  - *'I enjoy being the casualty, I get to know more about the operational side of things, which makes my own role more enjoyable as I know what I am contributing to. They are so kind and supportive, and it seems like second nature to them.'*

- **Fire Service Volunteers,** including the potential EDI outreach role they could play.

- **Positive collaboration** '*between departments; and green and grey books*' (referring to corporate and operational staff respectively).

The positive cultural elements in this section are buttressed by the People Insight Staff Survey, which identified similar 'themes', 'strengths' and 'best things' – asserting that respondents' views are generally more positive than elsewhere in the sector, most notably around 'autonomy' and 'reward'.

The Staff Survey also draws attention to high levels of engagement[25]; 76% having a strong sense of purpose; high satisfaction with governance[26]; and the majority choosing 'inclusive', 'supportive' and 'friendly' when asked to provide three words that describe HWFRS culture.

4.2.2 Cultural elements: potential target areas

Corporate Staff respondents

The following triangulated examples were identified by respondents (predominantly, but not exclusively, Corporate Staff) as having an adverse impact on the otherwise positive culture.

- **They are not provided with the same career path opportunities as their operational colleagues,** as the following indicative comments emphasise.

    - *"We have to wait for 'dead-men's shoes', whereas operational staff retire earlier".* Note: Retirement is a national issue and aligned to job specific pension schemes and nationally-led Terms and Conditions something that HWFRS cannot change.

    Also please refer to comments as at Point 2 Page 12 Strategic and management considerations

    - *"The service needs to ensure that any advertised posts do not include 'operational experience' unless it is essential. For example, Fire Safety and Ops Policy roles usually ask for 'operational' but 'Green Book' staff can be fully qualified for those roles – except the 'operational' bit. Also, if people have the attitude and aptitude for those roles they can be trained."*

    Note: It is, however, acknowledged that the roles in HWFRS such as Fire Safety, Prevention, and Ops policy already include several posts that were traditionally undertaken by operational staff that have been filled by corporate staff with no operational background for some years (for example, Emergency Planning Officer, Fire Safety Inspectors & Prevention Technicians). Also, in many of these roles, staff that were already employed as HWFRS corporate staff in other roles, have changed disciplines or advanced in the organisation into these roles, with provided investment and training provided.

    The RT is aware that this concern is being discussed and that Corporate Staff are being urged to raise their preferences for career progression with their

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[25] Including pride in HWFRS and caring about its future, with 81% wanting to be working with HWFRS in two years

[26] 95% knew how to report inappropriate behaviour; 75% believed appropriate action would be taken; 54% felt their concerns would be listened to

managers and apply for personal development sponsorship, if they wish to attain skills to achieve that progression.

- **Whilst there is a drive to use the term 'Corporate Staff', they are still frequently referred to as 'non-operational' or 'non-uniform', including within national HMICFRS documentation,** with three respondents stressing "*I am not a non-anything*" and others stating, "*A third of us do not wear uniform, we cannot all be nonentities!*"; and *"I am a human-being, but the term 'non' seems to disagree – it is disrespectful, as I should be recognised for who and what I am".*

Whilst other Corporate Staff stated that they were not personally concerned with the use of '*non*', they stressed that they wanted their colleagues to feel included and were happy with the term 'Corporate Staff' if that was agreed. Two of these respondents suggested a survey, saying they would be happy with any term that pleased the majority, and this was agreed by others in the group.

Moreover, a number of operational staff in 1-2-1s and FGDs supported the view that using the term '*non*' was not inclusive.

The RT is also aware that this concern is being taken seriously and has resulted in a letter from the CFO to all Corporate Staff, with a link to a survey that canvasses views on a corporate term. A second survey has now been circulated as a consensus was not able to be achieved with the first survey.

- **Having operational colleagues as their line managers, who have no experience in the relevant areas of expertise,** which creates issues such as problems associated with their line managers having responsibility for channelling requests to the department. However, many are unable to understand the workload – or the process that is required for each task. Five respondents asserted that this results in staff 'drowning in projects'; 'working themselves to death'; being exhausted; or even leaving HWFRS.

Two respondents felt that, with their length of experience and expertise, they should be trusted to manage their team and its workload – rather than be line managed.

Note: in some areas this has already happened for example to Head of Prevention role was created and replaced a uniformed manager for exactly the reasons outlined above, however it is not always possible in all departments as uniformed managers are often required to straddle several roles, provide operational cover and also ensure that corporate staff fully appreciate the needs of the Response, Prevention and Protection functions.

- **There is no feedback from operational managers to SLB about unachievable workloads, which creates the expectation that deadlines are purely notional.**

  Note: HWFRS facilitates six-monthly, one-day meetings for all managers to meet from Station Commander to Chief Fire Officer, including corporate managers, thus providing a forum where they can raise relevant issues. This meeting may benefit from having this issue (workloads) as a standing item on the agenda. There is also a three-monthly meeting with all Department Heads at SLB, where they can raise issues. Senior respondents noted that there appears to be a reluctance to speak up at these meetings and stressed that senior managers should be mindful of creating an environment where others are confident to share their views.

- **Once the operational line managers become skilled in the role, many are moved to another role or promoted,** which results in new people with different ideas taking over their roles. In turn, this increases the length of time the piece of work or project takes and can cause confusion each time it alters.

- **Axiomatically, operational staff working within departments/on projects have to stay competent by completing active fire and rescue duties. Therefore, the project and/or department loses them for a number of days** and their corporate colleagues absorb much of their workload. Most stressed that their operational colleagues strive to keep up with both aspects of their work but recognise that it is impossible. The phrase '*something has to fall off the table*', was frequently used.

- **A significant number felt that they are often in stressful or uncomfortable situations that are not obvious to (or intentionally caused by) operational team members –** examples include notetaking regarding serious or critical matters/incidents; being included in conversations/rumours about ongoing cases, which are usually contrary to good HR practice; and being ignored by senior visitors as they walk past their offices.

Fire Station respondents

The following triangulated examples were identified by respondents (predominantly, but not exclusively, from fire stations) as having an adverse impact on the otherwise positive culture.

- **A small number of middle managers deliberately 'sabotage corporate messages'** (internal communications) and others do so due to a lack of understanding, as these indicative quotes demonstrate.

- *'There are some… who are so anti KPIs and internal messaging that they sabotage everything before the watch has time to digest it for themselves. It creates a toxic environment, but happily they are in the minority.'*

- *'One guy retired, and the watch were disappointed that they wouldn't have anyone to protect them from the s*** coming from HQ …I pointed out that they would now be better informed and better off'.*

- **Communication between senior leaders and fire station personnel of all roles could be improved**, as the following examples and quotes indicate.

    - *'When senior leaders ask us if we need anything or have any feedback, they should listen and let us know the result'* – a number of respondents stressed, *'even if it is a negative answer, we will know they listened'.*

    - *'They visit us on a rolling programme, but I'm not sure they are genuinely interested – so now they're more visible but not communicating with us.'*

    - Another group stated that their new senior leader provided an answer in a couple of weeks, to an important and troubling question they had been asking for years – proving it could have been done before.

    - *'Senior leaders walk past our offices without acknowledging our presence – we know they are busy so don't expect them to stop or come in – just a smile and 'good morning'…would be enough'.*

    - *'We cannot even give honest feedback via the 360 route, as it is not confidential because we get email reminders – so it can't be!'*

    Note: The RT believes that this may be referring to perceived anonymity, rather than confidentiality.

    - *'We are still very militaristic about some things with management and leaders checking on basic issues, rather than trusting us as professionals – but we are a service, so it should stop.'*

    Note: this was an ongoing theme and debate in a number of FGDs, as some believed that militaristic elements supported the positive culture – whilst others felt they were trusted when working in departments but not on their watch. However, it is acknowledged that the HWFRS requires managers to undertake safety and procedural checks to ensure a positive outcome and avoid cases of injury. Managers who spoke on this issue felt that

this is a procedural requirement and does not reflect on the level of trust they have for their staff.

- *'Some members of the SLB do not understand what we are doing, I have to put my main job first I actually take a huge pay cut by giving up my time to be here. The service needs to be more understanding in relation to our main jobs and family…'.*

This finding is supported by the Staff Survey results, which identified 'leadership' as the least favourable theme with the largest 'sitting on the fence' or neutral group – with 49% agreeing that senior leaders make the effort to listen to staff and 34% recognising the SLB as 'open and transparent'.

- Whilst respondents **viewed the EDI Allies as a very positive step forward, they were unsure of their practical role and the interventions Allies could make** and wanted to know more.

- **Being told to 'fabricate' documents** – such as saying that badly overdue fireground exercises had actually been completed. One of the respondents said s/he felt uncomfortable doing this, as it was against their values but was told to '*show the officer once it had been done*'.

- **Some organisational issues** were described as having a negative impact on morale and consequently the culture, including the following.

  o **HWFRS being too lean**, due to budget cuts, causing staff '*to work themselves into the ground*' and people having insufficient time to study for qualifications and/or promotion. Respondents also spoke about managing far more departments than people of the same rank/role in other FRS; and others stressed that this puts change processes at risk, as many necessary steps cannot be taken (such as consultation). It was also identified that '*ad hoc things*' add to the workload as well – such as investigations.

  o **Station Commanders changing too frequently** and, as a result not receiving a handover from their predecessor, or (when newly promoted) any induction training.

  o **The 'Pick Your Three Stations'**, when firefighters are asked to select the three stations they prefer to work at. The majority argued that they are told to make three choices but, as most only want to work at one station, the other two are not true 'choices'. Other comments included the impact on family; and the poor timings of the requests. One respondent recognised

that they joined Hereford *and* Worcester FRS, so have a contractual obligation to work anywhere in the two counties – but asked for holistic welfare complications (such as children's schools) to be considered. Another stressed that this process of relocating staff has been agreed with all Trade Unions.

o **Whenever change comes in it takes a long time such as crewing numbers** – one of these respondents stressed, '…*this is frustrating, for example if SharePoint changes, we lose a day trying to learn ways to navigate the new methodology'*.

o **General decision-making and decision-making regarding projects/discipline and grievance cases takes far too long**.

o **The promotion process has flaws including i)** the courses we take to get 'points' need to be more relevant to next role/rank, such as report writing and budget management – '*at the moment we are wasting time passing courses that are of no practical use*'; **ii)** we need feedback on the parts we fail from a relevant person, not just a representative who wasn't there; and **iii)** it is more of a memory test rather than testing skills and behaviour (especially the application and interview stages).

o The **complex shift system** i.e., 'Legacy' Day Crewed Duty System (DS); OC DS Management Policy; 12 Hour Day DS; 7 Day Flexitime – 42 Hour Day DS; and the new/emerging Day Crew DS. This included the de-motivational impact of the phrase '*Legacy will die on the vine*', which has been used by senior leaders, especially as those on that DS cannot go for promotion unless they are prepared for the '*massive financial impact*'. A number of respondents believed that the consultation process (regarding the new DS) is 'lip service' rather than genuine consultation. Others asserted that some had been 'tricked'/'conned' into signing previous DS contracts, which has resulted in people being nervous about '*jumping onto the new system*'.

o **The 'diminishing flexibility for OC firefighters,'** one stressed "*we used to be asked what time we could give – we are now told you must give this and this*". A number of other detailed examples were provided, but they would identify individuals.

The RT were provided with reasons for the new approach based around PERS 3A and health and safety issues, but

emphasise that this issue is keenly felt by many of the OC respondents.

- o **Senior managers/leaders do not seem to understand that OC have to put their main jobs first**.

- o **There are occasions when OC are used too much in a short time period** with potential health and safety complications, due to lack of rest/sleep.

- o **Amalgamating stations has caused staff to leave that have not been replaced**, making the service even more 'lean' than before.

- o **Targets being about '*numbers not people*' and '*quantity rather than quality*'**, whilst many recognised that this was caused by pressure from HMI to the SLB and finally to operational personnel, they felt that it belittled the prevention role as '*ways and means*' were used to '*up the numbers*'. Examples included knocking on the nearby doors of a current Home Fire Safety Visit to '*get another one in quickly*' – rather than ensuring the vulnerable are being supported.

- o **OC firefighters being 'baby-spoon fed' some of the training topics**, such as the RTC three-day course, which is degrading if you run your own business or work in academia. Some suggested the use of accreditation of prior learning (APL) as an alternative; or providing the learner with two options – 1) revising themselves then taking the examination or 2) using the 'baby-spoon' version if the subject is new to the learner.

- o **Other issues that related specifically to OC included** a whole year's annual leave being used on firefighting courses, which many stressed is not very family friendly; extra training taking a weekend away from families; it is very hard to recruit at the moment, exampling how only four turned up to a recruitment event; and explaining how some headquarters' staff do not understand core OC issues, exampling someone running a recruitment event, who knew nothing about OC and others expecting immediate responses to telephone enquiries, when OC staff are at home.

General respondents

A significant number of respondents from both operational and corporate felt that decision making is too central, and more decisions could be devolved. Many

stressed that the long process adversely impacts on morale and motivation and, consequently, the culture – as the following indicative quotes demonstrate.

- *'When requests are made or work is submitted, it often takes six months to get the results. By then, we have lost our motivation, or the issues are no longer relevant.'*

- *'If we truly celebrate difference and diversity, we will let people make more decisions.'*

   Note: The HWFRS CFO would welcome the opportunity to increase delegated decision making. However, this must be balanced against increased local accountability.

- *'There are some limited decision-making powers at station level, but it could be devolved further. Understandably cost implications make it that some decisions have to go higher, but that's not always the case.'*

4.2.3 The progressive nature of HWFRS

With 13 exceptions (7.5%)[27], respondents stated that HWFRS is on a forward thinking, positive and progressive 'EDI journey', as the following indicative quotes highlight:

- *'The old regime was dreadful, the current SLB is inclusive and forward thinking and ready to listen to any EDI issues – Hereford and Worcester [FRS] is on the right trajectory – the right journey'.*

- *'We are definitely moving in the right direction and our senior managers are driving and supporting us, which wasn't always the case. We still have a way to go – but we are well on the way now'.*

- *'I would hold HWFRS as a positive example of change for the better – staff know it's a journey and recognise they have a way to go, but they are keen'.*

- *'HWFRS is proactive about its EDI journey – such as the implementation of Say So, although implementation confuses me a little. For example, if it's totally confidential, how will there be enough evidence to act?'.*

- *'There are still some things we do not understand – such as pronouns and microaggressions, but we want to learn. We don't want to be on the wrong side of history, so we continue to move forward'.*

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[27] The researchers recognise that FGD participants do not make a verbal contribution to every topic under discussion, therefore this number refers to those people who commented on the subject in question during a FGD or 1-2-1.

Many respondents also spoke about positive changes to recruitment and promotion processes – stressing that they are now more objective, professional, and fair to both internal and external candidates. Several candidates stated that '*it is no longer jobs for the boys*'.

One candidate stated, "*I didn't get through the process – but, after a brief sulk, I realised it was my fault as I hadn't demonstrated the areas I needed to. I had actually expected the panel to take their personal knowledge of me into account, which obviously would not have been ethical*". Another stated that it is '*resource heavy but excellent*'. However, there are divergent views, which are detailed in Section 4.3.

A significant number also identified the new 'Say So' initiative (a confidential independent reporting line) as a positive example of progression, as people with problematic issues who were not confident enough to raise them internally, will be able to use the service.

4.2.4 The progressive nature of HWFRS: potential target areas

Whilst agreeing that the EDI journey is a very positive one, the majority of respondents identified that it is '*not over*' and that HWFRS '*still has a way to go*'. Many provided ideas for the next stage of the journey, such as:

- **Senior leaders should recognise that, in relation to gender, there needs to be more organisational progress** – respondents provided examples of comments they stated were made by senior leaders (which have been triangulated by the RT) such as '*young white men have it worse*'; '*a national women's group is not required*'; '*white privilege is nonsense, I was bullied and had to put up with that*'.

- **The EDI team needs more human and physical resources**, but it is hard to know exactly what without the strategic intent, business case and subsequent direction.

- **Finding out *why* the recruitment pool is not diverse**, through research within the community, as it '*cannot simply be down to demographics*' (some respondents felt that 'demographics' was an excuse whereas others thought it was the primary reason).

- **Specifically ensuring that HWFRS 'good leadership' training becomes 'good *inclusive* leadership'** training and, more generally, ensuring that all training contains an EDI 'golden thread'.

- Whilst recognising that the current SLB is committed, **EDI and ethics need to become the fabric of HWFRS**, or it will disappear when those leaders go.

- **Provide training and/or development in 'managing change' as it is a constant process**, as one respondent stated, *'People need tools to manage change, as many will resist it, even if it is not detrimental to them. It would be beneficial for them to understand why they feel like that and the process that are going through'*.

The 13 respondents who argued that the SLB approach to EDI was purely '*lip service*' or '*playing the game to get promoted*' provided examples to demonstrate their point. Before recording them, the RT checked that the examples were either '*from the last two years*' or '*were still having an impact on the current culture*'.

Examples included **i)** knowing a person who failed the promotion process because they did not have a certain qualification, whereas a person without that qualification was promoted; **ii)** persistent 'bullies' being able to get away with poor behaviour; **iii)** senior leaders giving the 'heads up' to more junior staff that a fellow senior officer is 'out to get you'; 'put a target on your back'; ''digging up the dirt' – but not actually confronting their colleague; and **iv)** senior leaders must know when their peers act in a way that is contrary to HWFRS ethics and values because we are a small service and word gets around – then either make excuses for them or ignore it and hope it goes away.

4.2.5 Majority of staff behave to a high standard

This was agreed by the majority of participants, from all parts of the organisation, who stressed that HWFRS is a *'good'* or *'very good'* service, made up of people who

understand its values, care about the organisation and the communities they work for/with. The majority of operational staff also stressed that their work is rewarding, challenging and/or interesting, which requires them to behave appropriately. Additionally, 80% of the Staff Survey respondents stated that '*working within HWFRS made them want to do the best work they could*'.

Respondents were supportive of service values and believed that their colleagues adhered to them, as the following indicative quotes demonstrate:

> - '*My team is excellent. We're treated really well at work – our manager is approachable and supportive with an open-door policy and regular catch-up meetings.* (Names manager) *is always respectful and treats us with dignity'.*
>
> - '*(Names senior leader)* *asks us to pop in a see* (them). S/he *is approachable, engaging, respectful and* (s/he) *always ask relevant questions about me and the team, demonstrating* (s/he) *actually listens'.*
>
> - '*I've only ever been treated well and with respect by everyone I have met in 'Hindlip' or in the stations. I've never seen inappropriate behaviour other than the odd swear word when someone is frustrated or tired – but we all do that at times.*'
>
> - '*My mentor taught me about values, (s/he) is brilliant and nips any problems in the bud. Even if someone on the incident ground wants to cause trouble (s/he) is respectful and never gets angry. I've never seen any really bad behaviour in my service – just minor things being nipped in the bud*'.

> The service has well defined values that it updated in consultation with staff… The results of our staff survey indicate that the values are well understood and accepted throughout the organisation, with 97 percent of respondents stating they are aware of the service's statement of values. Those we spoke to understand the services values and generally felt that behaviours reflective of the service values are shown at all levels of the service.
>
> HMICFRS IR, 2021-22

4.2.6 Majority of staff behave to a high standard: potential target areas

Whilst the majority of respondents strive to behave to a high standard, a considerable number recognised that **there are still HWFRS staff who are not aligned to the values and ethics of the fire service.** Most went on to stress that this is probably the case in any organisation that has similar staff numbers – as staff will reflect society.

These individuals were described as '*a handful*'; '*a few pockets*'; '*one or two, who can get away with it*'; and '*toxic super stars*'. The latter were described as '*making themselves seem indispensable, so that they have a safety net and can therefore be inappropriate… But they lose staff*'.

The following quotes are indicative of the strength of feeling, regarding this issue:

- *'These are toxic people that we need to cut out, so they do not spread their c**p throughout our lovely service. It's no good saying that's just how she or he is; it's just his or her way – it needs to be challenged and stopped.'*

- *'I was made to feel so excluded and the only reason I can put my finger on is [explains their minority group status] why else would I be made to feel so excluded and poorly. It's totally different here [at a new station] everyone here makes me feel welcome and supported.'*

- *'99% of the stations I visit are fantastic and you get a great welcome – but there are a couple with one or two people who single-handedly create an atmosphere and however nice everyone else is they can immediately make you feel awkward. We don't need them – it's not the way of the modern fire and rescue service'.*

Respondents also described this group as reacting to feedback or challenge in ways that prevent people from confronting them.

Examples included **i)** asserting that they are being bullied by the person wishing to performance manage them; **ii)** stating they may have autism or ADHD, which is why they behave inappropriately; **iii)** saying they are suffering from workplace stress; **iv)** have a line manager who protects them; **v)** being clever enough to use dual meaning phrases so that, if challenged, they can say they didn't mean it *that way*; and **vi)** arguing that there is a regulatory or statutory reason why they cannot be challenged. One respondent asserted, *'People 'stamp their feet' and argue until it goes away – we waste so much time trying to appease them rather than getting them to change'.*

Importantly, the majority of respondents believed that the responses regarding neurodiversity and stress were not factual in the cases they highlighted – rather, they were intended to divert attention away from the person's own inappropriate behaviour – stressing that in genuine cases, welfare should be a primary consideration.

A number of respondents felt that these reactions were causing some managers to become '*waffly*' or that they '*were losing the necessary management grit*', which meant that they were not doing enough to '*grasp the nettle and deal with poor-performers or non-performers*'. Many highlighted that HWFRS's performance standards are clear, and everyone knows them, so poor performance can be evidenced and managed informally or, when required formally.

A small number of respondents stressed that it is important to deal with poor performers in a firm, stern but professional way – stating that some senior leaders wait too long then get angry, causing them to shout, bawl and/or bully. As this is also against the Core Code of Ethics and HWFRS's standards of behaviour,

they then lose the moral/professional high ground because they are not adhering to or upholding HWFRS's recognised standard.

This opinion that 'the majority behave to a high standard' was further emphasised regarding the relationship between On Call (OC) and Whole Time (WT) firefighters, which the majority of respondents agreed had '*improved dramatically*' over a number of years – with most of the workforce behaving at a high standard and seeing each other as valued colleagues, which they regarded as a 'positive element' of the 'positive culture'. The following indicative quote highlights this point.

> - '*The Chief has emphasised the point that we are an on-call service supported by whole-time fire fighters; I think that has made a real difference… I would definitely challenge any inappropriate comments if I heard them, but the old animosity has completely gone in my experience.*'

Respondents stressed that there are now only sporadic incidents of bad behaviour from WT towards OC, which in each cited case was appropriately dealt with by another WT firefighter. During FGDs where this was discussed, both OC and WT Fire Fighters expressed their disappointment at the behaviour of those colleagues, as the following indicative quote demonstrates.

> - '*That really saddens me – I thought it was all in the past. I'm sorry you've had to put up with that and I'm really glad they were pulled up for it on the spot by your Watch Commander.*'

4.2.7 Culture and practices: Recommendations

Following interim Cultural Audit briefings with the CFO and other SLB members, a number of issues raised by respondents in this section, were immediately acted upon; and others will inform medium- and long- term EDI initiatives and/or actions. These areas are detailed in Section 4.6 below.

The RT recognises that there is a positive culture within HWFRS, which could be enhanced if the following recommendations are taken up.

R1 - Making HWFRS's 'EDI Strategic Intent' more explicit across the organisation, such as identifying HWFRS's current baseline and its EDI Business Case for both the service *and* the community – including how it links to the Service's strategic priorities and how the Service can embed it.

The RT is aware that HWFRS has recently reinforced its ongoing commitment to the Core Code of Ethics (see Figure 1) and that this audit, coupled with the Staff Survey, will contribute to this recommendation.

R2 - Introducing Induction Training for newly promoted Station Commanders (SCs) and a handover period for all SCs.

R3 - Providing face-to-face or on-line 'Allyship Training' for the EDI Allies and other interested stakeholders, to ensure maximum benefit from this positive initiative (see Microsoft on-line example[28]).

R4 - Continuing the 'Difficult Conversations Training', as it is well received. Moreover, participants feel able to put it into practice, particularly when challenging or formally confronting inappropriate behaviour.

R5 - Offering welfare support to Corporate Staff [29] when they are involved in the active administration of sensitive and/or serious issues, such as notetaking.

R6 - Providing promotion candidates with feedback from a relevant person – chiefly on the parts they failed.

The RT is aware that HWFRS follows the National Fire Chiefs Council guidelines on Candidate Feedback.

R7 - Implementing the current plan to cascade Neurodiversity training sessions service wide.

R8 - Implementing the current plan to cascade Menopause Awareness training sessions to managers and leaders.

One of the reoccurring staff recommendations from this section is too wide to be considered as a recommendation, but is worthy of reinforcing here, as all other recommendations and subsequent action plans will contribute to it: '***EDI and ethics need to become the fabric of HWFRS****, or it will disappear when these leaders go*'.

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[28] https://mslearningcontent.microsoft.com/IntroductionToAllyshipAtWork/story.html

[29] The term 'Corporate Staff' is being used in this report until the ongoing consultation process has concluded and an appropriate descriptor has been agreed on.

4.3 Areas of Poor Behaviour

> …areas of poor behaviour to help management and staff target areas for improvement.
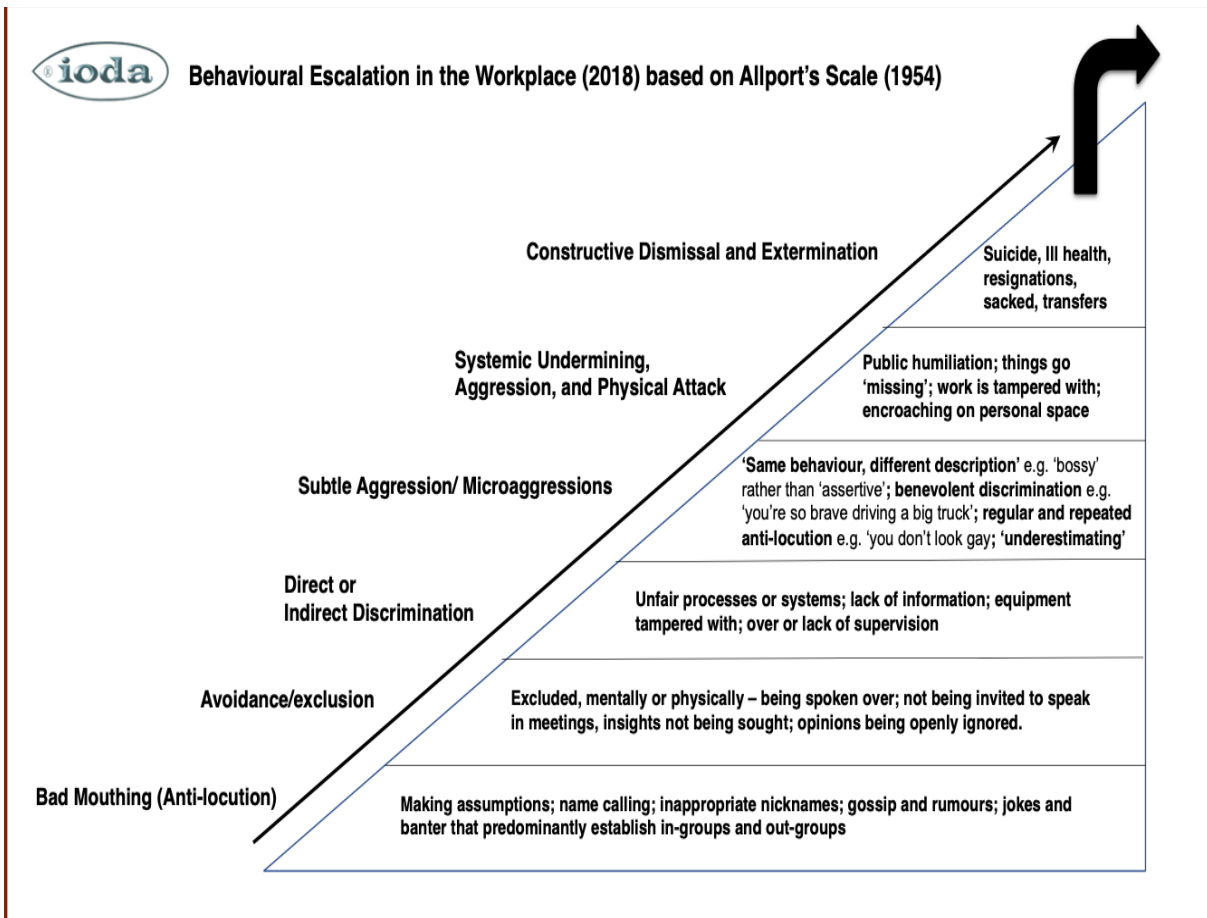>
> Terms of Reference:
> EDI Cultural Audit to Understand People, their Behaviours and Workplace Practices

4.3.1 Introduction

As the research progressed, it became apparent that Gordon Allport's Scale[30] was the most appropriate theory to bring structure to the analysis of HWFRS's areas for targeted improvement. To ensure it is contemporary, the more recent workplace adaptation (**ioda**, 2018), was used in the analysis.

This adaptation identifies six levels of behavioural escalation as demonstrated overleaf, based on Allport's original concept.

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[30] In the long history of psychological research on behaviour, Gordon Allport's (1954) book 'The Nature of Prejudice' is undoubtedly the foundational work, which scholars recognise as advancing ideas that remain highly influential and relevant to date. Allport's original societal scale included the following stages of behavioural escalation: **i)** anti-locution (bad-mouthing and hate speech); **ii)** avoidance; **iii)** discrimination; **iv)** aggression and physical attack; and **v)** extermination (from an area - or through genocide). Allport also identified that society often advances to the next stage due to 'bystanderism' and other forms of inaction.

Behavioural Escalation in the Workplace (2018) based on Allport's Scale (1954)

Level	Description
Constructive Dismissal and Extermination	Suicide, Ill health, resignations, sacked, transfers
Systemic Undermining, Aggression, and Physical Attack	Public humiliation; things go 'missing'; work is tampered with; encroaching on personal space
Subtle Aggression/ Microaggressions	'Same behaviour, different description' e.g. 'bossy' rather than 'assertive'; **benevolent discrimination** e.g. 'you're so brave driving a big truck'; **regular and repeated anti-locution** e.g. 'you don't look gay; **'underestimating'**
Direct or Indirect Discrimination	Unfair processes or systems; lack of information; equipment tampered with; over or lack of supervision
Avoidance/exclusion	Excluded, mentally or physically – being spoken over; not being invited to speak in meetings, insights not being sought; opinions being openly ignored.
Bad Mouthing (Anti-locution)	Making assumptions; name calling; inappropriate nicknames; gossip and rumours; jokes and banter that predominantly establish in-groups and out-groups

The Cultural Audit identified that the main areas for improvement relate to 'Level 1' and that it chiefly, but not solely, occurs in Fire Station environments. In itself, this is a positive finding, evidencing that the *majority* of issues are 'nipped in the bud' at the lower levels before they escalate.

However, respondents also described a number of isolated, but fully triangulated, incidents as occurring at the higher levels of the scale in all environments. In a number of these more serious cases, it was highlighted that individuals' behaviour had been escalating for considerable periods of time but had not been challenged.

The RT hypothesises that this 'bystanderism'[31] contributed to escalation 'up the scale' to the point that the behaviour of those individuals became totally unacceptable. The majority of these respondents linked their examples to the aforementioned 'HWFRS staff who are not aligned to the values and ethics of the fire service' (see Section 4.2.6).

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[31] **Bystanderism** is the phenomenon of a person or people not intervening despite awareness of another person's needs (see, for example, **i)** Latané´, B., & Darley, J. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Croft; and **ii)** Rendsvig, R. (2014). Pluralistic ignorance in the bystander effect: Informational dynamics of unresponsive witnesses in situations calling for intervention. *Synthese* (Dordrecht), 191.

This finding is buttressed by the RT's Review of Historical Conduct Cases (see Section 4.5) and 22% of the Staff Survey respondents stating that they had witnessed or experienced inappropriate behaviour in the workplace during the last two years.

Moreover, the HMICFRS IR stated that 20 of its 225 respondents (9%) said they had been subject to bullying or harassment, with ten declaring that they did not report it. Additionally, 34 of the HMICFRS IR respondents also said they had been the subject of discrimination (15%).

The findings are now mapped against each level of the Revised Allport's Scale 'Behavioural Escalation in the Workplace'.

Level 1: An element of **anti-locution/bad-mouthing** was highlighted by the majority of respondents, particularly (but not solely) those working in fire stations.

The examples provided by these respondents ranged from 'clumsy comments' (such as referring to corporate colleagues as *'non…'*) to 'inappropriate banter' including *'you're so gay'* up to 'unacceptable behaviour' including *'You got this job because you're a woman'; 'I'm talking to a brick wall'; 'This* [names a HWFRS initiative] *is crap, so I'm not wasting my breath telling you about it – if any of you have insomnia you can read it yourselves as a remedy'*; and *'man up and get on with it'*.

Two respondents identified occasions when social media had been inappropriately used to 'bad-mouth' colleagues and, whilst they were not actually named, it was clear who they were to their other colleagues.

As the level of anti-locution increased from 'clumsy' through to 'inappropriate' then 'unacceptable', the number of witnessed or experienced incidents reduced – but were still apparent.

Whilst the exampled 'clumsy comments' appeared to have no ill-intent; it is important to recognise that they may have considerable impact. For example, four respondents detailed the very negative impact that seemingly 'clumsy comments' were currently having on them. A fifth respondent was aware that 'clumsy comments' and 'inappropriate banter' were having a very negative impact on a colleague, which had been going on for many years. Two others highlighted that seemingly harmless, but ongoing and relentless teasing about age was causing some older members of staff to feel '*left behind, undervalued and/or past it*'.

Six respondents identified that a number of people who do not get promoted publicly blame the 'equality hires', which has an adverse impact on any minority group employees in the vicinity – even though the person they are actually referring to is not present – as well as having the potential to influence others.

Although this observation was only explicitly made by six respondents, the impact of such phrases was discussed in other FGDs and SSI and it is keenly felt by some of

the minority group employees – including feeling very angry or upset; frustrated; or, in some cases believing that they are actually an 'equality hire', creating what two respondents identified as 'imposter syndrome'[32].   An indicative quote follows.

- *'…wasn't happy because he wasn't promoted, so he started to mouth off about a woman getting the job instead of him saying he was far more experienced than her and it was his right… Some of his experience is dubious to say the least… when he briefs his watch and other watches about a new initiative, he immediately disagrees with it and gives reasons why it won't work (almost every time) which means his watch has no motivation to carry out the initiatives. I tried to challenge him about his 'shadow self' but he trashes that too. To be fair, he was brought up by the fire service in a different time'.*

In some areas, particularly in a number of fire stations, the lower-level anti-locution was regarded as the norm and a part of everyday culture – therefore it was not challenged or questioned. On three occasions, it was defended as being necessary to create camaraderie.

The comment '*we are aware of our audience and change appropriately*' was frequently made. A very small number of respondents argued that this concept is not appropriate – stressing that it is impossible to '*know your audience*'. The FT were made aware that this point is covered in some of the current management training. However, three respondents went on to stress that it is critical that this message filters down to those who do not have access to the training.

Additionally, there appeared to be limited awareness about the impact anti-locution can have on individuals and how, if left unchallenged, it can escalate, which clearly highlighted a training need. In the words of one respondent, "*It's critical that any training gets people to recognise that language is behaviour*".

Importantly, despite the majority raising this issue, they also stated that this type of behaviour has dramatically improved over recent years – such as nicknames now being appropriate; and only being used when the concerned individuals were completely happy with them. Another stressed that the '*so-called fun on people's birthdays and engagements, such as soaking them to the skin with buckets of cold water, is no longer acceptable as they may be needed on a call – we have to be more professional*'.

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[32] Impostor syndrome, also known as impostor phenomenon, is a psychological occurrence in which people doubt their skills, talents, or accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as frauds. Despite external evidence of their competence, those experiencing this phenomenon do not believe they deserve their success or luck (see, for example, Sakulku, J.; Alexander, J. (2011). "The Impostor Phenomenon". *International Journal of Behavioral Science*. 6: 73–92 – available at https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/IJBS/article/view/521/pdf).

Level 2: Avoidance in the workplace was highlighted by a much smaller number of respondents, who described it as being consistently spoken over; not being invited to speak in meetings; being the only person left out of WhatsApp group chats; insights not being sought; and/or being openly ignored.

One respondent stated, '*I had to constantly remind people that I am speaking and ask them to allow me to finish in a friendly but serious manner – at professional meetings and during coffee breaks – most know they can no longer get away with it*'. Another said, "*… I realised the Watch had a WhatsApp group chat and I had not been included*".

A third said that s/he felt at the '*bottom of the pile*', because his/her manager ignored all requests for help and whenever confronted about this, just ignored the challenge. This behaviour has caused the respondent to feel stressed and isolated.

One respondent described how a team member felt '*as if they didn't belong*' and then emotionally withdrew. The respondent appeared genuinely concerned but could not find the reasons for this feeling and was unable to help.

Level 3: The majority of cases of **discrimination** identified by respondents appear to be systemic/institutional rather than deliberate, as the following example demonstrates. However, those that were personal have been described as undermining the person concerned. Therefore, they are detailed at Level 5.

Fitness tests

The **current national fitness tests *may* constitute 'Indirect Discrimination' under the Equality Act 2010**[33] in relation to 'age' and 'sex'. Comments on this issue included:

- '*The levels of physical fitness in the FireFit Report, were not set in stone. Consequently, as more research becomes available, the standards should be monitored and reviewed as necessary.*'

- '*One box does not fit all – I have to prove myself*'.

- '*It is likely that a legal challenge will occur in the future due to the increasing number of scientific studies that support VO2 max differences between younger and older persons, and between males and females.*'

- '*There is a lack of any real empirical research into the specific fitness requirements of firefighters. For example, it is highly unlikely that any firefighter at an actual incident will need to complete all of the test activities in 11 minutes. Therefore, the test is unlikely to be regarded as sufficiently*

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[33] *Indirect discrimination can occur where a workplace rule, practice or procedure is applied to all employees, but disadvantages those of a particular protected characteristic (in this case sex and age).*

*job related or testing the person's abilities to perform their **actual** duties'. (Emphasis by respondent)* [34]

- *'Fire Services do not have significant numbers of female firefighters within the higher age groups, who have yet to consistently fail to complete the fitness tests. When this happens, which I predict in the near future, using the capability could lead HWFRS open to an indirect discrimination case, particularly as the evidence we refer to is up to 16 years old'.*

The RT understands that this is a national issue with extant national guidance in place which HWFRS is currently obliged to follow. The team also acknowledges that a level of fitness is required to ensure Firefighters are able to carry out their roles safely and effectively. Importantly, HWFRS agrees that the concerns around certain staff groups being disadvantaged require further exploration at a national level. To this end, the CFO has raised this issue with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the HWFRS Service Fitness Policy has been revised to allow for a medical assessment; risk assessment; and staff to undertake the 'Drill Ground Assessment'.

For example, respondents have identified that HWFRS provides training and support before implementing any capability process – including **i)** referring to a clear welfare strategy in the new draft policy for people who need support with the fitness tests; and **ii)** ensuring that any firefighters who are taken off the run are provided with guidance on what is needed to get them back, including the required timescales. Additionally, it will be clearly stated in that policy that the Fitness Advisor or Occupational Health (following medical assessment) can make recommendations for appropriate reasonable adjustments to enable the person to return to operational duties - for example, if a firefighter has a disability or is experiencing menopausal symptoms.

However, the RT has identified that, worryingly, the pressure to pass the tests (including one firefighter being told '*your job will be in jeopardy*') is **causing both female and male HWFRS firefighters to engage in potentially harmful behaviour in an attempt to get through them**. Examples include **i)** unhealthy dieting that, in some cases, could lead to changes in body composition, hormonal changes, reduced bone density and menstrual disturbances; **iii)** caffeine loading; **iv)** 'slimming injections and pills'; and **iv)** extreme exercise. The RT understands that HWFRS, as an institution, does not require staff to put their health at risk to achieve the fitness standard.

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[34] *The RT has read Physical Employment Standards for UK Fire and Rescue Service Personnel (Occupational Medicine, 2015); Managing Physical Fitness Guidance (CFQA, 2014); and the Equality Impact on Fitness Standards (Inclusion Professionals Group, Chief Fire Officers Association, January 2015). It recognises that it was based on practical, academic and scientific research appropriate to that time period. However, as with all research, it is now appropriate for reappraisal of that data and information to assess reproducibility and, therefore, credibility.*

Recognising that the RT has no expertise in the field of cardio-respiratory fitness and muscular strength levels it can only **urge HWFRS to liaise further with NFCC and give this matter careful conjoint consideration - including expert advice.**

Promotion process

As previously identified in the HMICFRS IR (2021-22), a considerable number of respondents still **believe that the promotion process is unfair, and many thought it was discriminatory**. For example, stating that most senior and strategic roles are not open to corporate, executive level personnel or to external non-FRS applicants – and stressing that there is a need to expand the pool to gain diversity at senior levels.

Additionally, there is a strong view from a number of respondents that **the promotion process creates an inappropriate environment**, which determines 'who is in' and 'who is out' – such as someone's sociability levels and networking being a proxy for competence and a means to deciding who should be promoted. They stated that allies begin to compete with one another and/or look for problems to record in their workbooks. Many believe that this causes self-serving behaviour, described as "*Stepping on heads to get promoted*"; and "*Damaging people's careers, just to get a point in their book*". Five respondents referred to it as the '*Hunger Games*'.

Whilst a considerable number of respondents gave contrary views and argued that this is a misconception, it remains a strongly held belief, which the RT believes can have an adverse impact on the HWFRS culture and 'EDI journey'.

Level 4: A number of examples of **Subtle aggression and microaggressions** were raised (predominantly, but not solely, by minority group respondents) including **i) 'same behaviour, different description'** such as women being classed as 'bossy', as opposed to their male counterparts being identified as 'assertive'; **ii) 'benevolent discrimination',** including continually checking if the stress/pressure is too much for certain individuals – or saying 'well done' to individuals for just doing their job; and **iii) 'underestimating'** – these examples predominantly related to members of the public at incidents – such as assuming a male Fire Fighter is in charge when the Incident Commander is female, or asking if female Fire Fighters are 'allowed to drive'.

Level 5: Systemic undermining, aggression, and physical attack were shared by eleven respondents with the RT, which predominantly related to systemic undermining and aggression – although two respondents described a person as 'getting someone by the scruff of the neck against a wall' and another stated that it had happened to them.

Eight of the respondents detailed behaviour by three senior HWFRS staff members[35], which was verified by three or more sources. It is recognised that the sources were known to each other, although they were not in the same FGD or 1-2-1.

It is probable that, with one exception, the incidents described would be classed as 'bullying' rather than 'harassment under the Equality Act 2010' as they were not related to protected characteristics. However, the RT recognises that they do not have all the facts – for example, those involved may not have shared their protected characteristic.

Respondents state that this had caused immense stress, anger and/or frustration, with an adverse impact on health and confidence. One respondent stated that it had '*actually caused me to suffer from imposter syndrome*' and recounted how it made him/her feel as if they were inadequate. The following quotes are from individual respondents.

- *'75% of my experience at the fire service is poor, when I spoke about the difficulties I was facing, I felt that I was just put in a box out of the way, and they lifted the lid when they were ready to deal with me. But I am happy here [new fire station] as people support me.'*

- *'I am too afraid to ask (manager) a question as s/he totally belittles me and talks about me behind my back – saying why does s/he keep asking me questions?'*

- *'I often see one of the team crying and on a bad day, I saw four crying'.*

- *'…had the person up against the wall by the collar and used bad language.'*

- *'… had me up against the wall and was threatening me…'.*

- *'I had to teach myself and others the job, because the manager ignored us and gave no help at all.'*

- *'I felt that my own management structure would not help me, so I disclosed to [names a 'grey book' member of staff] and [s/he] was very supportive and helpful. But did not take any action, because I was afraid of the consequences.'*

The research identified that when serious instances are reported and validated, the organisation has been firm in its response and dismissed staff from the Service.

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[35] Critically, the names (or identifiable positions) of the 3 members of staff, were provided by the 8 respondents. Respondents' details are not shared with anyone unless they request otherwise. Similarly, persons named during the research are not named unless they have given their permission.

Further details would identify the respondents, so the examples cannot be elucidated. However, there are witnesses who appear to be willing to come forward or use the Say So independent reporting line.

Another of the respondents said, "*I know we have a gay firefighter who is not out – it's not right. Rightly so, I wasn't told who, but I wish I could let him know it's OK. It upsets me, as I don't know any watch who wouldn't welcome him.*"

Level 6: Examples of **Constructive dismissal and extermination** were noted in a small number of examples regarding people who had transferred from HWFRS; left the fire service completely; or decided to stay at a particular rank/grade because of issues associated with EDI, particularly a lack of 'inclusion' and/or 'systemic undermining'.

The majority of these were over two years ago, but they still have a 'legacy impact' on people's current perceptions of EDI. One of the more recent examples related to a person who respondents stated is now actively supporting EDI outreach initiatives in another fire service. This is something that the RT believes could be explored further through Exit Interviews and/or contact sometime after the person has left as they may feel more able to talk openly.

4.3.2 Areas of poor behaviour: potential target areas

Professional and legal obligations

The majority of respondents understood their professional obligation to 'tackle behaviour at the lowest possible level' in line with the Core Code of Conduct and HWFRS policies and procedures. However, whilst the majority had a good awareness of the Equality Act 2010[36], many were unaware of their other legal obligations.

In particular, three respondents specifically stressed that many HWFRS staff members do not fully understand their legal obligations when the staff member concerned does not want to take action. These respondents recognise that employers (including all managers) have an overriding duty of care through Health and Safety legislation and Common Law – therefore, if incidents of inappropriate or discriminatory behaviour are reported, they need to address them, particularly as similar behaviour may be experienced by others.

The RT is in full agreement with a respondent who stated, "*…addressing such issues may initially be monitoring the situation carefully, rather than a full formal investigation, but we should never merely ignore it… this is also about ensuring that*

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[36] 98% of those who answered the FGD questionnaire understood the nine Protected Characteristics and Harassment (Equality Act 2010) and 70% identified the elements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

managers take the time to question and understand why the employee is reluctant to take the matter further – usually it is due to a fear of reprisals or not fitting in, which can be overcome with careful management".

Fear/worry about confronting poor behaviour

A significant number of respondents said that they were worried about challenging the more minor inappropriate issues (such as bad language and/or insensitive comments). They were concerned that they would be seen as 'boring'; 'a killjoy'; 'no fun'; or 'oversensitive', with some being concerned that this would upset the team dynamics and/or prevent them fitting in with the team. Others were concerned about ending someone's career for '*making a mistake*'.

One of these respondents made the previously quoted comment, "*It's critical that any training gets people to recognise that language **is** behaviour".*

Some of these respondents were equally worried about challenging or investigating any of the more serious issues, as these indicative quotes demonstrate.

- *"If I take ownership of a situation and mess up, I will be blamed".*
- *"If I investigate, I need backup from HR and legal advice, rather than make any decisions myself".*
- *'If I screw up an investigation or a grievance, the consequences can be dire".*

The majority of respondents felt that 'challenging up' was, at best '*very difficult*' and, at worse '*career suicide*'. Some of the more experienced personnel asserted that they would be happy to do so as '*they had nothing to lose*' and others said it was in their character to challenge, so they would not be put off by seniority and were prepared to accept the consequences. A small number of respondents also added that they would not be able to challenge any manager, whatever the level of seniority.

Some firefighters in their development period felt they would be able to 'challenge up', as the importance of doing so had been stressed to them during training, with the caveat that most (with one exception) would do it via their Watch or Crew Commander, rather than make a direct challenge to the person concerned. Another respondent informed the RT that three new firefighters had actually reported incidents.

The RT delved deeper into this issue and ascertained that, in most cases, '*challenging up*' referred to strategic leaders because '*they would put a target on your back*'; you would be '*marked*'; '*lose your promotion prospects*' or '*have a punishment transfer*'. Whilst a significant number of respondents felt that this was an incorrect perception, based on the legacy from a previous 'regime', they acknowledged that this view does exist – and that, for those people, their perception was a reality.

Many positive comments were made about the CFO and SLB and one respondent spoke about the '*shadow that had been cast*' by the previous SLB, which had caused much of the misperception that existed – then added that there are still staff members at '*ground level that are not invested in trust building*' because of this legacy.

This was reflected by other respondents who stated, '*people were too scared to talk to the former chief but it's easy to speak to the current one*' and '*If I ask the chief for a quick word, he will always say yes there and then if he can or give me a time when he is available*'.   Another added that the current SLB is still a part of operational firefighter culture as most '*grew up in it*' – stressing that '*they are not political animals, which makes it hard for them*'.

Five respondents stated that **HWFRS needs to empower people to challenge** as currently, staff do not want to take responsibility – probably because they do not feel enabled or empowered to have difficult conversations, which links to a lack of psychological safety.

Four others, and the RT fully supports this view, stressed that **recipients of feedback and/or challenge need training that helps them to receive that feedback, without becoming defensive**. One respondent added that this type of training would also support those who had failed the promotion process.

4.3.3 Areas of poor behaviour: Recommendations

To prevent the escalation of the issues highlighted in this section, the RT recommends the following processes.

> **R9 - The forthcoming EDI training should incorporate all key aspects identified by the Cultural Audit, to ensure that it is needs-drive, with a particular focus on increasing participants' skills and confidence in relation to challenging behaviour as well as providing them with the tools to do so (see the summary at Annex 5) – as well as ensuring all other training contains an EDI 'golden thread' such as 'good leadership' training becoming 'good *inclusive* leadership'.**

> **R10 - Continue to work with NFCC to review the national guidance with a view to appraising and updating the current HWFRS fitness tests, to ensure they do not constitute 'Indirect Discrimination' under the Equality Act 2010 in relation to 'age' and 'sex'**. Ensure that the support mechanisms outlined in the new policy are in place and that any staff group that may be vulnerable to the issues raised in this regard are offered additional support as necessary and appropriate.

> For example, it is important to **i)** ascertain the specific fitness requirements of firefighters, to ensure the tests are sufficiently job related, and **ii)** ensure they do

not disadvantage those of a particular sex or age – particularly as the Chief Fire Officers Association Equality Impact Assessment was designed early in 2015.

4.4 EDI: Views and Levels of Understanding

> Staff and management views on, and levels of understanding of EDI...
>
> Terms of Reference:
> EDI Cultural Audit to Understand People, their Behaviours and Workplace Practices

4.4.1 Introduction

The cognitive domain[37] details how the knowledge of individuals encompasses six levels, which are outlined here using the Core Code of Ethics (CCofE) as an example. The first levels of thinking are **i) remembering** (rote learning – such as being able to recite the CCofE) then **ii) understanding** (being able to describe, discuss and explain the CCofE) followed by **iii) applying** (implementing, using, demonstrating and interpreting the CCofE in various situations).

The higher levels of thinking are **iv) analysing** (using analytical skills to identify where the CCofE fits in the 'bigger HWFRS picture' and how it can support the EDI journey); **v) evaluating** (appraising, arguing, defending, supporting and critiquing the CCofE); and, finally, **vi) creating** (investigating, designing, constructing, developing *new ways* of ensuring the CCofE is embedded).

The majority of respondents (100% of those who spoke on the subject and/or completed a questionnaire) **had a good level of 'remembering' and 'understanding' the Core Code of Ethics and HWFRS' approach to managing harassment and discrimination (in line with the Equality Act 2010); other forms of discrimination, including bullying; and grievances and disciplinary matters. They also understood the importance of those processes.**

All the respondents had heard of Say So, and most had received an input that enhanced their **understanding**, but many still unsure about its **application** and how comments would be actioned (especially if they were anonymous), which is not surprising as it is a new initiative.

In terms of **applying** (level iii), most felt able to challenge inappropriate behaviour among their peer group and thought their line manager or more experienced members of staff would help them to deal with any troubling EDI issues. This is reflected in both HMICFRS IR (2021-22) and the aforementioned Staff Survey. The

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[37] The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (see Anderson, L.W., Krathwohl, D.R., Airasian, P.W., Cruikshank, K.A., Mayer, R.E., Pintrich, P.R., Raths, J., Wittrock, M.C. (2001). A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. New York: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon).

former recorded that '*staff have a good understanding of what bullying, harassment and discrimination are, and the negative effect they have on both colleagues and the organisation*'; and 95% of the survey respondents knew how to report inappropriate behaviour, and 75% believed appropriate action would be taken.

There were some exceptions as fully detailed in Section 4.3.2., with some respondents being worried about being seen as a '*killjoy*' or '*oversensitive*', with some being concerned that this would upset the team dynamics and/or prevent them fitting in with the team. One development firefighter stated, "*they joke about me being the 'baby', which I don't really mind, but I'll be glad when they stop*" – when asked if he felt able to mention this, the respondent said "*I may do in the future, but not now, as it's all in good fun*".

Other respondents were concerned about ending someone's career for '*making a mistake*' – and others felt that 'challenging up' was, at best '*very difficult*' and, at worse '*career suicide*' – although some of the more experienced personnel asserted that they would be happy to do so; and others said it was in their character to challenge anybody.

4.4.2 EDI: Views and Levels of Understanding: potential target areas

Although they did not cite the taxonomy theory, a significant number of respondents provided examples that highlighted difficulties in relation to **i) 'creating'** strategic planning **ii)** '**creating**' ways of improving Black, Asian and minority ethnic diversity; **iii) 'analysing'** and **'evaluating'** responses to majority/dominant groups; and **iv)** a poor **'understanding'** of Positive Action, which are detailed in this section.

Other areas are covered in Section 4.3.2 and 4.3.3 regarding how fear and/or worry about confronting poor behaviour can have an adverse impact on '**application';** and in Section 4.5.2 regarding **'application'** in relation to previous and ongoing conduct cases.

Strategic planning

Whilst most members of staff are confident that there is now really good strategic intent and positive actions, a few argue that HWFRS does not have the depth of understanding that it needs to make '*real EDI headway*' and provided the following examples.

- *'Our knowledge is actually superficial in some areas, for example in relation to 'Senior Officer takes accountability' it shouldn't just be a tick box – what does that accountability look like and what does that officer actually need to do – and why?'*

- *'We need to ensure that EDI is not merely a 'stand-alone homogeneous blob', we need to mainstream it and ensure everyone understands that, as a member of HWFRS, it is their responsibility.*

Mainstreaming is far more than carrying out an impact assessment – it's ensuring EDI is at the centre of everything we do.'

Improving Black, Asian and minority ethnic diversity

A significant number of respondents believed that analytical thinking should be applied to ascertaining **why the recruitment pool is not diverse**. A few stressed that, in particular, there should be 'more Polish recruits'.[38]

Additionally, a few respondents suggested **creating partnerships/stronger links with bodies that represent minority groups in Herefordshire and Worcestershire** to identify why their members are not joining the fire service (as Corporate Staff, FRS Volunteers, or Fire Fighters) and what would encourage them to do so.

Suggestions included Worcestershire LGBT Hub; Gay Herefordshire; the mosques in Redditch; Worcestershire Polish Association; and Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The RT noted that two respondents believed that the 'On Call Project' was already looking into this type of outreach – but did not have details.

A few respondents suggested recruiting more Corporate Staff, Volunteers and Cadets from diverse backgrounds as this would enable diverse community members to '*see or hear more of the fire service*' and – at a later time – encourage more of their community to join the operational side.

Understanding responses to majority/dominant groups

There were a significant number of respondent comments regarding the ways in which minority groups react to majority groups, which is generally academically accepted as either **withdrawing** (emotionally or physically – such as calling in sick); **acquiescing** (going along with the situation in order to fit in); or **resisting** (through a range of responses including negotiation, consultation, demonstration, anger or aggression) – or a linear combination of the three approaches.

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[38] **Examples from the 2021 Census**, the number of people from **Herefordshire** who identified themselves as being of an ethnicity other than 'white British' increased to 5,100 (8.9%), *which is very low compared to nationally* (26%). The census included those who identified as Asian (2,218 or 1.2%); Mixed (1,980 or 1.1%); Black (567 or 0.3%); and Other (1,019 or 0.5%). Other than English, Polish was the most common language spoken (3,000 people) followed by Romanian (1,500 people). 790 people described themselves as Muslims. and 55% as Christians. In **Worcestershire**, Asian residents made up the largest minority group, accounting for 3.1% (18,511 people); Mixed (11,173 people or 1.9%); Black (4,151 or 0.7%); and Other (3,357 or0.6%). The religion with the highest proportion other than Christianity was Muslim (1.9%). Just over 2% of people were born in Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (EU8); 1% were born in Bulgaria and Romania (EU2); and almost 2% were born in the Middle East and Asia.

Some of the comments appeared to be unintentionally judgmental – questioning why individuals had to '*make such a fuss*' [about being from a minority group or being an ally] and, conversely, why others '*didn't stand up and be counted*'. Three respondents had a more objective view, such as stating, '*If someone already feels different, why should they make themselves more different…*" – for example, by joining a representative body, or asking for a diagnostic assessment.

Five respondents also identified that members of minority groups may give mixed messages when they are trying to join in/fit in. For example, new recruits with strong accents may laugh at jokes about their accents when they first arrive (**acquiesce**) and their teams think it's OK (just 'banter') – whereas a few weeks down the line one of the recruits is now sick of the jokes and gets really angry with a team member (**resists**) who, in turn, is very offended because they have been shouted at.

Other examples were provided regarding minority group members using 'colourful language' to fit in, which achieved the opposite effect and they were politely asked to 'tone it down', as they were working in a professional environment.

This lack of understanding could result in disharmony due to the potentially judgmental nature of some of the comments and/or the 'mixed messages'. It may also be indicative of a reluctance to support or join HMFRS's representative bodies.

Positive Action

Three respondents explained that Positive Action briefings were provided to every WT and OC Watch, which involved open discussions about the issues – but two of them were concerned that some of the personnel responsible for the briefings may not have fully understood the concept themselves.

With the exception of Service Headquarters' staff, who demonstrate a good understanding of 'Positive Action', there were **a significant number of diametrically opposed views regarding Positive Action and, in some cases, allyship,** as the following indicative quotes from other staff members demonstrate.

- '*OC firefighters should have the opportunity to be allies, especially if we have those sorts of roles in our other jobs. We could support recruitment of minority groups.*'

- '*Why shouldn't we all have allies? – that's equality.*'

- '*They put extra training on for women so they can meet the fitness standard, why don't they do that for men. It's not fair at all.*'

> Note: a number of respondents stated that HWFRS offers support to *all* people that wish to apply, but offers targeted sessions for Positive Action. However, to the respondents who believe otherwise it is their reality/perception - hence the recommendation to include Positive Action in the EDI training.

- *'Positive Action, especially working with our representative bodies (as they're not afraid to say it how it is) has raised the number of female firefighters, which is great. The service has changed so much that it's no longer a white male domain.'*

- *'My friend did not bother applying for the service, as he's a white male and knows he will be last in the pile. He saw the advert' and it actually says we **particularly welcome** – everyone but white males is the real message.'* (*Emphasis by respondent*).

- *'We need more Positive Action for ethnic groups – we are geographically diverse, but we don't know what's happening out there, so we need to find out by visiting our mosques, Polish communities and others.'*

- *'The reason the number of applicants has gone down to 400 instead of being forced to stop at a 1000 as we used to, is that white males are not bothering anymore, as they're not welcome.'*

- *'We need to encourage more gay males to join – the fire service still seems like a scary place for many. At the moment it's just attending PRIDE, we need to do more.'*

    This relevant follow up comment was made, *'Yes, I didn't think I would be welcome because I'm not a 'tough guy'* [gives reasons why, predominantly around previous career choices/roles] *– yet now I'm here, I love it – must seem worse for gay guys.'*

- *'They call it talent management, but it's just positive discrimination around promotion, by another name.'*

- *'What is allyship? Just looking after the equality hires'*

- *'Allyship is an excellent initiative, but they need to have a more concrete role.'*

- *'Unfortunately, HWFRS is mainly made up of institutionalised, white, heterosexual males – but due to Positive Action it can only improve.'*

The following EDI-related issues were raised by two or three respondents – whilst they are not triangulated, they are provided here for information.

- *'I know that I am respected as an individual, but I am not sure if that extends wider to other minority groups or if I am viewed as an exception to the rule – I don't really know.'*

- *'OC firefighters have such a wealth and range of diverse knowledge – can HWFRS use their knowledge to help us further promote EDI – for example, they would know people in their areas from diverse groups, who we could talk to – or they may have successful EDI initiatives in their*

workplace that we could learn from'. The RT recognises that the OC Project may be covering this.

- The Asian Fire Service Association was recommended as a positive source of knowledge and information for HWFRS regarding recruitment, retention and cultural difference through networking and attending their events.

- *We need to have more EDI understanding about our communities too – could the Fire Safety Visits reflect how people with complex needs take longer - especially those who live in multi-occupancy accommodation (many of whom are from a different culture and have different cultural norms).*

- *We are lacking significant knowledge regarding our baseline, hopefully that will change with your report and the Staff Survey.*

- *We need more training – and coaching and mentoring on the subject, perhaps from the EDI Allies?* The RT recognises that the training is underway.

4.4.3 EDI: Views and levels of understanding: Recommendations

A number of respondents recommendations/ideas were provided in relation to the issues described in Section 4.4.2. However, the RT recognises that much of this work is already in the planning stages or ongoing at HWFRS, as discussed in the original and interim Key Stakeholder Interviews.   Therefore, they are simply provided in Section 4.6 of the main report for reference, rather than included as RT recommendations. Additionally, the following recommendation is made.

> **R11 - Recognising that the 'Positive Action Plan: Increasing Workforce Diversity' (2020-22) is under review, the RT recommends that the relevant issues from this report be included in the updated version, particularly in view of the aforementioned diametrically opposed views.**

4.5 Review of Historical Conduct Cases

Review historical conduct cases, investigations & outcomes and correlate results against findings to inform the final formative document and strategic recommendations.

Review HR/people practices (including previous and recent cases) to identify strengths, lessons learned potential areas for improvement.

Terms of Reference:
EDI Cultural Audit to Understand People, their Behaviours and Workplace Practices

4.5.1 Introduction

The RT reviewed cases from 2018 to 2023 consisting of 12 disciplinaries (2018); five disciplinaries and one grievance (2019); five disciplinaries and one grievance (2020); five disciplinaries (2021); and five disciplinaries and one grievance (2023) including the number of associated suspensions and final outcomes. Some of these cases were also discussed by respondents in the 1-2-1s and FGDs (without naming any of the persons involved).

The RT were also told about a number of other grievances and disciplinaries that were resolved informally during the FGDs and SSIs – and recognise that managers and staff are encouraged to resolve them in this way whenever possible.

However, the RT is unclear about how Informal Stage Disciplinaries are recorded in order to track repeated or similar behaviour in the future. The following triangulated points were made by a small number of respondents.

- *HR dealt with my grievance really well (*gave a detailed example, which five colleagues were aware of).

- *'It's only relatively recently that welfare has taken such positive steps to support all parties involved in a grievance or discipline. The 'accused' was often 'left to rot' except for the odd phone call. It's different now and everyone is looked after.'* One respondent went into great detail about the people he regarded as having facilitated this change including how much they are appreciated by the service.

A number of respondents informed the RT that the CFO insists on completing investigations even when the staff member under investigation resigns, as the results should be on record. Whilst these comments were made prior to the release of the 'Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services' report (HMICFRS, 2023), the RT notes that the CFO's actions are in accord with Recommendation 13 of the report.

4.5.2 Review of Historical Conduct Cases: potential target areas

The issue highlighted by a considerable number of respondents focused around:

- **Discipline cases can have a 'long history', which was not brought to anyone's attention as a management issue** for example, respondents were aware of **i)** people (including managers) leaving the room whenever a specific person's behaviour started to become inappropriate, as they did not want to 'witness' the imminent behaviour i.e., they believed it would escalate and become unacceptable; **ii)** people excusing inappropriate behaviour as it was 'just that person's way' or 's/he doesn't mean anything by it'; and **iii)** people not being tackled because of friendships/ Fire Brigade Union status/ health related issues/ the excuses they will come up with.

A number of detailed specific examples were provided but cannot be elucidated due to confidentiality. This issue was also discussed in Section 4.3.2.

- **A lack of trust about the processes,** with respondents arguing that it is 'one rule for one and not for the other', which usually related to senior versus more junior staff.

- **A misconception that investigations are the responsibility of, or driven by HR,** when in reality HR personnel are there to facilitate and support, which can cause tension and frustration for all parties.

- **The lack of confidentiality, rumours and excessive gossip around disciplines and grievances,** predominantly or exclusively among operational staff rather than Corporate Staff. Two respondents independently stated that firefighters from other FRS had rung them to gossip about recent HWFRS cases.

  One middle manager respondent stated that s/he always confronts those 'spreading the rumours' because the people concerned **i)** do not know the full facts; **ii)** they are not involved, so it is not their issue; and **iii)** it may be harmful to those involved and/or the service. If they are managers, s/he reminds them of their 'shadow self' and how harmful it can be.

- **The potentially serious repercussions of gossip and rumours,** examples included being told that someone had carried out an unlawful/ criminal act (as one respondent added, '*usually in graphic detail*'). Then finding out that person has been re-instated at the same rank/role and the negative impact that has on staff – when in reality it may not be true, or it may be exaggerated.

  Three respondents asserted that rumours were grossly exaggerated in relation to two different cases they had personal knowledge of. They both highlighted the stress this had caused on all involved (including colleagues, family and friends).

- **The decision-making process taking too long for both discipline and grievance cases**, which has implications for the health and welfare of key parties.

- **Investigators being too close to the person or persons they are investigating**, which can result in bias (both deliberate and unconscious) and the intimidation of witnesses by the investigator.

- **The notification of a discipline case against individuals indicates that it is a Formal Stage 3 and that a possible outcome is dismissal, which causes excessive worry**. Respondents believed the rationale

behind this is '…*would be easy to drop to a 2 or 1, if the Investigating Officer felt that was more appropriate, rather than having to escalate it at a later stage and the trouble that would cause'.* Respondents gave examples of two FRSs that begin investigations at Formal Stage 1 and escalate if required. One responder stated, '*it's a sledgehammer to crack a nut – makes me reluctant to drive as I could lose my job if I bump the truck*'.

The following themes emerged from a small number of respondents but have been triangulated.

- **Some discipline and grievance cases are worded in a way that makes the issue sound more serious than it actually is** – resulting in problems, both at work and in people's private lives.

  Whilst the examples cannot be elucidated here due to confidentiality, an example is provided below from Emily Mellor's own experience, which highlights a respondent's point that '… *just one word can make something seem much worse than it actually is…*'.

    - '*A young homeless person applied for a place in a charity's supported housing complex. He was initially refused residency because his records stated that he had previously committed 'arson'. However, on further investigation, it transpired that he had made a bonfire to keep warm whilst sleeping rough and it had caused damage to property whilst he was asleep. He was therefore given a place and proved to be a laudable resident.*'

  Three respondents have informed the RT that the letters are currently under review and stressed that HWFRS will operate within the legal advice provided as part of that review, which advises that they should make all the facts and possible consequences clear, to ensure that staff fully understand the potential severity of the issue.

- **Senior managers/leaders raising 'third-party complaints' with members of their team, without stating which member of the team made the complaint** (because those individuals wanted to remain confidential) – along with the resulting mistrust and atmosphere this caused in the teams concerned.

- **Line managers inappropriately handling grievances** – such as using guidelines from professional institutions (rather than HWFRS) to justify their reasons; using a selective evidence process/confirmation bias approach i.e., searching for or interpreting evidence in a way that confirms or supports their prior belief.

- **Investigations are additional work that adversely impact on day-to-day work activities**, with investigators working long hours to cover all their roles. Again, it was frequently colloquially stated that, '*things fall off the table*'.

4.5.3   Review of Historical Conduct Cases: Recommendations

A number of respondents recommendations/ideas were provided in relation to the issues highlighted in this section. However, the RT recognises that some of this work is already in the planning stages or ongoing at HWFRS, as discussed during initial and interim Key Stakeholder Interviews. Therefore, they are simply provided in Section 4.6 of the main report for reference, rather than included as RT recommendations.

The following distinct recommendations emerged from the review and interviews.

R12 - Provide training for discipline and grievance investigators (comparable with that given to fire investigators) including, as a minimum, **i)** interviewing skills; **ii)** remaining independent and objective; **iii)** unconscious bias; and **iv)** personal and organisational values. Respondents added that this could result in a team/pool of appropriately qualified investigators.

One respondent told the RT that this is currently being planned.

R13 - Continue to review coaching and mentoring for investigators on their first one or two investigations – this could involve supporting the new investigator with the preparation of an Action Plan; discussing the types of questions that could be asked; talking through problem areas (such as when the person under investigation claims they are 'probably' neurodiverse, without a diagnosis); supporting the management of time frames; and proof-reading drafts for content. As one respondent highlighted, '*this prevents people being thrown in at the deep end!'*.

R14 - Consider the need for appropriate information to be disseminated about discipline and grievance cases – '*to prevent the rumours getting out of hand*'.

R15 - Maintain records of informal discipline in accordance with Section 4.1 to 4.5 of the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure[39] so that it may be referred to in

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[39] Disciplinary Policy and Procedure states '**Informal Stage:** Cases involving low level matters are usually best dealt with informally by the line manager… quickly and confidentially. The line manager (or manager dealing with the issue) … should confirm in writing with the employee, a record of what was discussed and if applicable, any improvements required. The line manager may choose to do this on a 'Record of Discussion' form… or by sending an email to the employee… to be recorded on the employee's Personal Record File (PRF)… will not form any part of the employee's disciplinary record… may be referred to in the event of repeated or similar behaviour in the future…'

the event of repeated or similar behaviour in the future, as evidence of the Service's stated expectations.   Moreover, as this requires an element of manager judgement to operate within the Services policy, managers may benefit from specific training in this area.

4.6 Strategic and management considerations

Following interim Cultural Audit briefings with the CFO and other SLB members, a number of issues raised by respondents were immediately acted upon; and others will inform medium- and long- term EDI initiatives and/or actions. Key examples are detailed below.

1. **Descriptor for Corporate Staff:** a consultation process began with Corporate Staff to identify their preferred all-encompassing title/descriptor as a number of respondents were unhappy with the use of the term 'non' (as in non-uniformed and non-operational).

2. **Highlighting career path opportunities for Corporate Staff:** a letter was sent to Corporate Staff counselling them to raise their career pathway ambitions in their annual appraisal and, if required, to apply for personal development sponsorship.

   It was also highlighted that there are many examples of staff moving into more senior roles, including SLB and through different departments/disciplines.

3. **Respondents were concerned that the wording of letters/documents that notify staff about discipline procedures**, could **i)** cause people to think they will be dismissed; and/or **ii)** sound 'worse than they actually are'.

   The RT ascertained that this feedback had previously been raised with HR and had been acted upon, including obtaining legal guidance.

4. **The offboarding/exit process:** whilst HWFRS has a robust process in place, SLB has identified the possibility that this data could be further analysed to inform future actions.

5. **In-depth research within diverse communities to ascertain their reasons for not joining the FRS[40]:** this need is recognised by the SLB and will be addressed when finances allow. Whilst it cannot form a significant element of HWFRS short- to medium- term plans, the OC Project is currently addressing some of these issues.

6. **The hours worked by OC Firefighters** will be reviewed to ensure they are not called to a second incident in too short a period of time.

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[40] Possible examples from respondents included the Asian Fire Service Association; Worcestershire LGBT Hub; Gay Herefordshire; the Mosques in Redditch; Worcestershire Polish Association; and Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire

7. **The promotion process will continue to be reviewed and improved**, with due regard to the feedback in this audit.

8. **Members of the Corporate Staff respondents identified a number of staffing practices, which will be reviewed,** including having operational colleagues as their line managers, who have no/limited experience in the relevant area of expertise; the Corporate Staff team 'loses them' when on active fire and rescue duties; and many are moved to another role or promoted after a short time.

   See 4.2.2 in the main body of the report for details.

9. **Members of the Fire Station Staff respondents identified a number of staffing practices, which will be reviewed,** including Station Commanders changing too frequently; communication between senior leaders and fire station personnel; and a small number of middle managers deliberately 'sabotaging corporate messages' (internal communications) and others who do so due to a lack of understanding.

   See 4.2.2 in the main body of the report for full details.

10. **The roles Fire Service Volunteers and Cadets can have in EDI activities** will be reviewed.

11. **To reduce the time spent away from their families attending training events, a number of OC firefighters suggested the following alternatives i) revising topics themselves at home, then taking an examination; and ii) introducing an accreditation of prior learning (APL) process.** Whilst HWFRS will review this, due to the high-risk nature of firefighting duties, the Service's need to ensure all firefighters meet the required standards may mean it is not possible.