

BEDFORDSHIRE AND LUTON FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

SAFEGUARDING PEOPLE THROUGH VALUING DIFFERENCES - THE SERVICE CASE FOR DIVERSITY

The law lays down a number of requirements for all employers with regards to equality but, as a public service, we not only have to comply with these, we are also expected to be an example and set the standards for other employers to follow.

Diversity is not just about meeting our **moral obligations** and fulfilling **legal requirements** – it is also about providing the **best possible service** to the people in our communities.

Effective service delivery requires the community to have faith, trust and confidence in our actions.

As a public service dedicated to saving and protecting life, property and the environment by preventing and responding to fires and other emergency incidents, we need to call on all the attributes of our staff.

This means respecting and valuing people for their differences and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute fully to our purpose. It also means ensuring staff safety and well-being through our Health and Safety and Equality and Fairness Policies.

Our Role as an Employer

As an employer we have a duty to provide a safe and equitable workforce where all staff are able to contribute and to feel valued. As a public service we are rightly expected to uphold high standards of conduct. The Service must maintain and enhance these standards and look at ways to remove unjustifiable barriers to employment, career progression and personal development.

Neither is Diversity about treating all people exactly the same. It is about treating people fairly and equitably and recognising and valuing differences, bringing the best out of each individual's skills, talents, knowledge and abilities.

What is 'the Service Case for Diversity' about?

We serve all the people of Bedfordshire and Luton regardless of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, culture or sexual orientation. By better reflecting the diversity of our community in our workforce we will in turn be better able to understand and identify what our community needs and wants from us. We will also be much better when delivering the services to meet those needs and wishes. How well we serve and communicate with the community, therefore, directly reflects how much we value diversity within our own team.

In our protection and prevention work our ability to communicate effectively with the full range of our diverse community directly determines how successfully we deliver our safety messages.

Bedfordshire and Luton's population is dynamic and changing. Poor communications can cost lives. Members of our community who do not understand our community safety messages are at a greater risk of death or injury. As a professional organisation and professional individuals we must make every effort to communicate with the community we service, and respond to their individual needs, or risk failing in our duty of care. Poor

communication and lack of understanding between individuals within the workplace also results in accidents, ill-health and low morale.

As a public service that believes in treating everyone equitably and fairly, regardless of our differences, we need to:

- ensure that all staff receive equitable and fair treatment and feel supported in every aspect of their working lives,
- improve the equality and fairness culture and awareness, and
- increase minority group representation.

By valuing people, their lives and property, and by having a greater understanding of our community we are able to better deliver the message and services expected of us and this benefits us all – Service, staff and community.

We will thereby improve:

- the preventative and emergency services we provide,
- community involvement,
- team performance,
- morale and job satisfaction,
- recruitment and retention.

By recognising this, we can all begin to play our part in achieving our combined aims of 'Community Safety', 'Employee Safety' and overall 'Service Improvement'.

Community Safety

In regard to the safety of the community, as already explained, the role of the Service is changing, it not only responds to calls and attends emergencies, it also has a proactive role of education and working in partnership with a range of organisations to deal with wide-ranging community cohesion issues. To improve the overall safety of our community, the Service seeks to:

- Reduce fire deaths and injuries.
- Make a significant contribution to road safety.
- Make a significant contribution to water safety.
- Help and support social cohesion.

The Service is, therefore, committed to developing bespoke educational initiatives for target groups. These ensure that the diverse needs of the different communities that are served are recognised – not only in the different methods of communication required, but also the different partnerships and strategies that need to be evolved. Examples such as campaigns focusing on candle safety at times of religious festivals or hazards from cooking techniques associated with particular cultural or religious groups are illustrative of how diversity is being mainstreamed into community safety work.

Staff Safety

Properly recognising and respecting diversity within our workforce also directly contributes to the health, safety and well-being of our own staff. For example, for many years the Fire and Rescue Service provided personal protective clothing to women firefighters that was

designed for men. This not only reduced the efficiency of women firefighters at incidents but also placed them at additional risk by not protecting them fully in all areas. By recognising the different needs of men and women employees within this context, the Service has been able to avoid poorly fitting personal protective equipment or safety equipment that is heavier than it needs to be. This has ensured firefighters are less likely to be injured and are able to perform more effectively at incidents, which in turn has contributed to overall Service effectiveness and efficiency.

In addition, developing cultural awareness and competence amongst our staff and improving the ways in which they engage and interact with the communities they serve, will have additional benefits for their own safety such as reducing the number of deliberate fires or malicious calls and cases of attacks on firefighters.

Service Improvement

The benefits to the Service as a whole of having a more diverse workforce include:

- Having a wider pool of talent to select from.
- Enabling a wide range of views to be present in an organisation, including views that may challenge the status quo from all sides.
- Being able to focus and strengthen an organisation's core values.
- Being instrumental in supporting organisational change.
- Better engagement with our whole community.
- Increased customer satisfaction.
- Improved consultation on safety issues.
- Increased take up of safety campaigns by the community.
- Realising efficiency savings by reducing recruitment spend.
- Realising cashable savings in improved retention rates.
- Realising performance improvements from reduced sickness absences and the financial benefits relating to this.

The Service currently has a positive reputation amongst the community, however, this position cannot be sustained if we do not recognise the benefits of diversity and the contribution that all sectors of the community make.

The Service Now and Into the Future – A Summary of the Service Case for Diversity

- ***To be an employer of choice:*** To have a variety of staff and to reflect the diverse communities we serve. To develop staff and supply role models for the community. To employ the best people.
- ***Drive down fires and incidents and help to deliver fire safety messages:*** To be more effective in prevention measures and community development work – making communities safer.
- ***To improve our equipment and procedures:*** Understanding diversity improves equipment for all.
- ***Gain public trust:*** Increase public appreciation and improve relationships within our communities.

- **Build our reputation:** 'Be the best that we can be' – have pride in the Service.
- **To enrich understanding of the community** and help engage with communities.
- Because **the job has changed** and will continue to change – it's about thinking widely – opening peoples' minds – secure the future, the more innovative and creative we are the more we will secure our future.
- The more diverse the Service is the more the **corporate image** will change – change in perception of the Service by the community – improved public image – be associated with a 'wider force for good'.
- With diversity comes **knowledge, expertise and skills**, we can only get fully diverse skills, competencies and experiences that the FRS need by employing a variety of staff from all the communities we serve.
- Important from a **legal and moral** standpoint.
- It makes **business sense** – the commercial aspect – effective partnerships and community working is good business practice.

DCFO/LAG