

# Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade

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# Introduction

**London Fire Brigade (LFB) is one of the largest firefighting and rescue organisations in the world and deals with a high volume of serious incidents to keep the capital safe. These range from fires in the home, non-domestic building fires and arson incidents to responding to acts of terrorism and dealing with flooding and road traffic collisions. Firefighters also played a major role in the fight against Coronavirus, driving ambulances to assist London Ambulance Service and responding to Covid-19 deaths in the community.**

Other major events that LFB have had to deal with in recent years include the Croydon tram crash, the Westminster terrorist attack and the Grenfell fire, which was the worst UK residential fire since World War II.

During this review, we saw many examples of bravery and dedication to public service. Whether this is the daily work of firefighters risking their lives to rescue people to fighting fires in extreme heat this summer, it made an enormous difference in communities across London and our review is rooted in a deep respect for the work of LFB staff. We have highlighted some of the most admirable elements of this, but our focus has been on those areas where improvement is needed and where toxic elements threaten to undermine the strengths of the Brigade.

At its best, LFB is a beacon of distinguished service, selflessness and bravery. But there is a growing recognition that cultural challenges are holding the Brigade back.

This review was established by the London Fire Commissioner in response to the tragic death of firefighter Jaden Matthew Francois-Esprit, who took his own life in August 2020. His family were concerned that he had been bullied because of his race. Yet while Jaden's death is the catalyst for the review, it should not be seen in isolation. Cultural problems have long dogged LFB.

Jaden's death came after a period of sustained criticism and accusations that the Brigade has a problem with racism and struggles with a culture of bullying and discrimination. An inspection by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in 2019 showed that some staff reported a "toxic" and "pack like" culture.

In 2020 a culture audit carried out by Engage for LFB revealed that the majority of those interviewed found the culture to be controlling and wanted to see a shift towards a working environment that was more collaborative, open and inclusive.

The most recent HMICFRS report from July 2022 acknowledges that, while progress has been made since their initial 2019 inspection, London Fire Brigade still needs to improve in looking after its people and that the Brigade's values and behaviour are not displayed by all staff.

# Terms of reference

Nazir Afzal OBE was appointed by a selection panel as chair of the review and a team of experts were established to report to him in November 2021.

The review will assess the existing culture of the LFB and consider the extent to which the Brigade

and its employees have created a culture free from discrimination, unfairness and inequality. The review will seek to identify areas for improvement and areas of strength, publishing a report and making recommendations for improvement where appropriate. To achieve this purpose, the review of culture will:

**1** Consider the impact of policies, processes, systems and ways of working on people and culture;

**2** Consider the way in which policies, processes and systems are applied and interpreted by staff and how that impacts on people and culture;

**3** Consider the behaviours and decisions of leaders at all levels and the impact they have on people and culture;

**4** Consider the impact of individual or group behaviour on people and culture;

**5** Consider the impact of team-based customs and traditions within the Brigade on people and culture;

**6** Consider the impact of barriers to progression, real and perceived, on people and culture; and,

**7** Consider the difference in experiences of staff, based on, but not limited to their:

- age;
- disability and neurodiversity;
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership;
- pregnancy and maternity;
- race;
- religion or belief;
- sex;
- sexual orientation; and,
- other forms of difference, including occupational group and rank.



# Methodology

Over a period of 10-months a seven strong team led by Nazir Afzal OBE gathered evidence of what people experienced in their working environment and the wider culture that supported this.

We did this through the following stages.

- Desktop research, data gathering and the review of relevant reports and documents
- An online survey that was emailed to all staff and completed by 1,672 employees.
- Over a dozen focus groups where multiple members of staff representing different departments and interests took part in discussions to share their views, insights and experiences of working at London Fire Brigade
- Over 250 interviews with current and previous members of staff. These were done either in person or through video conference or over the telephone.
- By inviting staff to contact us through a secure and private email, we also received over 100 written submissions
- Station visits to talk to firefighters on the job and assess workplace culture

Interviews were carried out remotely, on site (including stations and at LFB headquarters) and at Transport for London offices at Victoria, which we used for the purposes of this review. All interviewees were given options to ensure they were comfortable in their surroundings.

We were careful to ensure our interviews, focus groups and station groups fully captured the diversity of LFB and was representative of gender, age, race, rank, sexuality, neurodiversity and disabilities, as well as geography.

As part of our approach, we had to go to great efforts to emphasise the independence of the review and give staff assurance that their input was confidential. There was not only a lack of trust in the process, as many felt their concerns would not be taken seriously, but a hardened view that little would change.

Our starting point for this review was a recognition among all team members that it's the people who work for LFB that determine the strength of the institution. We have tried to ensure this review captures the human side of the Brigade and, over the following pages, we have given ample space to the wide range of voices we heard. Many of these felt they were not valued by their employers and had not been listened to before.



## Foreword

# Why does culture matter?

Not only is it what separates high-performing organisations from the rest, but it's what shapes why people behave in a certain way. When you have an optimum culture then your DNA sparkles. Staff are motivated, teams are high performing and people want to join you. But when it deteriorates, performance drops, bad habits creep in and recruitment is hard. At it's worse, as I saw in the case of LFB, it can mean people are frightened for their life.



“When we go to work you could end up being sent to extremely dangerous incidents,” one female firefighter told me. “In these cases, your life depends on your colleagues. You have to rely on them to get out safely and how can you do that when you know they think so little of you and treat you like dirt all the time? Without respect, it makes the job impossible.”

For the purpose of this review, we have used Edgar Schein’s definition of culture being the “shared learning experiences that lead, in turn, to shared, taken for granted basic assumptions held by the members of the group or organisation”.

Schein’s definition suggests organisational culture is what makes an organisation tick and it’s the way an organisation thinks and feels as a community. Over the course of many months of interviews, surveys, discussions and extensive correspondence with LFB staff, we have sought to capture an understanding of this.

There are many things that determine this, including governance and structural issues. But an equally important factor in shaping workplace culture is the

**Research also notes that firefighters demonstrate high levels of ‘Type A’ behaviour. This personality type is typically extrovert, competitive, organised and possessing self-control. At its worse, though, it is impatient, aggressive and hostile.**

kind of person that is naturally drawn to becoming a firefighter.

Firefighters undertake a behavioural questionnaire when they join to assess whether they possess key attributes such as confidence and resilience, situational awareness and openness to change.

This process, however, doesn’t shed much light on the type of personalities that are attracted to the job. There is little research on this subject, although Mitchell and Bray (1990) use the term “rescue personality” to describe the characteristics of individuals who work in the emergency services. Their research also notes that firefighters demonstrate high levels of ‘Type A’ behaviour. This personality type is typically extrovert, competitive, organised and possessing self-control. At its worse, though, it is impatient, aggressive and hostile.

There are, naturally, many different personalities who join the fire service – and diversity is critical in building a high functioning service. However, where we identified cultural problems associated with bullying, it was frequently a case of those who weren’t ‘type A’ personalities struggling to cope with a dominant aggressive culture.

LFB are aware of this and their 2018 People’s Survey showed that just over a half of staff (55 per cent) felt they strongly belonged in their workplace. That some 45 per cent don’t feel this sense of belonging is a cause for concern. It is important to note, though, that while we have focussed on the challenges that deny people dignity at work, there were many examples of exemplary culture within LFB. Where it works well, there is a powerful sense of belonging and purpose.

The emergency services community is a fiercely proud, tight-knit unit with strong bonds, and through the course of our discussions, we saw how this dynamic helped



shape the culture at LFB. At times this was incredibly moving and a source of inspiration. Firefighters who worked closely together, not only looked out for each other but shared a keen sense of pride and purpose. The nature of their work is frequently dangerous, so their closeness is based on a need for firefighters to be able to completely rely on each other and trust colleagues with their life.

But while the tight-knit team spirit of the watch is often an exemplar of camaraderie, co-operation and efficiency, it sometimes comes with a downside.

The close-knit and clannish makeup of watches means that there is a need for firefighters to fit in with the culture or risk being viewed with suspicion or ostracized. We heard of too many examples where the watch culture was rigidly enforced and anyone who didn't fit in or was different was singled out for bullying or abuse.

Of course, not all watches demonstrated this intolerance and it should be said that plenty were inclusive and supportive of people from different backgrounds, race, sexuality and religion. But there were some where alarming levels of prejudice were apparent.

In these watches, we found an environment that was pickled in aspic, clinging to social mores from the 20th century and this manifested itself in a workplace where offensive 'banter' - particularly that characterised by extreme sexism - was commonplace.

Early on in our review, we were told that 'banter' was part of the job and necessary to allow people to let off steam in a stressful job. However, for banter to work those involved in the supposedly teasing exchange must know each other well enough not to take things personally. This was not the case in many incidents we heard of and the term was frequently used to justify gratuitous abuse and 'othering'.

Examples include continually mocking people's religion, taking bets on who would be the first person in the team to sleep with a woman and filling people's helmets with urine.

We asked many senior figures why sexism, racism and attacks on other minorities were prevalent at some stations and were told that some firefighters saw others as a threat to their role.

Looking back at recent history, it is clear that women and ethnic minorities have long been seen as a threat at LFB. In a 1991 documentary by Thames Television for ITV, set in a fire station in Hackney, the station officer says, "we were all frightened that we would be overrun by ethnic minorities, we would be overrun by women, and then the job would go out the window. There are status issues... we're firemen and we feel that's being eroded."

Much has changed since, and this station may have subsequently closed down, but some still maintain the same view and demonstrate a refusal to accept women and ethnic minorities. Widespread resistance to the #Firefightingsexism campaign of 2018, which saw many men angrily respond to the inclusive change in language from 'fireman' to 'firefighter', is a case in point.

One other figure, which is arguably outside of LFB's control due to London's cost of living challenge, is the fact that just under 50 per cent of all staff live outside of London. In some cases this created an obvious disconnect with staff telling us that they didn't feel attached to the capital. Some actively disliked it and were dismissive of everything London stood for.

This cultural dissonance is something that needs to be recognised in the Brigade's strategic plans to build a culture of belonging. "To love London is to embrace difference," states the LFB Togetherness Strategy. But for staff who do not love London, this can manifest itself



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in attitudes, behaviours and prejudice that are totally opposed to the Brigade’s values.

Given that London is one of the most diverse cities in the world, with over 300 languages spoken every day, it should be a prerequisite for anyone working in a public facing role to be comfortable with diversity.

And yet it’s not just in the watch culture where we saw evidence of a stubborn resistance to diversity. The senior leadership team are predominantly white males. There is evidence of poor progression of people of colour and women to senior positions within the service and there are no openly gay male officers above the rank of group commander.

“I’ve been told that LFB is not ready for a gay Deputy Assistant Commissioner,” one senior firefighter told us.

This uneasiness manifests itself in countless ways. From micro-aggressions and bullying to an opaque career development structure that’s beset with allegations of cronyism. But the most egregious examples of this culture are stomach turning in their toxicity.

In one case of horrendous racial abuse, we spoke to a black firefighter who had a noose put above his locker. We also spoke to a Muslim who was constantly bullied about his religion and had bacon and sausages put in his coat pockets and a terrorist hotline sign posted on his locker. On countless occasions, stories of racial slurs being casually used were related to us by people of colour. At its worse, particularly in relation to some Muslim firefighters,

this would manifest itself in constant mockery, baiting and bullying. We heard from one firefighter who had been diagnosed with PTSD as a result.

This intolerance didn’t solely exist in fire stations. It was revealed to us that a senior figure in the communications team was sacked and had to be walked off the premises after expressing views on race that were not aligned to LFB’s values.

With evidence showing that people of colour were disproportionately subject to disciplinary action and less likely to gain promotion, there is clearly much work to be done before the brigade can be deemed to match its inclusive aims with demonstrable change.

It wasn’t just race, though, where there was strong evidence of ‘othering’. We heard countless accounts of women being subject to abuse from colleagues on a day-to-day basis and this pointed to a deep-rooted culture of misogyny.

We heard stories of women being groped in training exercises and having to run a daily gauntlet of sexist abuse, again frequently euphemised as ‘banter’. Many were routinely referred to as “woman” or “front bottom” by colleagues and, more seriously, some were punched and attacked.

Some also had to endure the indignity of having photos of them taken without their consent, which were then passed on to colleagues with misogynistic comments written on them. Many were sexually taunted and one woman, after making complaints about this, received video calls from a man exposing his genitalia. In another case, a senior officer was asked to ‘retire’ early after sending inappropriate photos on his work phone to women.



Some of the most senior leaders at LFB admitted to us that they had heard many people say that women should not be firefighters at any level.

The previous Commissioner, Dany Cotton, told us she was passionately invested in the #Firefightingsexism campaign of 2017 because they had been told accounts of young girls who wanted to be a firefighter who had told people that they wished they were boys, as they believed it was the only way to achieve this. She subsequently received death threats and demands for her to be removed from her job. She also recounted one incident when she was a middle manager where she visited a fire station and all the male firefighters turned around and walked away from her because they did not want to work with women.

Any close inspection of some of the fire stations shows a watch culture, where men are sometimes huddled around a screen watching porn, which belongs in the last century. It urgently needs updating.

Much of this goes to the heart of outdated stereotypes of firefighters and suggests an urgent need to drag the role kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

The modern fire service still suffers from an image of the musclebound, burly firefighter, which is often at odds with the challenges facing the service. This narrative is further enforced by cultural references such as Love Island’s much-criticised ‘fireman challenge’, which saw the male contestants dress up as firefighters and strip before ‘saving’ their female partners.

The reality, as the #Firefightingsexism campaign showed across the world, is that women have a vital role to play in modern firefighting.

As one Borough Commander explained: “Women are often fitter than men and there have been times when I’ve had to take men ‘off the run’ because they’re not strong

enough and fail the ladder tests. Ideally you need a mix of people. A six foot four, 18 stone man is not necessarily the right option when you need someone to get through a small window.”

The same firefighter added: “It’s ironic that male firefighters often claim women aren’t physically up to the job and are too fragile. In my experience far too many men are fragile because they’re so easily threatened by difference.”

This extends to sexuality and we heard accounts from gay firefighters of being shunned because their colleagues found them to be a threat. “I was told, ‘I’m not going into a fire with you in case you try it on,’” one recalled. “It’s this level of absurdity you have to deal with on a daily basis.”

The above incidents are clear examples of cultural problems threatening the Brigade’s reputation and acting as a barrier to people experiencing dignity at work. But they are not the only problems we encountered.

As you will see in the following pages, there were other equally complex problems, which enabled a toxic culture to flourish in parts of the Brigade.

These relate to a failing HR system, poor leadership, training and a career development system that is seen as not fit for purpose and the need for a better understanding of employees’ mental health.

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All of these should not detract from the exemplary work that's delivered on a daily basis, but they act as a drag on the Brigade's performance and reputation – and if not urgently addressed will result in more poor reports and impact strongly on recruitment and retention.

We would like to thank all past and present staff who contacted us to share their stories, insights and experiences of working for London Fire Brigade. Their accounts were incredibly moving and show a human struggle for dignity at work that should be anathema in modern public services.

Of all the voices we heard, there is one that especially resonates because of the circumstances in which this review was born. We spoke to a young firefighter who was on the same training programme as Jaden. They became friends and he spoke of the excitement they both shared upon completing their training and going through their pass out ceremony. Both were thrilled at the prospect of moving onto a fire station to complete their apprenticeship programme.

It's at this point where their paths changed course, as they were both sent to different stations a few miles apart. For Jaden's friend, the journey of becoming a firefighter continued to be personally fulfilling. His workplace was a station with a supportive culture and a strong team that he was made to feel a part of. But the next time he came into contact with Jaden, he sensed something had changed. His friend's enthusiasm for the job had gone.

"He felt unsupported and didn't fit in," he recalls. "He made it clear that he didn't like it at Wembley and had to get out."

What he didn't know was just how isolated Jaden felt. In the months leading up to his tragic suicide, Jaden made more than a dozen transfer requests to different stations. Hardly anyone, it would appear, could see his anxiety and torment.

What's become painfully aware for us over the course of this review is that it's often a lottery as to whether people are posted at good stations or not. In Jaden's friend's case, he was lucky. But others can end up at stations where the culture is not inclusive or supportive.

And because of this, we've learned that Jaden's position was not unique. We have spoken to others that are equally isolated and harbouring suicidal thoughts. They too are on the edge. We have looked through the tears in people's eyes and seen the torment and humiliation they are experiencing due to extreme bullying and abuse.

It's wholly unacceptable that public servants are being stripped of their dignity and this review must be the starting point to end this toxic culture and start building a more supportive environment that values all staff.

That would be a fitting legacy for Jaden.



**Nazir Afzal OBE**



# Profile: London Fire Brigade

The starting point to understanding any organisation's culture is to examine its governance and makeup. Latest figures show that LFB employs 5,646 staff and these are made up of control, FRS and operational staff. Of all staff groups, 18 per cent are female and 82 per cent are male. Of these, 17 per cent classify themselves as BAME and six per cent classify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The Brigade does not hold data on gender reassignment, but does hold data on whether people identify as a gender different to that of their birth.

Many faiths are also represented across staff with the most popular being Christian, which 35.54 per cent of staff identify as. Staff also identify as having Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh faiths.

There are efforts to make the Brigade more diverse and representative of all the communities it serves across London. Of the trainee firefighter intake, latest figures show that over the last 12 months, 31 per cent of these have been Black, Asian and minority ethnic firefighters and that 24 per cent are women.

The highest represented age group for all staff is between 40-49, which is 37 per cent of staff. This age group is similarly the most represented group for operational staff (40 per cent) and 57 per cent of all operational staff are over 40.

LFB's control room deals with approximately 500 calls a day and between 160,000 and 180,000 calls a year. In the last year LFB handled over 115,000 emergency incidents. As a measure of how this compares with other fire brigades, East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service receives on average 30 calls per day.

There is also a considerable amount of work done to prevent fires and keep Londoners safe. This recognition that prevention is the most effective firefighting tool means there is a continued focus on home fire safety visits, where firefighters visit residents in their properties to assess fire risks and fit free smoke alarms. Over 35,000 home fire safety visits were completed in the last year and this is coupled with youth engagement schemes targeted primarily at primary and secondary age school children.

There is a target to reach 100,000 children and young people annually to deliver fire prevention and safety messages.

LFB's organisational structure is split into three areas:

- Operational staff – firefighters
- Control – 999 call handlers
- Non uniformed and non-operational – the essential support team

The LFB is led by the London Fire Commissioner. The Brigade and Commissioner are overseen by the Greater London Authority, which in 2018 took over these responsibilities from the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority. In practice this means that the Commissioner has the freedom to make operational and business decisions on behalf of the LFB – however if there is a cost implication above £150K then a decision is made by the Deputy Mayor, on behalf of the Mayor, to scrutinise the decision and agree or refuse to allow the Commissioner to spend that amount from the budget agreed with the Mayor every financial year.

The London Fire Commissioner is a corporation sole. LFB's rank structure and history is based in Naval traditions.

The Brigade has a structure on the incident ground that bleeds into other areas of their business. For example, at an incident of up to 4 pumps it is expected that a Station officer or sub officer will be the incident commander. A station commander will act as a monitoring officer.

If the incident grows to 5 pumps the station commander will take over the incident as incident commander and a Group Commander will be mobilised to take over as the monitoring officer. This continues until they get to the point where either the Commissioner or deputy Commissioners would be expected to mobilise to an incident to act as the monitoring officer for an assistant commissioner.

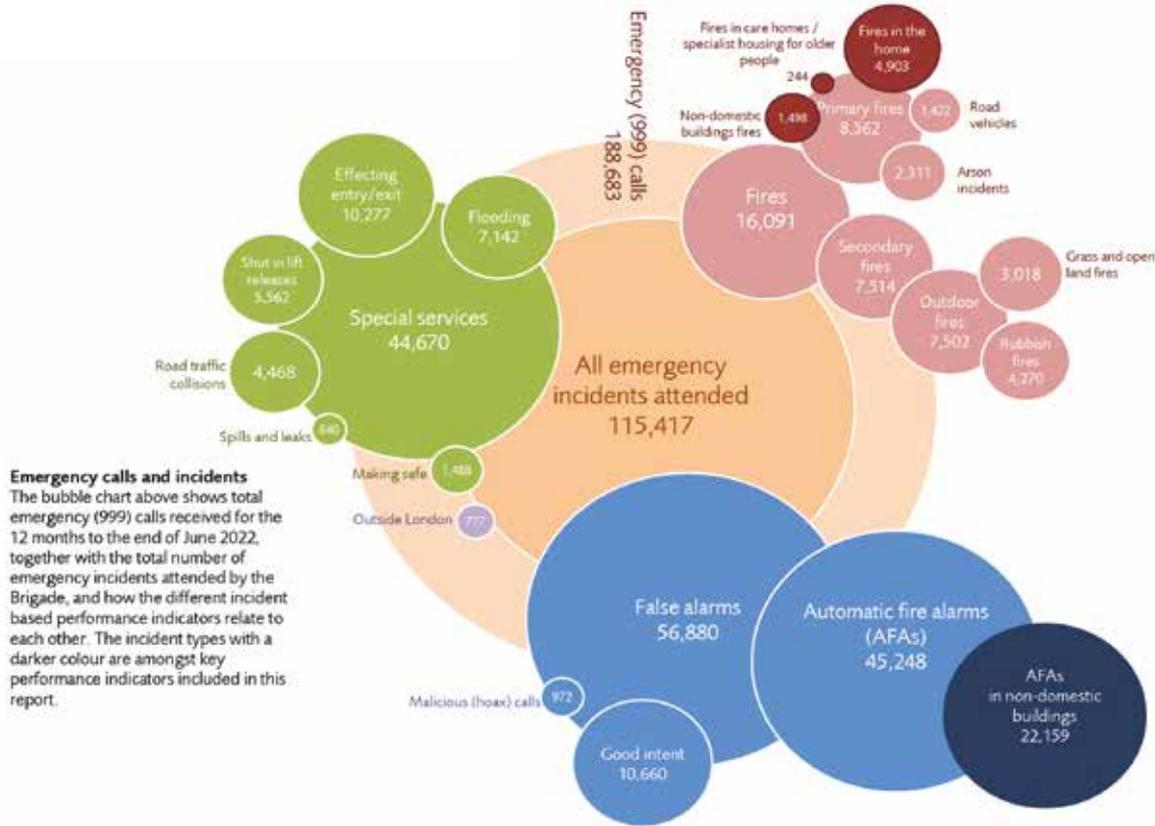
This is reflected in LFB's daily business where responsibilities are given by rank. There are three stages in the discipline process (1, 2 and 3). Disciplinary cases are heard by different ranks of officers depending on the stage at which the case is being heard. The Presiding Manager who not normally hold a HR qualification or HR background, although disciplinary cases at stage 2 and 3 of the process will be investigated by a HR Advisor. The Presiding Manager will receive advice from a separate HR Advisor. This is the same with FRS staff.

When staff are in the development phase of their roles following promotion, a specific rank will take up an assessor role and a verifier role rather than someone with a specific background in staff development.

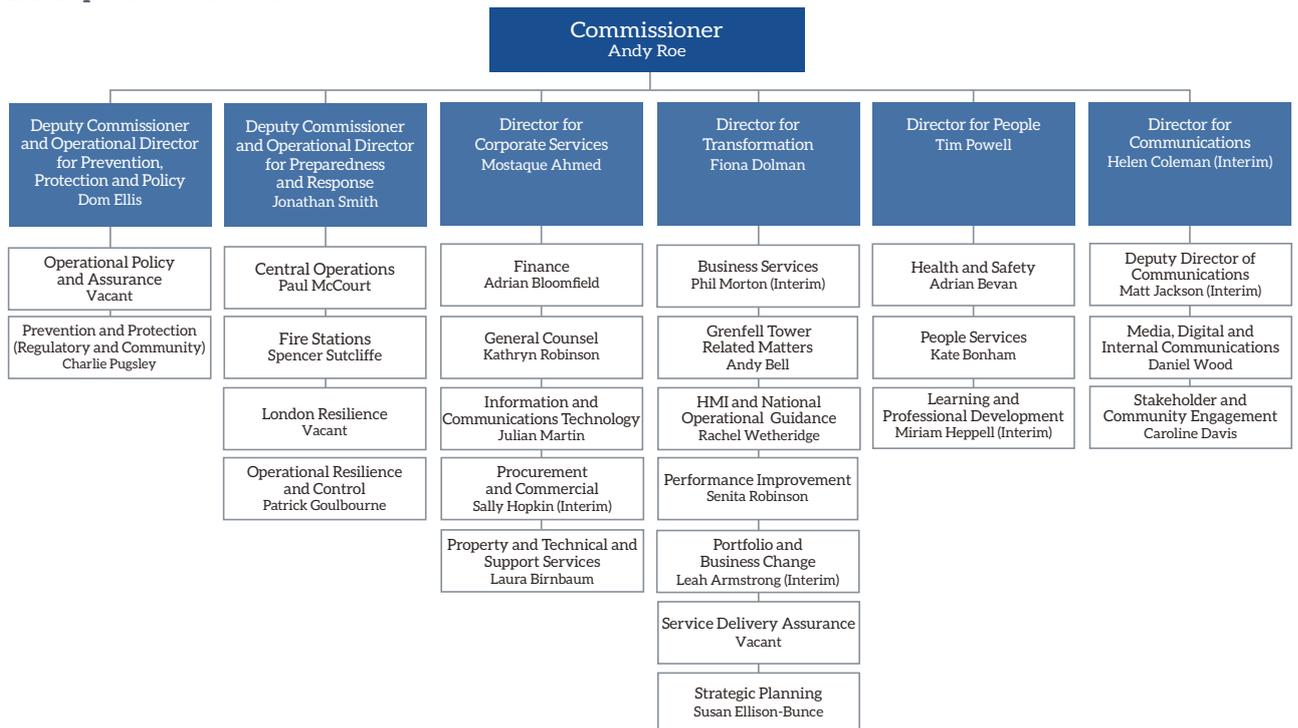
LFB compares favourably with labour turnover in the public sector. In the last year there has been a higher level of employee departures, with a total labour turnover rate of 15.6 per cent and a voluntary labour turnover rate of 8.8 per cent across public sector.

In LFB labour turnover for the last year for all staff is 7.6 per cent and voluntary turnover is 2.42 per cent. Turnover rate for the Metropolitan Police is 8.52 per cent.

### Incidents in Numbers



### LFB Department structure





# Strategic direction

There was a clear recognition among senior leaders at LFB that all is not well with workplace culture and that urgent changes were needed to better support staff. The commissioner publicly acknowledged this in an interview in March 2021 where he conceded that a culture of casual racism and misogyny existed in pockets at LFB.

“The benchmark for me is I’ve got a young mixed-heritage daughter,” he added. “Can I say with confidence that she will be treated with dignity and respect in every single part of the London fire brigade? No I can’t.

There are currently a number of culture change strategies in place across LFB including a Togetherness Strategy, which aims to embed “gold standard inclusion and diversity practice” across all areas of the Brigade.

However, when we discussed this with staff the feedback we received suggested this strategic work was not particularly valued. It was largely seen as a process that kept leadership busy; a document that didn’t have real outcomes and wishful thinking that was yet to translate into tangible change.

One key area to support change and hold unacceptable behaviour to account is the ‘Safe to Speak’ programme, which was launched in September 2021 and aims to improve confidence in reporting concerns.

Between Sept 2021 to March 2022, 22 people used the scheme (The majority of staff using the scheme were uniformed) and issues raised included recruitment

processes (inconsistent processes of recruitment of uniformed staff), inconsistencies in treatment where special leave is concerned (e.g. bereavements, emergencies) and a few complaints over harassment (feeling victimised by managers for speaking up).

Once an issue is raised, a mediator liaises with the line manager to resolve the issue. However, the programme is not well-known in fire stations and there is a plan to increase its visibility (e.g. placing posters in fire stations) to ensure it has greater take-up.

Furthermore, we discovered that the programme is not particularly trusted and does not command significant confidence across the Brigade. Beyond this programme, staff are advised to informally resolve any issues directly with their line manager if they can, or otherwise follow the formal grievance process.

The extent of strategic change is covered in more detail in the People Services section, as this department is key to supporting cultural transformation. Similarly, as we will explore in further detail in sections on leadership and workplace culture, the shortage of trust within the organisation is making it difficult to progress on cultural change. There is a widening chasm between senior leaders, People Services and other staff, particularly fire fighters. This means that change programmes are seen as abstract and unable to win hearts and minds.

Morale is low and in our online survey, over 40 per cent of respondents said they were frustrated in their job.





# Grenfell Tower

**In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a fire started in West London that would test LFB like no other. As the worst incident in living memory, Grenfell Tower was a national tragedy that claimed the lives of 72 people with hundreds more rendered homeless and many traumatised for life.**

Some 1,074 London Fire Brigade personnel were involved in responding to the Grenfell fire and its aftermath, which represented around 19 per cent of the total workforce. This number was made up of 660 firefighters, 113 watch managers, 116 crew managers, 159 senior managers, 17 control room operators and nine fire and rescue staff.

This incident loomed large over our review and has undoubtedly had a seismic impact on the culture of LFB. Staff repeatedly told us that it has taken its toll on their mental health and, while LFB informed us that they did not have complete data for the number of people that had left the Brigade because of the impact of the Grenfell Fire, they did acknowledge there had been a number of ill-health retirements as a result.

The data they held was based on what staff disclosed to them and they confirmed there had been 88 periods of sickness absence recorded as relating to the Grenfell Tower Fire. This ranged from one lost working day to

734 and spread across 67 members of staff. A total of 86 per cent of these absence periods were recorded as due to stress, anxiety or depression. They also confirm that their exit data showed an increase in people leaving after Grenfell and that their in-house counselling and trauma services had 258 direct Grenfell-related referrals.

We also recognised the profound impact of Grenfell in the anger of firefighters who took significant personal risks on the night, and then felt the public criticism of the Brigade's response personally. One Grenfell community group described the conflict some felt having been rescued from the fire by a service that, in many other ways, had failed them.

This was an extremely traumatic event and it is widely acknowledged that such events have a huge impact on the culture of the organisation and the stories that are told. The impact is heavily influenced by whether the workforce feel that their actions and the organisation as a whole has been fairly judged and whether their own leadership supported them through the Inquiry process.

Since then, the Commissioner has made it his priority to improve relationships and build trust with the Grenfell community. He and his staff meet regularly with them,

and some have joined the Brigade's new Community Forum, which has been set up to strengthen links with all of LFB's communities.

We sensed in our conversations with Grenfell community groups that these moves were welcome and had started to rebuild trust. But these new links are fragile and must continue to be nurtured and prioritised from now on. Equally, the Commissioner and his leadership team have work to do in healing the divisions in their own staff community, ensuring that all staff can see the benefit of accountability and open engagement in the delivery of public service, and feel supported and protected when things go wrong.

Grenfell leaves an enormous sense of injustice and nothing will ever make up for the loss of loved ones and the pain that families are forced to live with. The lack of anyone being held accountable for the events of that night will continue to leave the feeling that justice has been denied. That needs resolving soon.

But lessons from this awful tragedy must be learned and it is vital that the changes the Brigade has made continue, and that the lessons are applied to the way that LFB works with and communicates to all local communities in future.

**Much has been said about the Grenfell Inquiry and it is not within the scope of this review to duplicate its work. But our review would like to reflect how Grenfell has impacted on culture across LFB in the following ways.**

**1**

#### **There is a need for increased trauma specialism and mental health awareness**

Grenfell caused LFB to expand its counselling service into a much larger team with enhanced trauma specialism. It was also a turning point in the need for increased mental health awareness and the need to break down stigma within the organisation. There is still work to be done in this respect, as many firefighters are still uncomfortable when talking about their mental health.

**2**

#### **Grenfell has forced LFB to engage more with communities to rebuild trust**

The Communications Team openly acknowledged that Grenfell had changed the way they worked and forced them to focus more on building trust and better relationships with the communities they serve. Previously, their focus had largely been on communicating safety messages and encouraging people to fit smoke alarms. The scope of their work has changed significantly because of Grenfell.

**3**

#### **The damage to trust will take time to fully repair**

Our interviews with the Grenfell community showed that LFB's initial response and engagement in the first stage of the Inquiry significantly damaged trust. One group reported that they felt that LFB has focussed solely on trying to control the narrative and "not talk about anything other than the heroic Fire Brigade." This group also reported the anger they felt when firefighters sued for compensation over trauma they experienced while tackling the blaze. They did not see firefighters as victims at all.



**The chasm between leadership and firefighters contributed significantly towards a deteriorating workplace culture and created obvious resentment.**

# Leadership

Over the course of our review, we spoke to a considerable sample of leaders across the LFB rank structure including people from all grades/ranks up to and including the commissioner.

The senior leadership team are all high performing individuals who have the best interests of their workforce at the forefront of their minds, but we saw a lot of silo working in leadership roles and that merely reinforced how isolated senior leaders had become. This has to be addressed.

We were struck by how much micro-management takes place with people seeking permission to influence those in power rather than seizing the opportunity to influence events as they come their way.

In part this is a confidence issue. LFB believes itself to be a junior department, particularly when compared to the

Metropolitan Police, also within the Mayor's remit. The Senior team said they weren't outwardly concerned that any expenditure over £150K had to be agreed by City Hall, but inwardly it explained why senior staff often micro-managed their juniors. If they themselves can't be trusted to make the big decisions - and be held to account for them - then is it any wonder that those they line manage can't be expected to either?

We heard several accounts that suggested LFB staff were confused by the leadership style of senior managers. Many were used to a Command and Control model where rank or status was used to obtain compliance. The pips on the uniform were the absolute determinant of where power lies. However, an equal number of others considered their workplace to be more collegiate and built around teamwork where compliance was obtained by the power of influence and one gets others to willingly cooperate and engage.



## A constant refrain was that “leadership is do as I say not as I do”.

This is one sign of an identity problem. Is LFB an organisation like the police or armed forces where people do as they're told by more senior personnel, or is it more akin to a public service where the team is the centre of the universe? Staff we spoke to in firefighting roles saw rank, others in non-operational positions saw team. This becomes a problem when staff progress from one role to another. LFB needs to decide what it is.

Our review identified trust concerns at all levels of leadership – though there were fewer problems with immediate line managers. Indeed, our survey showed that over 70 per cent of respondents felt they were managed satisfactorily or very good. A further 22 per cent of respondents were unhappy with how they were managed. Negative feelings towards leaders tended to increase with seniority and a frequently expressed view was that senior leaders were “distant”, “aloof” or “hiding in Union Street”.

Blame was disproportionately heaped on senior management with some claiming that they exemplified

the bullying culture that stubbornly persisted in some watches and also did not understand diversity.

*“Senior management is where the cultural issues lie. Bullying happens from a senior level, I’m ex-serving Royal Marine and my senior officers in the Marines were so much better and, even though officers, still team players. The Brigade...it’s all about if your face fits, I have had numerous encounters with senior officers and their helpfulness and knowledge is horrendous. I think watches are the most diverse groups within the Brigade, we are established teams that work well together, the issues arise when senior officers get involved and throw the big stick around as they have to show they have power.”*

This widening trust gap was a particularly alarming finding and long serving FRS staff and operational staff said they felt that over the last 10 years the leadership has been poor and inconsistent, with no real guidance and strategy. It was felt that there has been and continues to be a very poor relationship amongst principal managers, which is openly observed by senior and middle managers.

Typical views to support this were:

*Going past my immediate line manager things tend to get lost in the ether. Good ideas go nowhere and corporate drivel is spouted. Unfortunately for all we seem to be run like a bad business.*

*“Raised concern over performance and behaviour of individuals, investigation carried out and then brushed under the carpet by DAC due to optics.*

*“My immediate line manager is very supportive and has informed me of intended actions. It is my line*

*manager’s manager that prevents action, and is a bottleneck for all situations.*

*Watch based staff are receptive. It’s when you start going above station officer then it seems they’re only in it for tick boxes and looking after each other. Us who wear red t-shirts are just pay numbers and not real emotional human beings who need help. Unless you’re liked or know the right people you are not helped and in my case my daily work life was made worse.*



Many commented on the current all staff briefings being rolled out to all staff in a virtual setting and some in person discussions at places of work. Typical comments were:

*Commissioners roll out for station visits (Roadshows), is good in principle*

*All staff briefings are a disaster"*

*"They are so disjointed and removed from the reality of station staff*

*" The Commissioners' group are not on the same page*

*"They don't answer the uncomfortable questions"*

*"There is a detachment from middle managers and the void is getting bigger"*

*"Some principal officers are afraid to talk about diversity and manoeuvre around the subject and will revert back to policy statements because they cannot explain from their heart because they do not live diversity"*

*Other than the Commissioner, I do not think I have heard anyone talk comfortably or openly about race, some are not even sure if they should say the word, Black, to describe someone – what century are we living in?"*

*"If the so called leaders could really hear what is said about the leaders in the offices/stations, they would really have to consider their position*

*"There's a massive division, both FRS staff and operational staff do not trust the leadership for some time now"*

A constant refrain was that "leadership is do as I say not as I do".

The chasm between leadership and firefighters contributed significantly towards a deteriorating workplace culture (which is explored in more detail below) and created obvious resentment. In station visits we heard firefighters condemn "the white shirts" for "not knowing anything about what we do" and not "getting out of Union Street and getting their hands dirty". It spoke of a culture where trust was openly haemorrhaging and this was further echoed in online responses to our survey.

There was also frustration openly voiced about managers retiring and then returning to run special projects.

*"I find the most challenging aspect of working here for the last 20-years the staggering and divisive gulf between FRS and uniformed staff. Nothing grates more than uniformed staff retiring only to return to 'run a project' that they know nothing about. Yet some innate snobbery leads senior managers to believe that because they have been senior officers they have some special insight or toolkit. I can tell you that this is certainly not evidenced by my experience, for the majority of cases."*

A good number of people also observed that the hierarchical nature of the organisation made some people who had years of experience feel unworthy. "There is a massive disparity between operational and FRS staff and



***There were also frustrated leaders who felt they could not get rid of poor firefighters. “We need more teeth,” said one. “How can someone who works for an organisation that has a zero tolerance for drugs be on a final written warning when they’ve failed a medical due to drug taking?”***

the Assistant Commissioner only listens to operational staff,” one explained, adding that she wasn’t asked her professional opinion on a review that she led on.

There were, however, plenty of good leadership examples we saw – those who mentored and championed staff, and went out of their way to build inclusive environments and operate a zero tolerance policy around discrimination, for example – but this was uneven and patchy. There was little consistency and a sense that it was a postcode lottery for firefighters and staff on whether they ended up working in a supportive environment.

There were also frustrated leaders who felt they could not get rid of poor firefighters. “We need more teeth,” said one. “How can someone who works for an organisation that has a zero tolerance for drugs be on a final written warning when they’ve failed a medical due to drug taking?”

This frustration also extended to concerns over the Brigade’s ability to identify talent and support the most able firefighters. “We have a problem with identifying talent for leadership,” added another. “Why have we got people doing a really good job acting up and yet they can’t pass an interview? There’s something wrong. And then you get really good firefighters passing all their exams and being offered a promotion that’s miles away and unsuitable for them and their family. They turn it down

and are told not to go for promotion again. So they leave. We are pushing talent away.”

Some watches felt that the leadership on fire stations was generally good. However, from Station Commander and above was poor. “There are very few role models that reflect good leadership in all aspects of the managerial role,” one firefighter explained, “for both people management and managing operational incidents.”

The fact that leadership was so inconsistent may well be connected to the fact that the culture of an organisation is not a key performance indicator (KPI), which means it is not measured or valued. Neither is the importance of listening or empathy. There were multiple complaints about leaders and HR lacking people skills, which are not recognised in any training.

At the heart of this criticism, though, was a view that too many of the leaders at LFB are not interested in changing the culture and do not see it as a problem. Many complained that there a huge gulf between the ambition and capability of leaders and that far too many had been over-promoted.

“Other than the Commissioner, who I have a lot of respect and loyalty for, none of the other Directors have demonstrated that they have any interest in changing the Culture of the LFB,” explained one manager with 30 years’ experience.



In part due to Covid-19, the visibility of leaders has suffered despite the valiant efforts of the Commissioners in particular. Few staff told us that they had seen the “white shirts” outside of Union Street HQ. If they did, many assumed it was either “lip service” or “because something had gone wrong.”

The best leaders build their own visibility, they liberate others and they encourage. They achieve results, develop others, lead by example and build relationships.

They know that trust comes first – it is the bridge that connects with others so that they listen. We speak elsewhere about poor internal and external communication - and good leadership models recognise the power of communication which enables you to align goals and actions with those around you. We saw little evidence that the leaders were actively building trust and engaging with staff well enough to win hearts and minds so that leaders can actively drive change.

## Case study - An Assistant Commissioner's view

**“There’s a subculture in our watches that is linked to what happened to Jaden”**

*We need to move away from the Cruel Sea, stiff upper lip, quasi military approach. We push people through a sausage machine and then put them onto a Watch where the tribal aspect is so bad they have to fit in. They don't get the diversity that's needed to improve the quality of decision making.*

*“I've visited lots of Watches and can see some have problems. I spoke to a woman at one watch who said she was the 'shit catcher'. Everything that went wrong was her fault and she had to move. If it was down to me I would have bust up the entire watch because it gave permission for the next person to be treated like that. I put in a complaint and asked for it to be investigated but no one came back to me. That firefighter went to pick up her kit and found her helmet had been spat in. This culture is deeply ingrained.*

*“The problem is that middle managers don't put themselves in the firing line. They step away and use skilful blindness.*



**We were told that no action was frequently taken by managers on abuse and harassment. Instead it was treated as low level behaviour or considered to be 'banter'.**

# Workplace culture

Seeking a clear understanding of workplace culture was a critical objective of our review and there were differing views from participants. These varied in accordance to the amount of time an individual was employed within LFB, their experience of other environments within the organisation and exposure to previous employment in separate organisations.

It was widely recognised that LFB has historically suffered from a bullying and discriminatory workplace culture and many spoke of a 1990s environment where young trainees had to go through brutal rites of passage as part of initiation rituals. They were quick to add that the same brutal initiation culture was no longer in place, although many current leaders were from this era and still held some of the values from it.

What became clear from the outset of our interviews was that at the heart of LFB is a family culture built on trust and togetherness. This is similar in many ways to the army; however, it can be viewed as a “pack mentality which will work for some and not for others”. To belong at the Fire station, “you have to earn your stripes,” prove yourself and earn the team’s trust. The culture is very dependent on the watch, and “you must make it work”. The watch leader is crucial in setting the tone, and middle managers are seen as key to creating a more positive culture but appear to have the most challenging role with limited support. Addressing the watch culture must be a priority for the London FRS as this impacts the experience of all staff and hinders progress in developing an inclusive culture.

## The watch tends to be seen as a place that's almost 'outside the law' with regard to norms of behaviour.

Most participants found that the place where they worked was a supportive and friendly environment. But they knew of other watches/teams where they would not want to work. Similarly many examples were given of good managers they have worked with who are supportive and where they enjoyed working for many years. However, this could easily change with a new manager or being moved to another watch or team.

Some of the below comments were representative of our engagement and showed the positives and downsides of the watch.

The culture on a fire station was demonstrably different to that of an office based environment. Some stated the reason was that the values of the organisation could be expressed differently due to the difference in the roles, despite working for the same organisation.

An example of this which was frequently discussed is the role that the 'Mess' assumes on a fire station. It was widely recognised as being the focal point of the station

and where a lot of interaction and bonding traditionally occurred. Friendships are often formed here; issues can be raised in an informal manner to continue good working relationships and frank discussions are held to 'nip things in the bud' and prevent potential conflicts from escalating.

It was also said that due to the very long working hours performed on a station, the culture of preparing and enjoying a meal together is completely different from an office based environment.

The majority of contributors to these discussions considered the mess to be a productive place in itself. However, many recognised that the environment is not always a pleasant experience and this often depended on the culture of a particular watch.

It's important to recognise that there are 103 fire station and 412 watches in total. Each watch can be completely different in regard to common practices including behaviour, management styles and how people respond to difference.

*"Most positive - people like working here, it does feel like a family. In fact I would go as far to say people stay longer because of the relationships with colleagues.*

*"The most positive is the passion and commitment for the work that we do and the 'family' type environment that people talk about a lot. However, I do think this is a strength that becomes overplayed. The family environment has downsides - relationships are too strong which reduces people's ability to be objective and enhances unconscious bias, and people are almost too committed to their work and the brigade, driving*

*quite emotional personal responses to things and ultimately making it difficult to change.*

*Working as part of a team (watch). Eating, sleeping, training and saving lives with people with a common purpose and objective is very rewarding.*

*"I still feel I am treated differently either as a woman or as non-operational. I was harassed by my Team Leader and was told by management to not speak about it, I felt like a trouble maker for making a complaint.*



Some typical comments from firefighters we surveyed on the mess are below.

*"The Mess is run by the watch*

*"There is no rank in the mess – it's a place of free speech and a bit of banter is good, providing you respect each other"*

*"Traditionally we all sit and eat together and, regardless of whether you are part of the mess, you can bring your own food in. It brings us all together as a team, it might be the only time when we are all associating with each other, so it's nice*

*"I sometimes find the environment of the mess is used as a place to say whatever you want regardless of the organisation's values. I don't always feel comfortable as a white male, so it does make me think how a person who is from an underrepresented group may feel or someone who has joined in recent years and has come from a different environment"*

*"I don't feel I can be my authentic self [in the mess]. I don't always feel that the discussions are inclusive and that I can talk about my life outside of the job, as the subjects are not what I engage with whilst outside of work"*

*"I have mixed feelings on the mess culture" – "I like the fact that it brings us all together. However, depending on the watch it can be the stage for a dominant person, who may not be the most considerate individual"*

*"[In the mess] I have seen degrading behaviour go unchallenged, where it would be challenged in a different environment"*

*"I have seen bullying, racist, misogynistic, homophobic behaviour being made light of in the presence of managers and not be challenged, because it has occurred in the mess, however it would not be tolerated anywhere else.*

As these comments illustrate, the watch tends to be seen as a place that's almost 'outside the law' with regard to norms of behaviour. Before we embarked on this review, some senior figures were keen to emphasise the 'banter defence' in preliminary discussions we held to determine the terms of reference. In their view, due to the stressful nature of the work, there had to be a safe space where firefighters could 'let off steam' in a jovial way.

However, once we started the review others were very quick to acknowledge that there must be a clear line between banter and bullying. Where light hearted badinage certainly has its place – and need – in any

stressful environment, it should not descend into vindictive bullying.

We heard some very good examples of how watches prevented this by talking to young trainees and asking them if, in the course of light teasing during conversations in the mess, they felt a line had been crossed. This ensured they were able to manage downtime 'joshing' in a respectful manner.

These examples helped show how a 'Good watch' would not allow the negative behaviours expressed above, as a bullying or toxic culture would not be tolerated because

# Case study – North Kensington Fire Station

## *“Our culture is our strength”*

North Kensington (NK) fire station is located on Ladbrooke Grove and close to Grenfell Tower. Widely recognised as a supportive station with a strong and diverse culture, it has a long waiting list of firefighters and officers who want to be stationed there. As part of our review’s station visits, we met with Green Watch to find out what they’re doing right.

### **Q: Why is there a big waiting list of people who want to be stationed at NK?**

A: “Our view is a good watch is a busy watch, we always find a reason to do stuff. We have an attitude that makes you want to come in to work – we like being at work and sometimes when you’re on leave you are always wondering what is happening and can’t wait to get back, because we enjoy each other’s company and serving the community.

We had two watch members transfer to another station so they could be closer to their homes, but within months they transferred back. They missed the professionalism and the community engagement that they all pride themselves on. There is also a very close network of staff on the station and retired members still meet up regularly and bond with old and new members.

### **Q: How important is the mess in setting your culture?**

A: “You have to treat the station almost as your own brigade. What we mean is, we can only really influence our own watch/station regardless of what is happening in

the LFB. On our watch and the station probably, there is a long standing expectation to follow the reputation that has existed from those that served before us. It has always been held in high regard and that’s why people wait years to get a chance to serve here.

“Everything we do starts in the mess, friendships, meaningful discussions about LFB life to real personal discussions where you can open up in a supportive environment. It is a place of sanctuary, a safe place where you are supported and can make real working relationships that last long after you’ve retired.

### **Q: Can people be themselves at work?**

A: “We are a diverse team not just in terms of personal characteristics, but in holding different views too. Any subject can be discussed, because we believe we often learn something from others. Watch members frequently raise things in their personal life experience as well as things that happen in the local NK community.

### **Q: How do you engage with the local community?**

A: We have always had a strong presence in the community and attend many local events while on and off duty. Many off duty firefighters from our station and that of neighbouring stations came to support us after Grenfell and we attended lots of events that went unreported. These range from “cookouts” to many silent vigils. We performed honour guards in full fire kit for those that were grieving, and it was well received.

## “There were fights and I nearly had my legs broken,” said one. “I’ve been urinated on, headbutted, had cold water poured over me. It was horrendous.”

of the intervention of others. This would not necessarily have to be by a manager, as firefighters bought into a culture that wanted the watch to be a respectful place where they grew together as a team. However, as a measure of how patchy good practice is, one member of a particularly supportive watch was quick to note that he would not want to be on another watch on the same station, “as it was like walking into the lion’s den, where there seemed to be no rules or respect.”

We heard plenty of examples of extreme bullying that took place on watches and some managers said they had been fortunate to get through the experience. “There were fights and I nearly had my legs broken,” said one. “I’ve been urinated on, headbutted, had cold water poured over me. It was horrendous.”

Other managers confirmed that there were no rules or respect in some watches and said they recognised there was resistance across LFB to having “difficult conversations” with staff.

*“As a manger I have had to raise issues of poor or underperformance of staff, this has on some occasions resulted in being accused of bullying and harassment, although no case of B&H has been found proven against me as I work within the guidance and ensure I am fair to my staff, during these period I have not felt supported. However, when I have raised concerns of poor or under performance of others with managers, there is a reluctance to action, which provides inconsistency in response and creates teams that have different levels of operating, dependent if poor performance is addressed or ignored. Ultimately generally LFB managers do not like difficult conversations or more importantly do not like the amount of work that comes from addressing poor performance. I believe this is one of the main reasons that unhealthy cultures start within teams, departments and station, if unaddressed by leaders.”*

However, the workplace culture obviously extends beyond the mess. When asked about the culture of the workplace, one senior manager made the point that “we are all equal on the fireground,” meaning all firefighters

Some other typical comments that illustrate this resistance and other problems associated with the work culture are below.

*“It’s more an organisation culture of (The old boys club) that needs to be addressed. It’s a bullying culture in essence which then prevents the correct course of action to be administered. It’s never going to be eradicated I’d imagine because people are more than happy to practice it, to get to where they want to be. “I still feel I am treated differently either as a woman or as non-operational. I was harassed by my Team Leader*

*and was told by management to not speak about it, I felt like a trouble maker for making a complaint.*

*“The bullying, sexism, racism, favouritism, the old fashioned traditions that are used to break your spirit, being treated like children, the secrecy of the management, the fear of speaking up, being blocked from development opportunities, managers that don’t like to be spoken to like adults, the LFB always ticking the boxes but never actually doing the right thing by people, the lack of inclusion, managers scared of their own shadows, lack of support when things go wrong etc.*

look the same - wearing full PPE and a BA set and most importantly, are not readily identifiable, so would be treated exactly the same with the same expectations.

That said, some considered that the role of a firefighter is a job for a particular type of person and “this job is not for everyone” and not everyone welcomed women on their watch, for example.

This type of feedback was common and pointed to a wider problem where a good number felt that there was little action taken by managers at the early stages of workplace conflict. If it was addressed at an early stage, it could have stopped things progressing to action being taken in the form of discipline.

As an indictment of a ‘look the other way’ management style, we were told that no action was frequently taken by managers on abuse and harassment. Instead it was treated as low level behaviour or considered to be ‘banter’.

In these discussions, bullying was a sensitive subject. One senior officer who was not condoning this form of behaviour conceded, “There has never been a golden time in this job. Bullying and harassment has always been here and always went on.”

We interviewed many firefighters who acknowledged that bullying happens – and can cause serious resentment, sickness, poor mental health and make people’s time at work very difficult.

When asked why this is allowed to occur at work with all the policies, training and structures in place, some of the responses were:

*“It’s poor training - in fact no real meaningful realistic training for managers or staff in regard to managing people*

*“Equality and diversity awareness training is a tick box exercise, which no one can even remember when they last did it!”*

*Compared to other professional organisations we are rubbish at dealing with bullying in any form, even if you are a white man, let alone being a woman, gay, black or just different.*

*Our main role is to save life and protect property, but some of our own people are left alone, to protect themselves at work from their colleagues.*

*We do not invest enough on our supervisory and middle managers; you only get out what you put in.*

*“It can be a very lonely place on a fire station if you are different.*

*“In my team we have a high turnover of staff, due to an uncomfortable environment.*

*“I’ve been here for 8 years and still do not feel I can report it.*

*Closeness of managers makes it very difficult to report it. No confidentiality.*

*"There is a lot of family relations within my place of work and no confidentiality.*

*"The environment I work in is toxic, they take pride in being a watch that can say and do what they want, and the manager is no different. I cannot wait to finish my development and go to another watch.*

*"I think the Commissioner's comment, where he stated, that he wouldn't encourage his daughter to join the operational environment as a Firefighter, sums up the workplace culture. It speaks for itself, and he's been here a long time, he knows what it's like, but what has he done about it?"*

*As a senior officer, I find it hard to understand that in 2022, we still have watches/stations that we cannot comfortably send a person from an underrepresented group to work, because we fear for their welfare and have to really scrutinise some postings.*

*Good watches have a positive and healthy culture, but a negative watch just separates, divides and no one wants to be there, so very little gets done. It's a horrible place to work.*

*"Time in, at a place of work is a subculture, so regardless of who is formally in charge, the senior hand/person often dictates the behaviour or poor/good leadership.*

We received a vast amount of feedback on bullying and it continually pointed to a culture where managers frequently turned a blind eye to bullying. This also extended to casual sexism, misogyny and racism, which is explored in more detail further on in this report.





# LFB Morale

As our survey showed, over 40 per cent of respondents admitted to feeling frustrated by their job – and, in interviews, there was a clear view that morale is very low. The reasons below were stated as key factors.

1. The operational establishment has been lying very low for almost two years. This creates resentment, but does not affect the commitment and professionalism towards the public and the role of protecting and serving London.
2. Extremely poor pay and conditions in comparison to other professions
3. A regular failing on LFB management to provide fire cover daily, frequently having up to 39 fire engines/appliances not available due to shortage of staff for the last 18 months
4. No forward planning in regard to recruitment
5. Constant staff movement to cover for shortages ( Out duties) causing a financial negative impact on staff
6. Poor work/life balance due to all of the above
7. Increase stress due to poor forward planning and recruitment of staff
8. Increased sick levels
9. No leave availability
10. Very little recognition of the important role we do
11. "The only reason the majority of us are here is because we are tied into the pension....and that is not that great anymore.

Other views that help further explain the low morale include:

*We're unable to do the job with confidence because of a lack of resources and effective trainer led training at venues that really test us; we don't retrain staff returning from long stints away from operational duties (detachments, pregnancies etc). Our officers are responsible for incident command at emergencies, risk management on the ground, HR, management and discipline of a number of staff with varying needs, training our staff (when most of us have just learned it from a computer package and are trying to remember how we were taught), targets like fitting smoke alarms, community fire safety hours etc. More stuff is being piled on and we're just told to make it work, we want to do our best but honestly don't know if we're doing certain things right and we get audited instead of CPD/regular training, things are improving but I still hear more reasons why things are too difficult to do than just trying anyway. We move challenging staff around rather than deal with issues like re-training or re-deploying but not before leaving managers and colleagues exhausted and disillusioned.*



# Industrial relations

The relationship between LFB and the unions has had its ups and downs in recent years. As part of his evidence to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, former Commissioner Ron Dobson reflected that some of his decisions had created an ‘us and them’ relationship between the Brigade and Unions and there will be many examples of difference and disagreement throughout its history which will have strengthened a complex industrial relations climate. This climate underpins a framework that can be seen to focus on resolving difference and division as opposed to one that addresses the common goals that should exist between the Brigade and its unions in improving peoples working lives.

This can underpin some of the competitive behaviours referenced earlier in this review document which at their worse can reinforce impatient, aggressive and hostile behaviours between both sides.

Under the joint protocol for good industrial relations in the fire and rescue service produced by the National Joint Council (NJC), LFB recognises five trade unions.

- The FBU: exclusive bargaining rights for Firefighters, Leading Firefighters, Sub Officers and Station Officers, within the Joint Committee for Firefighters (JCF)
- The FBU and FOA: joint bargaining rights for Station Commanders and Group Commanders, within the Joint Committee for Middle Managers (JCMM)
- GMB and UNISON: joint bargaining rights for FRS staff, within the Joint Committee for FRS staff (JCFRS)
- GMB, UNISON and FBU: joint bargaining rights for Control staff, within the Joint Committee for Control staff (JCC)
- Prospect: exclusive bargaining rights for the Top Management Group, operational and non-operational, within the TMG Consultative Forum

For operational staff, 80% of the workforce is a member of FBU (90-95% union density). There are no exact numbers on membership as members now pay for their membership via direct debit and not through payroll. Non-operational staff are members of GMB and Unison (50-60% union density). FBU has good formal structures, a monthly joint committee and a good informal relationship with LFB. It is a very strong union that believes that nothing important should happen without its agreement, so changes can take a long time. GMB and Unison engage in more ‘normal’ consultation processes. They are politically connected but not as strong as FBU. They don’t have a very high union density which means that they don’t have as much bargaining power as FBU. The unions are consulted on a range of issues according to LFC’s Industrial Relations Procedures. For example, in a review of the performance appraisal system and training/development. Unions and management share common objectives. They want a workforce that is motivated, trained, developed, with good health and safety. But sometimes the view is that the unions are too rigid; they don’t accept what management thinks to be logical arguments and requests.

As key stakeholders to this review, we interviewed representatives of all the five recognised trade unions. Some of their concerns around the culture of LFB are as follows:



- **Nepotism is a problem:** the issue of predominantly white officers retiring and then returning was frowned upon. It is favouritism and never favours people of colour. Similarly the issue of intermarriages was also raised in the same breath – as it also amounts to favouritism and will always lead to rapid promotion for those that know others in the service.
- **Only the brave submit grievances:** People have frequently resigned because of the way they have been treated and LFB is losing talent because of the way it treats people.
- **There is an ‘us v them’ culture between senior management and the rest:** This is damaging to LFB and the ‘white shirts’ can be too aloof.
- **There are a disproportionate number of black trainees in disciplinary hearings:** A review was commissioned after a trade union raised concerns about this.
- **The LFB need to learn from how the army have brought more women into their profession:** The LFB have been left behind in this respect and need to do more to ensure the profession is accessible to women.
- **Soft skills are not valued or taught:** Staff are expected to use them when they engage with communities but many have poor people skills.
- **HR is at fault for ensuring that staff do not have a sense of identity or belonging:** A union official said that HR treated staff as “just statistics” and was not a people-focussed department.
- **Transformation strategy is divorced from the realities of staff and too high level:** “It is so high level that nobody else needs to know is their view. We don’t even know what a transformed LFB will look like or should look like.”
- **There is an over dependency on senior roles:** A union’s view was that there was a lot of micromanagement in the service and this does not empower people. “They are fearful of decision making and the risk of consequences.”
- **LFB is sitting on a mental health timebomb:** A union believes there is a lot of undiagnosed PTSD in the service. “We need to rescue ourselves as well as rescue others.”
- **LFB staff are not seen as part of the communities:** Most can’t afford to live in London and to 40% of staff have second jobs. This will get worse. New trainees are left with £1,476 a month and that barely covers their living accommodation, never mind food or anything else.
- **There is no path for anybody who wants to progress:** “It depends on your line manager who may leave you completely in limbo.”
- **Young people are now prepared to walk out:** “They used to stick around even if they were badly treated. But that has changed. They are prepared to walk out and that will lead to a massive retention problem.”



**Recruitment campaigns were unrealistic in that they did not reflect the reality of the job and attracted unsuitable applicants as a result.**

# People Services

Our review recognises that HR structures have an essential role to play in determining the culture of any organisation and People Services at LFB was frequently mentioned in interviews.

This department is responsible for an employee's journey in LFB, from recruitment, selection and induction to retention (e.g. training and development, corporate culture, management style, work-life balance, rewards and benefits), performance management, managing

employee relations, equality, diversity and inclusion, discipline and grievances, and termination/dismissal.

It is also responsible for planning staffing needs across the organisation and for systematically collecting and analysing data that feeds into its HR strategy. It is for this reason that interviews with key staff in People Services were conducted and relevant documents were analysed.



### Key findings

The department is currently undergoing major restructuring and is in the process of implementing a new operating model based on Centres of Expertise, Service Centres / HR Operations and HR Business Partners.

This is needed as there was an acknowledgement that the department had traditionally been non-strategic and disconnected from parts of the organisation (especially fire stations). To People Services' own admission, the old operating model had limitations and was out of kilter with best practice in HR functions across the Greater London Authority (GLA) family and in wider public and private sectors. The restructuring is a step in the right direction, although there is still a great work to be done for it to become a strategic partner in the organisation.

In interviews, criticism centred on the fact that People Services was ineffective, inefficient, slow and people were not always sure who does what. Staff in the wider organisation did not know what People Services did and they were accused of not understanding the world of firefighters and failing to take a lead on wellbeing. There was also fierce criticism that the department enabled a non-transparent recruitment process that was unfair and rooted in cronyism.

"There's no point asking People Services for help," said one firefighter in a view that was widely shared, "because they are seen as in cahoots with the managers and do what they say. They're not objective or focussed on your wellbeing. They're here to punish you."

Another added..."they have been aware of the issues around unfair treatment and bias towards all staff groups and fail to monitor and put systems in place to protect people. I have been here too long, and cannot see the change coming."

Many of these views suggested that People Services was perceived as solely a disciplinary department that was unable to deliver key HR functions relating to employee development and supporting health and wellbeing.

Example comments include:

*"I raised concerns with HR and line manger regarding the stress it was causing me being placed on courses on off duty days. I was ignored and threatened with discipline.*

*"HR offered no support when I was going through a split with my partner and had child care issues.*

*"It was pointless, I am a manager I need support, help and guidance from HR. I got nothing when I asked for direction. I don't bother anymore.*

As a measure of how trust in People Services was in short supply, our survey showed that 53 per cent of respondents were not confident in talking about issues that concern them at work with HR.

Our interviews, research and analysis concluded that the department is, for the most part, lagging in terms of internal HR expertise due to the way the function is currently staffed and because of a lack of investment in developing staff within their areas of specialism. Furthermore, HR data analytics driving People Services strategies, policies and practices are lacking sophistication. There is not a HR data analytics strategy in place and, when HR data is available, analyses are descriptive and disconnected from other sources of data and, as such, are unlikely to lead to meaningful actions.

We also found there was an excessive amount of HR policies, which were not always clear to understand and which were devolved to various People Services functions. This led to policies often being disconnected from one another. We also noted that there was not a workforce planning strategy in place nor co-ordination of activities to drive a strategy in this respect.

People Services provided some important data around staff leaving LFB and we found that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff were disproportionately completing exit questionnaires in comparison to their White counterparts. Bullying/harassment, lack of promotion opportunities, unfair treatment, poor management/ leadership and a lack of training were the common resignation reasons among leavers.

Discipline and grievance data did not allow for an in-depth analysis. However, from the available data, BAME staff are more likely to raise a grievance and more than twice as likely to be subject to disciplinary hearings in comparison to their White counterparts. Although the discipline and grievance policies highlight the processes for each, there is no consideration as to the root cause of these issues and, therefore, it is unlikely that the existing discipline and grievance policies will equalise BAME staff's experience with their White counterparts.

## Background to changes

The People Services Directorate has approximately 104 staff in its structure. This department was created in 2018 under the Directorate of Finance and Contractual Services. The appointed Director for People Services has responsibility for developing a comprehensive People Strategy with the aim of supporting the delivery of LFB's objectives. These objectives have been under review following the findings from Phase 1 of the Grenfell

Tower Inquiry (2019) and the findings of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) (2019), both of which led to the organisation admitting the need to articulate a focused strategic direction. In addition, the London Fire Commissioner conducted an internal review which identified areas of work that required change and improvement. As a result, a Transformation Delivery Plan (TDP) was developed and agreed by the Commissioner's Board. The TDP sets priorities under four strategic pillars; people-related priorities were already incorporated in the plan and included the areas of leadership, development and talent, wellbeing, diversity and inclusion. The currently agreed strategic priorities for People Services are:

***a. Leadership:** We will place a premium on leadership skills and will invest in leadership at all levels.*

***b. Diversity & Inclusion:** We will foster and embed a culture of togetherness so that every member of staff feels respected and valued regardless of their gender, sexuality, colour of skin, race or religion. Everyone will feel able to bring their whole self to work, feeling a sense of belonging in the Brigade because they can be themselves.*

***c. Developing our long-term strategy:** Our long-term strategy is to become a forward-thinking service led organisation with communities at the heart of our delivery. Our priority over the next twelve months will be to develop and launch our Community Risk Management Plan, which covers the period of our strategy from April 2022 to March 2026.*

***d. Operational Excellence:** We will build on the delivery of the Phase 1 GTI and HMI recommendations and our TDP. Through continuous improvement across our operational and support functions we will strive for excellence and efficiency in all we deliver."*



In addition, the refresh of the Brigade’s Risk Register at corporate, directorate and departmental level has meant that People Services feed heavily into the People Directorate Risk Register (responsible for 8/12 risks). To mitigate these risks, the People Directorate also has five people priorities:

*“a. Leadership - Our People will be well led with the leadership behavioural framework of compassion, togetherness and accountability being the means by which people are recruited, promoted and rewarded in the Brigade*

*b. Training, Development and Talent - Our People will be well trained and developed so that people can maximise their talent and fulfil their true potential in the Brigade*

*c. Safety and Wellbeing - Our People will be safe and feel that their physical and mental wellbeing is supported at all times by the Brigade*

*d. Employee Engagement - Our People will be well informed, listened to, and be engaged in decisions which affect their day to day work in the Brigade*

*e. Togetherness - Our People will be confident that through our work on togetherness they can bring their true authentic selves to work every day in the Brigade of which are either led by or involve significant contribution from People Services.”*

To underpin the above work, the Brigade has recently launched a new behavioural framework which is currently being embedded: “The service that HR provides and its working relationship with the business must support the behaviours of togetherness, compassion and accountability. For example, enabling managers to

take accountability for their decisions and behave in a compassionate manner, rather than relying heavily on HR”. LFB has also articulated a Togetherness strategy and policy which build on four pillars: building a culture of belonging, being inspired by difference, being at the centre of London and their communities and delivering excellence through inclusion. This strategy underpins and enables the TDP for the Brigade, particularly the goal to improve diversity and inclusion across the Brigade. The strategy is aligned with their organisational purpose, “trusted to serve and protect London” and a long-term vision, “we will be a dynamic, forward-looking organisation of fully engaged people at the centre of the communities we serve, adapting to the needs of London”.

The current Assistant Director of People Services, who started in post in November 2020, has been developing a strategy and a future Target Operating Model (TOM). This work has identified strengths of the People Services Directorate, but also “demonstrated that the current operating model has significant limitations in its ability to deliver the organisational priorities...”

This has led to a proposal to change the current operating model (see Table 1) to a new TOM (see Table 2).



**Table 1. Current operating model**

<p>“16. People Services is currently responsible for the following key functions:</p> <p>a. <b>The employee lifecycle:</b> from recruitment outreach to processing leavers. This includes providing advice to staff regarding employment matters</p> <p>b. <b>Advice on HR casework to managers:</b> including discipline, grievance, sickness absence</p> <p>c. <b>HR policies:</b> reviewing and formulating new policies.</p> <p>d. <b>Industrial Relations:</b> working with representative bodies covering strategic and day-to-day management of the Brigade’s industrial relations function.</p> <p>e. <b>Counselling and Trauma Services:</b> contributing to mental health and wellbeing through confidential counselling; trauma prevention interventions and providing mental health support and advice.</p> <p>f. <b>Wellbeing:</b> responsible for the development of a wellbeing strategy for the London Fire Commissioner, encompassing psychological, physical and social wellbeing support for all employees. Also providing fitness, and tailored wellbeing advice and support.</p> <p>g. <b>Talent and Performance</b> - designing and implementing processes that help support good quality performance and talent management at the Brigade.</p>	<p>h. <b>Culture Change, covering</b> -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leadership Development – creating a culture where people are well led and where leadership capability is developed for all our people.</li> <li>- Diversity and Inclusion – creating a culture where people can be themselves, they feel like they belong, where difference is celebrated, and diversity improves everything we do.</li> <li>- Coaching and Mentoring Service - supporting our people with coaching and mentoring to improve their ability to be successful.</li> <li>- Learning Support – helping individuals, teams and the organisation adapt around different neurodiverse learning needs.</li> <li>- Outreach – to attract, retain and support a diverse group of people to have successful fulfilling careers within LFB.</li> <li>- Cultural Change - providing strategic support to the organisation where issues arise to improve and change our culture.</li> </ul> <p>i. <b>Workforce Planning/Data Analytics</b> - providing data analysis and reporting services on a wide range of People Services data.</p> <p>17. The current operating model for the department involves a staffing headcount of 103 people divided into nine functions, primarily clustered around topic area rather than skillset or customer group and supported by a small Business Support team. All teams engage with staff and the majority engage with line managers, Directors and senior leaders.” (People Services Strategy, pp.5-6)</p>
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**Table 2. Target Operating Model (TOM)**

Based on three core elements

<p><i>“a. Centres of Expertise: small teams of HR experts with specialist knowledge of leading-edge HR solutions. The role of centres of excellence is to deliver business advantage through HR innovations in areas such as reward, diversity and inclusion, wellbeing, leadership, talent and performance, staff engagement.</i></p>
<p><i>b. Service centres/HR Operations: deliver transactional services relating to the employee lifecycle from recruitment to onboarding, payroll and all employee administration. This function often also includes a dedicated ‘casework’ team who provide expert advice to line managers in dealing with complex HR matters such as discipline and grievances. Their role is to provide efficient HR administration which delivers a positive employee experience.</i></p>
<p><i>c. HR Business Partners (HRBP): senior and experienced people professionals who work closely with business leaders or line managers, usually embedded in the business unit, influencing, steering and implementing both the business and people strategy by aligning HR capabilities across the whole organisation. HRBPs customise HR solutions to their business areas, and act as a strategic partner to business leaders, advising on matters related to people strategy, talent and organisational development.” (People Services Strategy, pp.8-9)</i></p>
<p>Line manager has primary accountability for HR work, with HR providing expert advice</p>
<p>Supported by effective HR systems</p>
<p>Key building blocks: structure, skills, systems and governance (Phase 1 of change is focused on structure and skills)</p>
<p>Business partner team would not be responsible for dealing with HR issues regarding individuals. These would be the responsibility of HR operations, either via HR Services or a dedicated ‘casework’ team providing expertise in managing complex HR cases (e.g. discipline, grievances).</p>

The TOM is implemented in 4 phases. “Phase 1 – set up senior positions and HR Business Partner teams; Phase 2 – detailed design, transitioning current functions and teams to the new model; Phase 3 – Full transition of current functions to new with transition period; Phase 4 (tbc) – full model implemented”. At the time of the Review, the implementation was on Phase 2 (December 2021 to June 2022)

People Services staff and customer feedback obtained during the implementation of the TOM revealed numerous issues with the existing model. These can be summarised as:

- Too many policies, not clearly written, processes take too long
- People Services’ staff time taken for administrative tasks such as drafting letters to line managers, chairing ER meetings and occupational health (OH) case conferences.
- Basic training is not available to line managers on a variety of topics (e.g. monitoring periods, special/parental leave, travel claims, discipline, grievance processes, management investigations). This leads to a significant volume of queries to PS.
- Line managers apply policies differently at their discretion.
- People do not know what People Services offers, how it is structured and how to access support.
- Line managers do not feel able to take decisions locally with the support of People Services to improve their HR metrics (e.g. absence, sickness, satisfaction, leavers)
- People Services staff need upskilling in a variety of areas.

- Decision makers are not clear (People Services vs. line managers)
- Employees and line managers need to have access to more resources, advice and guidance when they are off shift.

A further area highlighted through the interviews with People Services staff relates to making this service known throughout LFB and particularly in fire stations. Staff do not always know what People Services is and what it does. Fire station staff do not always look at Hotwire to learn about changes in the organisation because they are not desk-based. However, there is a wider issue of engagement here to be addressed as often fire station staff do not engage with the wider organisation.

### HR expertise within People Services

In the past, the HR function was largely overseen by non-HR specialists. Currently, out of approximately 121 staff working in People Services, less than 35 per cent have HR related professional qualifications (e.g. educational via MA/MSc or professional via the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development – CIPD). The HR expertise of staff is mainly through experience, either by working within various functions within People Services or transferring from other non-operational posts within LFB. In terms of developing staff in HR knowledge, there is scarce investment in developing staff in non-operational roles, and this includes developing staff in People Services posts. This is acknowledged by People Services as they openly admit a need to “Improve capability of staff within People Services: Feedback from respondents demonstrated a desire for People Services staff to be upskilled in a variety of areas.”

This skills deficit urgently needs addressing at LFB. If the majority of staff that make up the function responsible

for driving cultural change through the design and delivery of new HR systems, policies and practices do not have professional HR expertise within their areas of HR specialism and are not being developed in this respect, then all efforts to create a new culture will be seriously undermined. Building a new culture does not only require expert knowledge in HR systems, policies and practices, but also the ability to implement any changes and initiate new ones for continuous improvement.

### HR policies

People Services have 114 HR policies in place and these should be reviewed at least once every three years. Out of the 114 policies, 60 have already missed the set review dates and are due to be reviewed (including 43 which should have been reviewed between 2018-2021). However, there is currently a major review undertaken in most HR areas (including in discipline, grievance and training/development) due to the re-shape of People Services.

The policies are owned by different teams within People Services, with the responsibility for HR policy previously sitting with the Head of Employee Relations and HR Advice and now sitting with the Head of Culture and Organisational Development. Policies are not well connected between them and there is no proper overview at top People Services level. When a policy is created or reviewed, the process involves a consultation with unions and employee support groups, neglecting other stakeholders such as the People Services helpdesk and line managers. When a policy is updated, this is not communicated in any way. It is only when a new policy is created that this is communicated through Hotwire and through briefing sessions in stations. This lack of

communication is one of the reasons why staff frequently call the People Services helpdesk to find out information about a policy.

### Workforce planning

LFB is facing significant challenges in attracting and retaining staff, and this includes non-operational staff such as in People Services where positions are mainly filled internally. As an example, in the current restructuring, we looked at five People Services vacancies and noted that three were recruited internally and the other two were still available because external candidates either dropped out during the ineffective recruitment process or because they were poached by competitors.

In terms of workforce planning, there is no specialist software being used and this does not enable People Services to effectively plan for workforce needs. This issue is further complicated by the lack of training and development provided to the workforce planning team.

Workforce planning is done in a fragmented manner (split between People Services, Establishment Performance Team, Central Operations and Learning and Professional Development) and not as one 'whole'. As a result, there is no overall workforce planning strategy although there are monthly meetings to coordinate actions. HR data analytics would have helped in the development of a workforce planning strategy, but such data is also scarce.

Leavers/exit data for the period 2018-2022 that was provided for the purposes of this review only provided a surface analysis of questionnaires completed (broken into shared or not shared with manager and into exit interviews requested or exit interview declined).

There is an aggregate analysis by gender and ethnicity and also an aggregate analysis by reason for leaving.

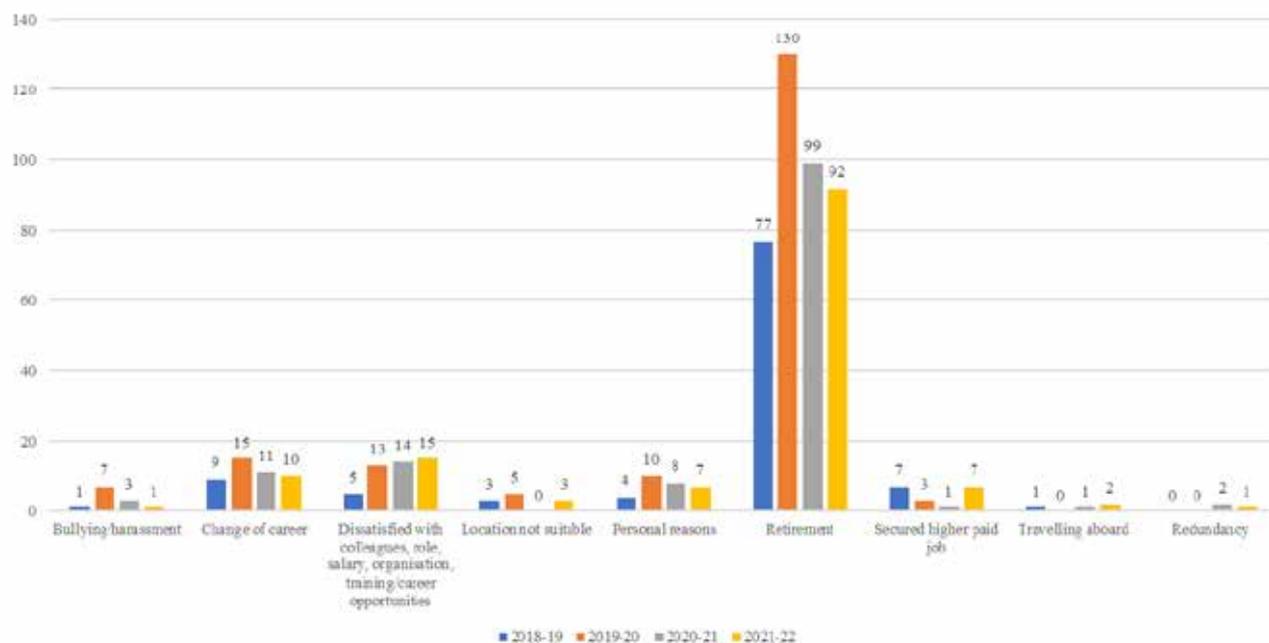


However, there is no in-depth comparative analysis into reasons for leaving combining, for example, gender-ethnicity-occupational group data. In addition, other demographic analyses, such as by age, sexual orientation and religious beliefs are missing.

To gain more insight into the reasons for leaving and impact this is having on LFB, appropriate analyses should include a calculation of labour turnover rates per occupational group (and a second-order breakdown of key posts/functions within each occupational group) and then a calculation of labour turnover per gender, per ethnicity, per age, per sexual orientation etc. for each. Comparative analyses should also be conducted to compare experience

between different occupational groups, different genders, different ethnicities etc. For example, identifying if women or BAME staff experience life in the organisation differently from men or White staff. This will enable the People Services function to monitor EDI and pinpoint areas of concern. It will also enable HR to monitor general issues that may be specific to one part of the organisation. A comparative presentation of the aggregate analysis per year is provided in Table 3 below. Table 3 demonstrates that most leavers who complete the exit questionnaire leave because of retirement. However, the data on bullying/harassment and dissatisfaction with colleagues, the role, the organisation or with the training/career opportunities are serious reasons that require further

Table 3. Leavers/exit aggregate analysis (2018-22)



Note: based on #18; 2018-19 data from May 2018; 2021-22 data until Feb 2022.

investigation. Yet, an in-depth analysis into the latter reasons is not conducted.

We spoke to a number of women and people of colour who were in the process of leaving LFB due to bullying, racism and a lack of opportunity to develop their career. It is a serious cause for concern that, at a time when recruitment is challenging, better data capture is not a priority. Equally worrying was that a number of BAME staff said they were not offered an exit interview/questionnaire.

To examine these concerns further, the open-ended data (reason for leaving: Other) from the anonymised exit questionnaire is useful. Table 4 summarises the key reasons for leaving per occupational group during

the 2018-22 period and reveals that poor management/ leadership, lack of transparency in processes, unfair treatment, lack of promotional opportunities and lack of training are key themes running across all groups. Unfortunately, the small sample size in each occupational group does not allow for any meaningful further analysis per gender or per ethnicity. However, the following can be noted: Out of the 38 responses across occupational groups, 22 were from women and 10 were from BAME staff. This means that the findings presented in Table 4 are adequately capturing women's experiences at LFB, although the same cannot be said about BAME staff who seem to be disproportionately completing the exit questionnaire in comparison to their White counterparts. However, this, in itself, is an interesting finding and there is a need to investigate why this is the case and how more views from BAME staff can be captured in future.

*“Being told by leadership within the very department that is responsible for the current and future safety of its members, that as an organisation we are ‘currently a couple of years away from being able to do anti-racism work’ is incredibly worrying. It is a permission statement that says that it is ok to carry on as we are because we are simply not ready. The Commissioner stated that people of colour are more likely to fail courses, more likely to be disciplined, more likely to be asked to repeat training at training school, less likely to be promoted and less likely to hold senior positions in LFB. Has the organisation considered whether people of colour are happy to wait ‘a couple of years’ regardless of their documented and evidenced suffering?”*

**An open letter from a black firefighter who resigned from LFB in 2022.**

### Recruitment and selection

Recruitment checks prior to making an offer include criminal records check and driver's licence check. Cultural fit testing takes place in the interview and through a role play that assesses behaviours. Line managers are not involved in interviews and the panel is a mix of uniform and non-uniform staff with the aim of having a diverse panel. Following the interview, the next steps include fitness test, medical, offer stage (contract), 6-8 weeks training and induction. Insufficient recruitment/selection data are kept, and more analysis needs to be done.

There is training provided for recruitment assessors to make them aware of non-discriminatory recruitment practices. The purpose of this training is to gain knowledge and awareness of the different types of bias that impact assessing and hiring candidates, reduce bias and make fairer judgements in hiring by objective decision making, and learn the skills to become an



Table 4. Resignation reasons 2018-22, open-ended data, anonymised exit questionnaire

Occupational Group (number of responses)	Details
Control (1)	Bullying/harassment; no career promotion; unfair treatment; poor management/ leadership
FRS (27)	No career promotion; no support when on sick leave; poor management/leadership; poor work-life balance; disability discrimination; bullying/harassment; isolation; lack of transparency/unfairness in internal processes (e.g. recruitment, promotion); lack of training received; unrealistic performance management targets; unchallenging role; toxic culture; politics within the team; inconsistent processes; inadequate or no training;lack of mentoring; pressure to meet performance targets;inadequate induction; lack of meaningful direction; heavy workload; frustration; poor emotional wellbeing
Operational (10)	No career promotion; poor management/leadership; unfair selection, promotion, and development; failure to acknowledge and reward good performance; threat of discipline; poor work-life balance; difficult watch environment; lack of structured training; unsupportive organisation

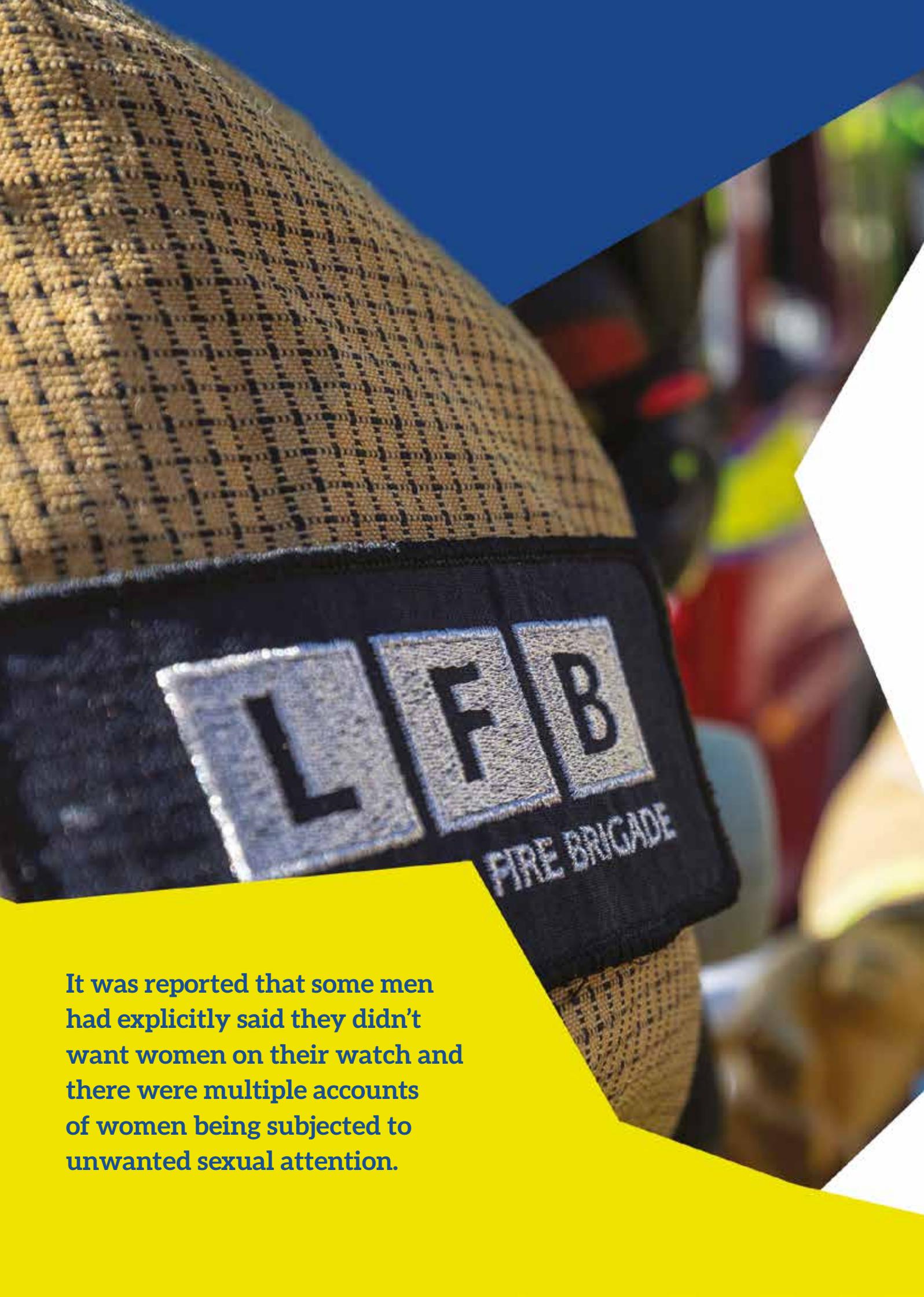
effective interviewer.

However, this was one area where there were consistent complaints among a wide range of staff that the process lacked transparency and was mired in nepotism and cronyism. Complainants said other candidates were favoured by having interview questions shared in advance of the process.

A similar concern that became a running theme throughout discussions was that recruitment campaigns were unrealistic in that they did not reflect the reality of the job and attracted unsuitable applicants as a result. *“Advertising needs to be more realistic in showing what the ‘darker’ side of the job entails. Too many people join not*

*realising we go to suicide and fatal accidents. We have a duty of care to make sure the job description is accurate.”*

*“I feel the LFB needs to be more honest with what working for the LFB will actually entail. Previously campaigns seemed to centre around cups of tea with the community and gloss over the incredibly physical and dangerous work a FF has to do at operational incidents.”*



**It was reported that some men had explicitly said they didn't want women on their watch and there were multiple accounts of women being subjected to unwanted sexual attention.**

## Diversity and inclusion

**While public services are at their best when they reflect the diversity of the country as a whole and are able to understand the needs of different communities, our fire and rescue services have failed to embrace diversity in their workforce.**

Latest figures show that in 2020, 95 per cent of firefighters in England were white (out of those whose ethnicity was known) and this has long been a source of criticism.

In 2017, the then Home Office minister with responsibility for policing and the fire service, Brandon Lewis, said: “Any workforce should represent the community that it serves, but in fire this simply is not the case. I’ve been to fire stations where I noticed more diversity in the fire hoses used than I have in the workforce.”

In London this is especially pertinent, as the capital is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world.

Over the course of our review, it has become apparent that LFB is seeking to be more representative of the communities it serves, and has done some good work in recruiting more diverse staff. However, attracting a more

diverse workforce and providing training is only part of the issue. Support to develop emotional intelligence and encourage colleagues to engage in meaningful conversations without fear of offending is required as when things do not work out; it is generally about an inability to communicate.

We received considerable feedback around the issue of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, particularly in relation to race and gender, and this was in the form of challenging interviews and robust online comments.

From the outset, our online survey attracted strong feedback and, while many spoke of how the LFB had “come a long way since the 1980s”, there were clear tensions around the diversity and inclusion agenda. Over 80 per cent of respondents said that the LFB had communicated information about its diversity goals and a further 77 per cent said that diversity and inclusion were key priorities for the LFB, but among some, there was a failure to acknowledge racism and a resistance to diversity training.



Example comments include:

*“Everyone is equal, all part of the same family, the more the brigade tries to push diversity and inclusion down people’s throats, however, the more divisive it could potentially become.*

*“I believe that the LFB discriminates against the average white male within the organisation.*

*“The minority seem to be catered for, We need to stop creating sections and dividing people into minority. As long as the person next to you can do the job who cares what gender or race etc you are. We are one team on watches.*

*While management is broadly committed to serving the needs of all employees, I believe that some groups are allowed to get away with flawed behaviour due to a sense that it is easier to bypass them than take them on. This can be due to a mixture of union links, time in service, or knowing the right people.*

*“I’m a working class white male, I don’t feel important.*

There are strong historical roots to this resistance, but one reason we identified as a contributory factor was the fact that, in interviews, it was patently obvious that the benefits of diversity were not fully understood. Diversity training was seen a tick box exercise and a target to achieve. It was something they had to do, rather than something which would help LFB become a better service.

For example, some of the people who complained about LFB placing too much emphasis on diversity also complained about LFB’s failure to recruit more firefighters. When it was pointed out that greater diversity could aid recruitment, as many people

have traditionally not looked at the fire services as a viable career because they don’t see people like them represented in fire stations, complainants acknowledged that they hadn’t realised this benefit.

Worryingly in too many instances we saw diversity framed as an ‘us versus them’ narrative rather than a social and operational benefit.

Others noted that there was still a failure to properly reach many communities across London to make them realise that the Brigade was accessible to minorities.

*“We don’t have an understanding as an organisation on what diversity actually means and how it affects us, it’s not hardwired in, it comes in cycles then departs. We don’t reflect the local community as we don’t give a true reflection of the job. We run centrally led outreach and only briefly engage local stations. We need to make local stations places where people visit and find out about the job. We need our FFs to talk to people and talk about the job, it needs to be local and engaging but also we need to be aware that in some parts of London the wages provided are not sustainable in London.”*

From the perspective of ethnic minorities, there was a view that a true culture of diversity was not embedded in LFB because “there are currently no non-white TMGs or directors and diversity is seen less, the higher in grade and rank you go (FRS and Ops).”

Others expressed a similar view.

*“It’s hard to see how the organisation sees diversity as a priority when the management in my team are all white, straight males with a military background. I think the recruitment process is not inclusive, with its prescriptive requirements, there is no space to hire people from local communities who may not have had those opportunities.”*

Sadly, the majority of BAME staff and women that we interviewed all reported institutional failures with



regards to supporting equality and diversity duties. Examples included the lack of opportunity afforded to BAME staff particularly and women in comparison to their white counterparts in areas such as promotion and reporting racial harassment and sexual harassment.

Similarly, the LFB rating on the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index is relatively low and we heard worrying examples of intolerance towards LGBTQIA staff. One example is cited below.

*"I think the brigade is complicit with homophobia and transphobia, the evidence for this is when I've been involved in making LGBTQ+ centred content for the brigade there were homophobic comments and replies on social media from fans of the page telling me to 'fuck off, stick to firefighting' and asking what the point of it was etc. In the wake of a bake sale that was held recently in Union Street for a trans day of awareness, the post received loads of transphobic abuse and harassment on social media - and the Brigade's official social media channels stayed silent and did not respond to the Internet trolling. This left members of the brigade to have to defend themselves on their own personal social media handles."*

There were also considerable challenges around neurodiversity within the Brigade and it was apparent that many staff with dyslexia and other needs were not supported.

In LFB's Organisational Learning and Professional Development Strategy it acknowledges that the current approach to learning, training and development was not promoting gender, ethnicity equality or supporting those with neurodiversity.

*"Currently, there is a lack of a structured approach to learning and development for FRS staff leading to a potential for a disproportionate indirectly negative effect on women who make up the majority of this staff group... A more*

*varied and flexible structure to learning inputs will have a positive impact on those with neurodiversity and varied thinking and learning styles... The data suggests that people from BAME backgrounds have worse outcomes through the current training approach."*

We asked LFB for figures on the number of staff within the Brigade who were neurodiverse and were told that the number of staff diagnosed with a neurodiverse condition, and known to Learning Support as at 5 August 2022 is 506. A further 128 files are open for staff who are either awaiting a diagnostic assessment or neurodiversity screening making a total of 634.

However, LFB acknowledged that these figures are not secure and do not accurately reflect the number of neurodivergent staff in LFB for a variety of reasons, which include the fact that there is no electronic system in place to record data, recruitment do not always inform Learning Support when neurodivergent staff join the Brigade and apprentice firefighters who declare neurodiversity during training but do not forward their diagnostic assessment report and experience no difficulties during training, or subsequently may not be in their records.

Many suggested the number of neurodivergent staff at LFB was much higher than their records indicate and that the Brigade needed to prioritise addressing this important knowledge gap.

LFB admitted that they were experiencing an increase in the numbers of staff who suspect or have been diagnosed with Autism or have ADD/ADHD and that they had recently discovered that 28% of Firefighter Apprentices presented as neurodiverse.

We are aware that Learning Support have delivered a number of Neurodiversity Workshops and Awareness sessions, which seems to be improving awareness in the

workforce, although incidents were still reported to us where people with dyslexia were routinely bullied and humiliated by being made to do impromptu 'lectures'.

This was all the more troubling given that it was stated at Jaden Matthew Francois-Esprit's Inquest that he had not received learning support from LFB for his dyslexia.

During a focus group with key support staff, we learned that there were many neurodiverse individuals receiving extensive support across LFB with demonstrable benefits. However, it was concerning to hear that some line managers do not complete Learning Support Authorisation forms - and despite sending multiple reminders and telephoning they refuse to engage.

We heard multiple cases of bullying and the targeting of ethnic minorities and women - and while these were distressing to hear, the human consequences of this behaviour were much worse. It left a clear trail of psychological harm which manifested itself in low self-worth, suicidal thoughts and mental health problems.

Rather than list the many complaints in relation to racist and sexist behaviour, we have focussed on the impact they had on staff and the psychological impact it is having on the workforce.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic colleagues largely felt that they must work twice as hard to be heard and seen. Data showed that they were more likely to be disciplined and less likely to be promoted and yet, in focus groups, they demonstrated high levels of pride in working for LFB.

Many spoke of their pride in wearing the uniform and serving their community.

*"You get much more respect driving a fire engine than a BMW or Mercedes in my community. It matters."*

In the course of our interviews, we recognised a strong awareness of the unsupportive mood across the Brigade. Campaigns such as 'Black Lives Matter' are not supported, including taking the knee, and this has a real impact on black staff who take this a personal affront. During the height of the tragic murder of George Floyd, the lack of support from LFB senior staff had a real and detrimental impact on black staff who did not feel supported and/or understood.

At times this would take a more disturbing turn, as we saw WhatsApp messages sent between watch members following the tragic death of basketball player Kobe Bryant and his daughter in a helicopter crash, which caused considerable distress to people of colour in the same watch. The post openly mocked the death of Bryant and the Station Officer in charge of the watch was a member of this WhatsApp group.

The fact that it was widely known that a Director of Communications had been dismissed for inappropriate comments relating to the feelings of people of colour was a further sign that there are problems at the top of LFB which do not show a firm commitment to diversity.

At the extreme end of the scale, we heard examples of clearly racist bullying that caused considerable distress. In one example, we heard from a black firefighter who had been subject to racist bullying on his watch, which culminated in someone putting a mock noose over his locker. In another example, we heard from a Muslim firefighter had been routinely bullied on his watch because of his faith.

As well as colleagues speaking to him in an Indian accent, they would routinely ask him about his "magic carpet" and make racist remarks such as "off to your rucksack training, it shouldn't be hard, all you have to do is pull the cord" when he was sent on training courses. When the firefighter in question returned from the Hajj pilgrimage



in Saudi Arabia, colleagues asked how his Al Qaeda training had gone? His line manager would regularly swear at him and curse Prophet Mohammed and his work colleagues put a piece of bacon in his sandwich.

When he transferred to another watch, the abuse continued and colleagues put a pork sausage in his pocket while he was washing the dishes. A terrorism hotline sticker was also placed on his locker. When he experienced a fatality, a Muslim Pakistani woman, in a fire and his colleagues made jokes about the body, this was the final straw.

After making several complaints that were dismissed, he began to suffer from depression and anxiety, and would later collapse at work and be admitted to hospital. He has since been diagnosed with PTSD and has confessed to having suicidal thoughts.

The above example demonstrates the impact of casual cruelty that is allowed to continue unchecked in some stations because managers consider racial abuse to be acceptable 'banter'. That complaints are frequently blocked by managers and not allowed to go anywhere because they don't deem such abuse to be racist means there is little protection or justice mechanisms for those on the receiving end of abuse.

Even firefighters working in supportive and inclusive teams were aware of examples where toxic culture persisted and felt that managers who turned a blind eye to this behaviour were harming the reputation of the Brigade.

There is considerable anger among some managers about a failure to clamp down on bullying and one said to us that "nothing will change until LFB is put in special measures". The same manager told us that promotion rounds that had taken place earlier this year had seen Assistant Commissioner (AC), Deputy Assistant

*Why are senior managers not managing these 'racist and misogynists' who cannot treat people with dignity and respect? They know who they are. Manage them, don't label the good ones.*

Commissioner (DAC) and Station Commanders (SC) have to take an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion test for the first time. The fact that there was a poor pass rate and a development plan introduced for ACs shows that management are still unable to actively demonstrate LFB's professed diversity values.

As further evidence of the resistance to cultural change, it was reported that there was considerable pushback from those seeking promotion, as they felt that they should not have been subjected to a separate EDI process. "They didn't feel they were ready for it and complained that it didn't follow the same framework that they are used to," explained an insider.

It should also be noted here that we carried out focus groups with black and white firefighters and there were plenty of examples of good leadership, where white firefighters were quick to challenge racist behaviour.

Since the death of Jaden, a group has been formed as a support network outside of the LFB to challenge racist behaviour. Made up of predominantly black firefighters but not solely, it also comprises of women and white firefighters who are supportive and recognise the challenges facing underrepresented groups within the LFB, particularly the lack of support for Black, Asian and other visible minorities and women firefighters.

A white officer within this group told us: "Racism within the LFB won't change, unless white firefighters and officers challenge it directly...don't just stand by and let it happen in front of you, call it out for what it is."

There are 10 other support groups that we identified and these staff networks are seen as influential. They result from need and are consultative but do not seem aligned with business strategy. Support groups can influence policy, as seen by the Menopause Action group and the Women's Action Committee. They are continually active and linked with the Unions. The Gay and Lesbian forum has around one hundred members and is a positive support group. Statistically, there should be about three hundred members, and whilst some people may not be interested in joining groups, the group contains a disproportionate number of female firefighters. Bi people are also not openly declaring at work. More effort is required to reach out to Bi and gay staff to clarify the role and purpose of the group and that it is for both firefighters and office staff. Crucial to achieving inclusion are heads of service who are open supporters and actively promote these groups.

The support groups are seen as necessary for the brigade. They are well advertised and promoted. Hotwire's internal website is updated daily and is seen as a valuable source of information.

But if there is still progress needed in terms of accepting greater diversity in LFB, there is even more work needed to challenge sexism and misogyny. In terms of complaints about bullying, prejudice and abuse, by far the greatest number we received were from women.

If there was signs that pockets of racist behaviour still stubbornly persist in LFB, there was strong evidence that the Brigade were struggling with institutional misogyny.

To give this some context, a number of respondents questioned whether men listen to women when women are in charge and noted that cultural backgrounds could also be challenging when it comes to men listening to women who are in control. It is felt that men still struggle with the term firefighter as opposed to a fireman, with a

minority of stereotypical white males holding on to the 'boys club' image.

When LFB decided to participate in the global #Firefightingsexism campaign in 2017, which saw fire services from Germany to the U.S. posting images of their firewomen to show it was a career that girls could aspire to, there was a backlash. In a Facebook post from the time, a senior communications officer for LFB admits there is a 70/30 split against the campaign and that he was being abused for pushing the campaign - although the abuse he received was only a fraction to that received by the Commissioner at the time, Dany Cotton.

When we spoke to former Commissioner Cotton, she recalled that when she was one of 30 women who joined LFB in the late 1980s, she was told that being a firefighter was a macho job and women couldn't do it. At the time the approach of colleagues was to "treat you badly and hope to get rid of you", and that when technology improved and equipment changed to reduce the impact of musculoskeletal injuries, it was widely seen as a move to make it easier for women, when it was meant to be making it easier for everybody.

When she became Commissioner she was told on more than one occasion that London is not ready for a female commissioner. "Many people wanted me to fail, and several said it to my face," she said, acknowledging that one of her biggest battles was with "internal terrorists".

In trying to create a more inclusive culture for women, she was met with fierce resistance and "shocking abuse" which culminated in death threats. With previous budget cuts leading to the loss of the central Equalities Team in 2011, she said this has often led to disproportionate disciplinary actions.

For example, a white male turning up for late for work three times might be given an informal warning, but a black woman turning up late three times for the same



reasons might result in formal discipline. She added that the toxic nature of WhatsApp groups has led to people speaking very openly about issues, which previously they may not have wanted to share. She also felt that middle managers have become isolated and disempowered and don't feel able to challenge – so they end up running with the pack.

Cotton's insights similarly shed some light on the cronyism that not only sees poorly performing staff over promoted, but also acts as a barrier to cultural change. She expressed concern about the influence of the Freemasons and said whilst she worked in the equalities team in 2001, she suggested a register of Freemasons but ended up getting threatening phone calls. While she was a principal officer she suggested it again and City Hall stopped her setting up this register on human rights grounds. On another occasion very early in her career when she was a sub officer she spoke to a leading firefighter to encourage him to go for a promotion. He told her he wasn't worried about passing the promotion interview, "because the interviewer was in the same lodge as him". Cotton added that some groups of senior officers appear to be extensively involved with the Freemasons and she said this needs to change because some of them use this to give advantage to other Freemasons within LFB.

Cotton acknowledges that not all Freemasons behave in this way but because it is a closed society, this behaviour can be very difficult to identify, and women are not permitted to join the Freemasons. She is also aware that the Freemasons do excellent charitable work and very kindly donated a substantial sum of money to LFB to enable them to buy new turntable ladders.

There seems to be two powerful forces behind the misogynistic abuse that was shared with us; firstly a view that women should not be in the fire brigade and that it should be an all-male profession and secondly that

women cannot do the job.

Both views are barely worth consideration – but on the latter point it is worth highlighting that LFB contains some inspiring female firefighters. One, for example, competed in four world championships in three different sports before becoming a firefighter. There are many other decorated firefighters who have won awards and a long pedigree of outstanding service. In 1941, for example, LFB's Gillian Tanner was the only female firefighter to be awarded the George Medal in the Second World War.

The Brigade employs 457 women in operational roles at various ranks, including trainee firefighter and above, and many women were keen to share their experiences for our review. A common theme was that they were not listened to and had been told not to speak about bullying, harassment and abuse.

We do not have space to include all the bullying, misogynistic abuse and cultural resistance to women that we encountered over the course of many interviews. But the following examples show urgent change is needed.

*"I still feel I am treated differently either as a woman or as non-operational. I was harassed by my Team Leader and was told by management to not speak about it, I felt like a trouble maker for making a complaint.*

*"Nobody listens...the men talk over the women, they play golf together and meet early for breakfast while I am getting my kids ready for school.*

*"I still feel I have to prove myself as the only woman in the team. Also I have been dismissed and called "woman" by an ex-Team leader when I've given opinions.*

# Case study: a female firefighter's perspective

## 'Good people stay silent because they know nothing will be done'

*"There are lots of good people in LFB and I know that they don't like seeing women being constantly bullied and the butt of sexist jokes. But they don't feel there is anything they can do – because if you complain to your station manager, it goes nowhere. And then you will be targeted for bullying.*

*The threshold for bullying is so high, you would have to gouge someone's eyes out to get sacked. Everything else is seen as banter.*

*There will be some people who don't understand the nature of bullying in this job. It's not like any other in that when you go to work as a firefighter you could end up being sent to extremely dangerous incidents. In these cases, your life depends on your colleagues. You have to rely on them to get out safely and how can you do that when you know they think so little of you and treat you like dirt all the time? Without respect, it makes the job impossible.*

*It's now reached a point with me that I tell my female friends not to let male firefighters in the house. I would advise any single woman not to let them in to check smoke alarms. Why? Because I know what they do. They go through women's drawers looking for underwear and sex toys. Then they will spend hours bragging about the dildo they found and they will refer to the women as sluts. We hear it all the time and I'm sick of it. You shouldn't have to listen to this all the time in any workplace.*

*The only way it'll stop is if they put cameras in the fire engines because they won't dare talk like that knowing it's being recorded. This was suggested at one point, but it was blocked because it was seen as an invasion of privacy.*

We heard from women who had been verbally and physically assaulted, bullied, harassed, intimidated, abused online and held to a different standard. This ranged from being groped during training exercises and kicked and punched to having their uniforms urinated on and men keeping diaries of when they suspected women were on a period and telling them they "didn't want to be around women who were bleeding". It was reported that some men had explicitly said they didn't want women on their watch and there were multiple accounts of women being subjected to unwanted sexual attention.

This included men showing them pornographic videos and taking bets on who would get to sleep with them in the watch. One woman spoke of the distress of receiving

video calls from a man exposing his penis and saying 'you want this don't you'. After requesting disciplinary information from the Brigade, we were informed that there have been 10 cases of staff being disciplined for sexual harassment over the last five years and none had resulted in dismissal. It did come to our attention, however, that a senior officer was asked to retire early after sending inappropriate photos on his work phone to women. We do not know how many other cases of early retirement there have been resulting from complaints about sexual misconduct.

The above examples caused extreme anxiety for those on the receiving end of bullying and myriad examples of inappropriate behaviour. Many women had accessed



counselling and taken long spells of leave due to stress and anxiety as a result. In some cases respondents told us they harboured suicidal thoughts, had seen their mental health suffer greatly and felt they were “constantly on the edge”.

However, there were also many other examples of bullying and toxic behaviour that contributed to a working environment where women felt degraded and constantly belittled. We heard accounts from women who said men in their station would constantly speak in crude sexual terms about women passing by on the street. We heard of women continually being told that they are in the job because they’re “a woman to fill a quota” and being dragged out of the driving seat of fire engines. And accounts of women being subject to continual online bullying and trolling.

The latter complaint is well evidenced and there is also social media activity that demonstrate how casual sexism has become normalised among firefighters.

Examples can be seen on the Instagram account ‘Hoses and Helmets’ where firefighters and officers post

comments and views, without identifying themselves, about all aspects of the fire service nationally and local LFB issues.

In our focus groups this often came up often as an example pointing to the real mindset of firefighters. It has to be noted that this is not a LFB handle or run by the LFB, but it has LFB members and contributors – some of whom are in senior positions. There were clear examples of sexism and misogyny. Example posts are shown below.

Over months of interviews, we found there was considerable sensitivity around racism and, despite persistent problems, it was recognised that the Brigade had to drive change to foster a more inclusive environment. There are certainly questions about the pace of this change and whether there is enough urgency and buy-in from senior leaders. But on the question of sexism and misogyny, there appeared to be a worrying blind spot on the part of LFB about the scale of the problem and no urgency to address complaints.





**It is notable that LFB FRS staff are significantly more impacted by stress, anxiety and depression than their national colleagues.**

## Mental health and wellbeing

In the course of interviews, we heard considerable anger from some firefighters over the loss of colleagues to suicide. They felt more should have been done to highlight these deaths and prevent others from taking their life.

As a result of these conversations, we asked the Brigade for information they held on firefighters who have taken their life over the past five years. They acknowledged that prior to 2020 they did not collect the cause of death – and it was pointed out that Coroners' reports can be inconclusive, which makes it hard for LFB to provide clear figures.

Similarly they had no data on members of staff who had attempted to take their life. They were, however, able to confirm that in the last five years six members of LFB staff have committed suicide. All of these individuals were male. Three of the six were 'White', one was 'White other', one was 'White/Black Caribbean', and one was 'Black Caribbean'. One declared a disability, five declared as heterosexual and one did not provide data on their sexuality.

We were also provided a briefing note issued in February this year from the Assistant Director of People Services, which noted that on 18 January 2022, a firefighter sadly died after serving 18 years with the LFB.

*“Although the cause of death is to be formally confirmed, it is suspected that they took their own life. This is the third LFB staff member to have taken their own life since August 2020; with Jaden Matthew Francois-Esprit on in August 2020 and a further suicide in July of 2021, and the sixth in the last five years.”*

The briefing note goes on to state that following the death of Jaden Matthew Francois-Esprit, an internal investigation concluded that there were inadequacies in several LFB systems relied upon by Jaden and made 24 recommendations to address them.

On 22 February 2021, the coroner issued a Preventing Future Deaths report (PFD). The recommendations from the internal investigation and the PFD were brought together into an action plan of 32 recommendations which have been implemented over the last 12 months. Some 23 of the 32 actions are now complete and key areas of progress include:

- 1. a) The process following FF(D)s attending fatal fires: Station Commanders are now responsible for ensuring that every firefighter on development (FF(D)s) within their area of responsibility speaks to Counselling and Trauma Services following their first fatal incident.
- 2. b) Data sharing: a Reasonable Adjustment Passport is being developed, which will enable the sharing of information about a neurodiverse condition, physical condition which requires an adjustment or disability.
- 3. c) Pilot of the ‘Safe to Speak’ Programme: from

September 2021, modelled on the NHS Freedom to Speak Up Guardian that encourages staff to feel safe to speak up about matters that concern them.

4. d) Learning support: following the publishing of the action plan, every member of staff who joined within the prior 12 months who had declared a learning support need was contacted to find out whether they had the correct support. Time off is granted for appointments with the Dyslexia Assessment Consultancy; the learning support team has been provided with additional resource to improve support to trainee firefighters and line managers; and a mandatory neurodiversity e-learning is being rolled out, starting with Top Management Group.

5. e) Onboarding and induction: the onboarding process includes information regarding financial management, and how to access Counselling and Trauma and wider wellbeing services and support. Station Commanders are also equipped with a simple checklist to complete when a trainee arrives on station, and our Counselling and Trauma service have implemented a protocol for a counsellor to see all FF(D)s for at least one session during their first few months on station.

6. f) Support for FF(D)s: A process is in place to act on inconsistencies in FF(D) experience identified by Apprentice coaches, and regular 1:1s are held with FF(D)s by operational leaders. Work is underway to allocate every FF(D) a Watch Mentor, with guidance notes and training commencing in January 2022.

7. g) The transfer process: mechanisms are now in place to ensure that line managers have conversations with staff about transfer requests, and Station Commanders are expected to check the numbers of transfer requests on a monthly basis to provide assurance. Transfer request data is shared monthly with People Services to enable

the department to identify trends and any concerns, particularly in relation to trainee firefighters. Alongside this, work is underway on a new transfer and station allocation process that better balances personal wellbeing with organisational need.

8. h) External review of culture: An external review of the culture of watches on fire stations, which has been expanded to the culture of all teams and all levels. This review will assess the existing culture of the LFB and consider the extent to which the Brigade and its employees have created a culture free from discrimination, unfairness, and inequality, and is likely to include consideration of recent loss of life and investigations undertaken following those.

In conversations with firefighters across LFB, suicides were raised on a number of occasions, and many believe that the true number of firefighters that have taken their lives over the last five years is much higher than the figures provided above. Indeed, many examples were provided to us. Following the HMICFRS report of 2019, which raised concerns that the Brigade did not have a wellbeing strategy, a wellbeing strategy has subsequently been published, acknowledging that mental health is just as important as physical health.

The lack of information that LFB have on firefighters that have committed suicide is also matched by that which they have on firefighters that have attempted to commit suicide. We were told of several harrowing examples of firefighters that have tried to take their lives.

There is also no information that could be shared on the circumstances of suicides or attempted suicides. For example, several people have noted that a firefighter who recently took his life was under investigation and that a further suicide in 2021 was referred to counselling and

didn't go. We are told that nobody followed this up from HR.

Our online survey of staff asked whether LFB had provided support if they had raised a concern about their mental health or wellbeing – and 43% said no.

An open text response allowed staff to explain more about the support they received or what would have been more helpful – and this generated considerable feedback.

The responses were mixed and a representative sample is included over.

Our survey also revealed that almost a third of respondents felt emotionally drained from their work often or all of the time. Furthermore, over 20 per cent of respondents admitted to feeling burned out by their job.

Arguably, the relatively high number of firefighters admitting to feeling their mental health is suffering should not come as a surprise, as there has been an increase in mental health problems across the globe over the course of the pandemic (The World Health Organisation, 2022). Over the past two years it is has not been unusual for organisations to report elevated levels of mental distress or impaired wellbeing among their workforce.

Yet while there have been significant changes to the firefighter role and ways of working during the pandemic, it is important to note that these do not appear to be the main contributors to the challenges noted during discussions. (i.e. the challenges are more longstanding and pervasive and cannot be blamed on the stretch of the pandemic). The view from our team is that the pandemic may have further exacerbated existing concerns.

*"I raised concerns with HR and line manger regarding the stress it was causing me being placed on courses on off duty days. I was ignored and threatened with discipline.*

*"LFB rely on the firefighters charity, rather than providing their own support. They have a counselling service. I used it for a bit but they couldn't provide what I needed and I had to pay privately. I sent LFB an email 5 months ago when I was off sick with work related stress and PTSD. I asked them to answer some questions and stated that the answers would help my recovery. I still have not had a reply to the email. They put messages on hotwire and posters up on station about mental health. This is all lip service. They do not care. Managers need proper training and people skills to treat people like human beings. Occupational health is rubbish and being put on a light duties team fitting smoke alarms rather than being able to follow your own supportive watch is an example of LFB failing to look after staff mental health. Everything is a battle and senior managers automatically treat you like you are a piss taker, rather than someone who genuinely needs help and support.*

*"My immediate line manager is a big advocate for mental wellbeing and is always keen that I take regular time away from work, when necessary, to relax and recharge. I am always able to talk to them and share any concerns.*

*When I was diagnosed with having a mental health issue, my line manager made a point of involving the watch telling me it was all in my head and making sure*

*I was not allowed to be operational, this made the situation worse and meant more time required with specialists, my doctor at the time was so angry with how he behaved this had a negative view of the brigade from an outsider. From this I now keep it to myself and not make a point of telling senior management. or even my line manager.*

*"HR offered no support when I was going through a split with my partner and had child care issues.*

*"I now have terminal cancer. It's shit. But the support of my line manager and colleagues has been amazing.*

*"I once had a lot of pressure in my personal life which impacted on me at work. My line manager and others were very supportive and ensured I had access to the right support including the Counselling service who I cannot speak highly of. I am also aware of the Welfare Benevolent Society, Blue Light services, and Trade Union support available.*

*"During my 31 year operational career, around six years ago, I sustained serious work based bullying, in which I sort Counselling and Wellbeing support. I was made to feel wanted and someone again, and the help was truly welcome.*

*"Due to my diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, a reasonable adjustment to my role has been agreed which excuses me from standby duties.*



*"I have felt stressed at times at work and expressed concern about the unequal workload in our team and conflicting demands that are place on us. This has caused one colleague go long term sick with stress three times in recent years. and another to leave the Brigade. I do not think this has been addressed by management. This has been a factor in my decision to retire.*

*"I went sick with work related stress in relation to a leading firefighter who had taken over our watch at*

*the beginning of September last year and was an absolute nightmare. There was no follow up, no response. I had to ring advisory and counselling off my own back and then only had a telephone consultation and not even a face to face appointment. It was a waste of time. I feel sorry for those people who are really struggling and desperately need support, but it seems that male suicide, especially white male suicide, is a very uncomfortable subject and does not fit in with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion narrative.*

In interviews, several firefighters were very candid about the mental health challenges they were struggling with, particularly those that had been exposed to traumatic incidents early in their career. One firefighter, for example, who attended an incident where there was a shocking fatality said he was haunted by the image of the person dying for years afterwards.

"I couldn't get it out of my head. Even when I went for a run I could see the dead person following me," he said. Senior figures in the Brigade also raised concerns around mental health support for young trainees. As an indication of the kind of traumatic incidents that some young firefighters are exposed to, one station commander recalled an incident earlier this year when a team had been called out to a suicide. "Someone set fire to themselves and a young trainee had to extinguish the fire," he said. "But he then disembowelled himself and the trainee had to watch his guts pour out over the pavement. It really shook him and he was badly traumatised. A few days later someone put chicken on the table in the mess and he just went mad. The incident had a deep effect on him and he needs support."

In the LFB's Mental Health Strategy it notes that while sickness absence is broadly in line with other UK fire and rescue services, FRS staff are more impacted by stress, anxiety and depression than their national colleagues.

#### **Sickness absence data**

55170 days were lost to absence in the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 in LFB, 47600 for operational staff, 1341 for control staff and 6229 for FRS staff. This has been increasing consistently for the last 5 years.

The most common reason for absence across LFB for operational staff is musculoskeletal (physical) issues, and for FRS and Control staff it is stress anxiety and depression (psychological), broken down as follows:

- Operational staff - 12285 days lost – 26% of all absences
- Control staff - 479 days lost – 36% of all absences
- FRS staff - 2530 days lost – 41% of all absences

This is broadly in line with other UK fire and rescue services. National Fire and Rescue Service Sickness Absence Report data 2021 shows UK fire service operational staff losing

## Overview of prevalence and reporting

- Stress, anxiety and depression account for nearly 25% of sickness absence cases in operational staff. This is in line with the distribution of fit notes issued by GPs in the UK (where 1 in 4 is issued for mental health, NHS Digital, 2021).
- Concerning levels of stress, anxiety and depression are seen in FRS (41%) and control staff.
- Occupational Health data indicates that 20% of mental health-related absence is work-related.
- Counselling and Trauma Services data recognise that trauma post critical incident, grievance and discipline-conduct are the top issues cited for work-related mental health problem (along with life issues and Covid-19).
- Despite these significant indicators, from two different sources:
  - there were indications that there was no clear pathway for this information to be fed directly up to Senior Leadership, with all reporting going via central HR teams. It was not possible to evaluate whether Senior Leaders had been made aware and/ or discussed resources to be made available or prioritised
  - there were no clear indications of systematic and accountable process of reviewing work-related hazards and provision to reduce these work-related sources of stress.
  - there does not seem to be a clear tailored prevention or support plan to roll-out targeted activities for groups with high prevalence of mental-health problems.
- These figures represent significant costs to the service and the individuals through working days lost and personal harm.

57554 days (25% of all absences) to musculoskeletal issues and Control and FRS staff losing 3486 (34% of all absences) and 14444 (31% of all absences) respectively to stress anxiety and depression.

**Mental Health**

*It is notable that LFB FRS staff are significantly more impacted by stress, anxiety and depression than their national colleagues. Although physical wellbeing matters affect operational staff more, the difference in terms of day lost to stress anxiety and depression is small; just over 500 days less per year (11767). Anecdotal evidence from our Equality Support Groups (ESGs) also shows that the matter of stress anxiety and depression is an increasingly significant factor for those employed by LFB.*

*Mental health is also a wellbeing factor that is evidenced as having an impact on all staff that work within an “emergency responder” occupation (The Royal Foundation 2020 – Assessing the mental health and wellbeing of the emergency responder community in the UK) LFB’s own data supports this and shows that “health”, inclusive of mental health, is the factor that is most predominate for people that present to LFB’s Counselling and Trauma Service (CTS).*

Wellbeing provisions at the Brigade are broadly typical of many organisations: the LFB received an award from the London Healthy Workplace Charter demonstrating that they have been externally assessed for the coverage and implementation of policies and practices with regard to healthy working. However, many policies and practices are not embedded throughout the organisation, and provision of mental health support is largely reactive (i.e. at the point of need rather than taking preventative action to address the management of work) and support

is poorly resourced given the demand for services (NB counselling provision and waiting lists).

Activities provided through Wellbeing Services are similar to those seen across other Fire and Rescue Services and organisations including Wellworks, a wellbeing platform to be powered by Virgin Pulse, and dedicated teams including the Wellbeing Team, Counselling and Trauma Services, Mental Health First Aiders, Equality Support Groups and the Learning Support Team.

Future activities proposed include increased communication platforms, targeted events around the inclusion and Wellbeing Calendar and the introduction of Local Wellbeing Partners. Training for Local Wellbeing Partners will include MHFA 2 day training. These activities will improve the capacity and capability to recognise signs and signals for mental distress and support individuals to seek further appropriate support.

We also noted that there is a wealth of information available on the intranet, however the presentation is static and likely to be a barrier to engagement. Information regarding people practice and wellbeing activities are not being cascaded.

Stakeholders indicated that despite the roll-out of activities, including training through wellbeing services, many managers are not fit to people manage, which means that information and a priority on wellbeing is not cascaded throughout the Service. Many people who present with Trauma and other mental health concerns report that their problems are exacerbated by poor support at work, e.g. by poor management at station level and lack of flexibility over where and when they work.



This not only links to development but to recruitment and promotion: manager promotions should include core assessments of their ability to manage and have open productive conversations.

Because of this lack of trust, some of the key aims of the Wellbeing Strategy may struggle to be realised. Similarly, because there is not 'one LFB' but rather separate cultures across London stations and this is a major factor blocking efforts to support wellbeing. In some stations the organisational culture is decades behind where it needs to be - behaviours clearly associated with misogyny, bullying and racism are part of the everyday fabric within some stations, and the senior officers that lead them are complicit in mental health deterioration because of their failure to act.

One of the best examples of good practice we came across was the Walk and Talk support group established by firefighter Dean Corney from Beckenham Watch (see case study over), which encourages firefighters to talk openly about their mental health struggles. As an informal network that was initially resisted by LFB, this commands high levels of trust among participants because they are able to talk to peers who have experienced similar issues. It has been praised by the likes of fitness coach Joe Wicks and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, and has inspired other such schemes to be replicated across the country by other fire brigades.

# Case study – the firefighters’ ‘Walk & Talk’ initiative that’s improving mental health

“I set up our walking group because I knew men struggled to talk about mental health and I wanted to normalise it. I’ve been a firefighter for 19-years and had struggles with my own mental health, as the job can take it’s toll. On one of my first jobs I had to attend a horrific car accident and ended up holding a dying man in my arms while his wife was screaming and punching me on the back. I went back to the station afterwards and wondered what I’d signed up for. It had a big impact on me but I didn’t say anything because I thought people would think I’m not up to the job. But I soon realised that others found it hard to process these incidents too.

“The average person will experience traumatic incidents like witnessing death once or twice in their lives. But in a 30-year career a firefighter will experience 400-600 incidents. It can have a huge impact on your mental health. But what happens if you don’t want to go to counselling? What happens if you don’t want to talk to your line manager? There are quite a lot of people in this category and they’re struggling in silence. There’s a real pressure on them to be macho and strong and not to cry. But they will talk to another firefighter who’s experienced what they’re going through.

“So we put posters up advertising a walk and people came along and we went for a walk around Greenwich Park. It’s a simple concept but people can talk to like-minded guys about their experiences without judgment. From humble beginnings it quickly grew and we now have nine walks taking place across London every week. All our walks are run by mental health trained volunteers and we’re starting to see a big change. More and more men are opening up. One guy told us, ‘this is the first time I’ve ever done this, I’ve never spoke to my wife or family about these experiences.

We’ve seen people on long term sick leave go back to work after attending our walks. It’s really making a difference and I’m delighted that other fire brigades around the country are starting their own groups. We are starting to change the mindset that you can’t reach out as a man to want to talk about your mental health. It’s not a weakness, it’s a strength. Sometimes things in life get you down. Our group is all about realising you’re not alone and it’s not unusual to feel the way you do.

## Communication and engagement

A clear finding from our review was that staff do not feel that they have a voice to speak up. There is low psychological safety (which will be addressed through the new leadership development programme) and there is fear of repercussions. Data gathering and analysis on employee engagement is low and the 'Safe to Speak' programme is a pilot. In the past, there were traditional employee engagement surveys distributed, but the last one was in 2018. Other organisational wide surveys were also used from time to time (e.g. the culture audit running by an external company ENGAGE, or surveys from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services). But there is low participation in such surveys overall, including from BAME staff.

Going forward, a new annual employee engagement survey will be launched and there will be coordination

on how the data will be used. The plan is to physically go to stations and sell the benefits of participation to the staff. Managers in stations will be able to provide support and they will also be able to bid for funding for projects to improve engagement in stations as per the survey results.

In discussions with communications staff, as part of a focus group and one-to-one interviews, we identified that parts of their team were overworked and struggling with resources. In particular, there was a significant imbalance between external and internal communications; a considerable emphasis was spent on communicating to external stakeholders the modernisation changes that LFB are undertaking and yet there was an incredibly small internal communications team that needed more resources to properly communicate these changes to staff and win hearts and minds.

**The desire was for LFB to make fire stations a community asset in order to further embed the service into the fabric of local communities.**





In a focus group we were told that there had been a fundamental shift in communications strategy post-Grenfell. Prior to Grenfell communications largely covered safety measures such as fitting fire alarms, changing batteries etc. Post-Grenfell “everything is about how we work with communities and how we represent London”. This represented a significant change, moving to an outward facing, trust-building organisation that’s committed to building relationships with the communities they serve. This new community engagement has seen five new posts introduced in the last year with three further posts being introduced in the New Year.

Over the last year, LFB carried out a community engagement pilot, which saw them run 40 engagement sessions in the nine pilot boroughs with London’s communities from April to October 2021.

These were largely welcomed by firefighters, though many felt they were scratching the surface and much more community engagement was needed.

A senior officer felt the commitment had been forced because of Grenfell and was not genuine.

*“When has the LFB have ever actually set out to ask what the real communities of London need? – and I am not talking about those that are fascinated by the fire engines and attending open days, I am talking about those that do not consider the fire brigade as a genuine establishment that wants to work with them outside of fire safety. We have a considerable number of Black, Asian, women firefighters that live in London, who have children, siblings etc, that still do not feel comfortable bringing family members on to a station because they are not sure what response they will receive. And these are the ones that should be spreading the*

*message to the wider community. I have firefighters who regularly express that they cannot be themselves on a fire station, and are understandably apprehensive. So why will they bring their family and friends to such an environment?*

*“We have spoken for some years about opening up fire stations to the community, I have not seen any real momentum to those other than Cub groups and Duke of Edinburgh schemes. I have never seen an advert or any engagement or encouragement for us to approach and reach out to a community group that would not readily consider the fire station as a place to use as a community resource.”*

On the latter point, other senior leaders expressed a wish that stations with rooms available for community use, of which there are several in London, were made more available. The desire was for LFB to make fire stations a community asset in order to further embed the service into the fabric of local communities.

We requested data on community rooms within LFB and were told the following stations have purpose built community rooms.

- Dagenham
- Dockhead
- Leytonstone
- Mitcham
- Old Kent Road
- Orpington
- Plaistow
- Purley
- Shadwell

Ilford, West Norwood and Walthamstow also have the facility to offer a community room.

Many senior managers were keen to talk about community engagement, as they could see that LFB should be doing more. One pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic had slowed down the roll out of opening fire stations. He also noted that previously the LFB have opened fire stations to hold a programme of blood registrations for charities, such as the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust (ACLT).

Another senior officer stated that the current Community Risk management Plan (CRMP), covers engagement in principle, but no one really knows what to do with it and that watch managers need help doing it.

*“When I asked a watch to do it regarding reducing fires, they only skirted around doing it. Also, the community only consider us when there is a fire or emergency, our operational responses only take up between 3 and 7% of our working time. We could be doing more meaningful engagement with all communities, but because we are not monitored for real community engagement, no one sees it as a real priority – if it is not monitored, it does not get done.”*

A Sub Officer added that crews and managers are not trained to do real community engagement. “We stumble and drag our feet to go to an event without doing any real research or engagement with hard to reach community groups. A lot of our staff choose not to live in London for many reasons, so they are often detached from many of the BAME and hard to reach communities. Other than Home Fire Safety Visits we do no real engagement, because many feel they do not have to.”

Among the findings from last year’s engagement pilot was a declared interest from Londoners to hear more about the following:

- LFB’s regulatory work and how LFB holds building owners and decision-makers to account
- How LFB ensures the brigade is inclusive and how it engages with under-represented communities
- Making sure LFB communication is accessible to all our communities
- The setting up of a London Fire Brigade Community Forum

Feedback from many BAME firefighters suggested that there is a wealth of ideas and suggestions as to how the Brigade could better engage with diverse communities – and these should be taken on board to deliver more creative and authentic programmes of engagement.



**In our online survey, almost 40 per cent of respondents said that their career at LFB had failed to meet expectations.**

# Training and career development

Training is subject to strategic change and within The Organisational Learning and Professional Development Strategy (2022-2024), there was data indicating that the current approach to learning, training and development was not promoting equality through gender and ethnicity:

*“Currently, there is a lack of a structured approach to learning and development for FRS staff leading to a potential for a disproportionate indirectly negative effect on women who make up the majority of this staff group... A more varied and flexible structure to learning inputs will have a positive impact on those with neurodiversity and varied thinking and learning styles... The data suggests that people from BAME backgrounds have worse outcomes through the current training approach”.*

The new structure of People Services will form a new Professional Development and Learning Team and will implement this strategy. It represents a “move to a more comprehensive and professional approach in identifying the organisation’s learning needs through a detailed assessment that covers every role and every level and moves away from solely an operational focus to support all staff in their professional development... The strategy is based on a learning cycle that broadens out the way in which learning is delivered through a proactive stance that places personal responsibility on the individual for their own learning”.



The current offer for Leadership Development training targeted at managers has been significantly improved in recent months, with internally delivered leadership training across a number of programmes at different levels. A tender process is underway inviting bids to deliver a comprehensive middle management programme (£740,000 investment in the next three years). There are also plans to offer a supervisory leadership course for staff below station commander level.

For the past 10 years, the design and delivery of formal training for firefighters was outsourced to an external provider (Babcock International), neglecting training and development for those staff who were members of professions other than firefighting:

*“Traditionally, the Training and Professional Development Department have been engaged on, and expected by the organisation to, focus entirely on the Design and Delivery elements of this cycle, which given that training is outsourced to an external provider, Babcock International, has essentially reduced the team to one of contractual management and administration. As a result, focus on learning and professional development has been minimal for quite some time, and whilst it occurs in the organisation, this is not structured or fully understood at an organisational level... Further, the training offer focusses heavily on the operational and safety critical elements of the requirements and is almost entirely made up of delivery of formal training interventions, either face to face or using Computer Based Training modules. Whilst it is crucial that risk critical areas are given this focus, and that quality, effective training is delivered, there is currently no systematic approach to learning and minimal training and professional development*

*exists for those staff who are members of professions other than firefighting.”* (Organisational Learning and Professional Development Strategy (2022-2024 p13)

To make up for this historical gap in providing training and development to staff, there has been a wide range of training delivery happening outside of the Babcock contract and this was varied as different departments developed their own solutions to gaps in knowledge. This has meant that training and development in LFB, other than the services provided by Babcock, have been ad-hoc. People Services has had limited strategic overview of the competence levels required for each role across the workforce, has had an inconsistent approach to leadership development and lacked in a formalised strategy for the learning provision for FRS staff. In addition, *“the current levels of provision within the contract with Babcock International are not sufficient to deliver the acquisition and maintenance of operational skills required, particularly in the context of the McCloud Judgement, known locally as the Pension Remedy, which is likely to lead to a large number of staff in firefighting professions at all levels retiring in the next 3 years”* (Organisational Learning and Professional Development Strategy (2022-2024 p.23).

The new strategy will capture all staff at LFB and tailor learning specifications for firefighters and for other staff. The strategy is based on a new Organisational Learning Model, which will (i) set out the expected levels of skill, competence and behaviours for each role, (ii) encompass all national and local professional requirements for each group of staff, and (iii) lay out the different learning inputs which should be used, including delivered and computer-based training, on-the-job development, coaching,

self-directed learning and academic and professional qualifications where appropriate. The new strategy makes explicit links between training/development and reviewing job descriptions and person specifications, conducting performance appraisals, enabling workforce planning, talent management (including promotions) and succession planning, and this is a step in the right direction.

But it is also implying a major review in all above-mentioned areas as well as a re-shape of the training and development culture at LFB; from an inconsistent and sporadic approach “dependent on the skills, ability or will of individual managers” to a strategic approach which will bring personal responsibility for learning to all individuals, enabling staff at LFB to move away from viewing training/development as something that is passively “done to” them.

In group and one-to-one discussions, there was ample feedback on training and a considerable amount of criticism.

Control staff have a dedicated training team and feedback stated that out of approximately 100 staff they have a dedicated team of up to eight personnel.

Our discussion group felt that although they had a dedicated training team, they still had a substantial amount of cascaded training, or online training. As a recent example, they explained that the current Fire Survival Guidance (FSG) training was insufficient and not detailed enough, despite it being a critical part of their role. They argued that the standard training does not reflect the seriousness and accountability they have in a real life pressurised situation. They maintain they have

fed this back, but no one has considered their point of view.

Others said that station managers were able to ‘game’ training by getting one or two people on the watch to do online training and then say the whole watch had completed the course. In some cases, training was seen as a ‘tick box exercise’ that had to be done rather than activity that improved career opportunities and capabilities.

When speaking to watches as a group, firefighters raised the current fire safety inspections being put on them in regard to assessing the risk of dwellings above commercial shops/restaurants as an example of an area where training was needed. They felt that this was a major risk and a task where training should be provided as they are not fire safety trained. Should someone die or be severely injured after a fire safety check by local crews, there was concern that they will be held responsible. They felt that if something so serious was part of their role then they would expect adequate training.

Some watches and trainees also felt that the development of new trainees required some investment and time to develop them further before completing the training. Most trainees leave training without even observing or using some primary operational equipment, which makes them unprepared for the operational station life. Many felt this was a cost cutting exercise to limit the time within the training environment. Several trainees stated that they never had a hot wear (training in a real fire atmosphere) before completing their training.

Some officers who carry out training on the watch conceded that no one (managers) really care about the



standard of training providing the training records show they have been completed. “Effectively you could complete the training without getting up from the chair, providing your watch figures are within the acceptable level, no one goes looking,” argued one.

There were some very positive comments about the standard of breathing apparatus (BA) and real fire training, which many felt has really improved. There was also good feedback regarding the battery powered Rapid intervention equipment used for effective entry for road traffic collisions.

On the subject of career development, many did not feel this was linked to hard work and ability – and a view that a culture of cronyism determined how you progressed in the Brigade was widespread.

In our online survey, almost 40 per cent of respondents said that their career at LFB had failed to meet expectations. Furthermore, a majority of 51 per cent of respondents said that it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would be able to fulfil their career aspirations at LFB.

When asked why this is the case, 13 per cent said they had not benefitted from a coach or mentor and that

they had not received effective training or development programmes. A further 10 per cent of respondents said that the LFB did not support progression/promotion from within and they had not built strong relationships with senior managers.

However, the most popular reason (18 per cent) was that they were not confident in the fairness and transparency of the career progression process.

There is an urgent need to tackle this trust deficit and promotions needs to be made more transparent and linked to the documented evidence base of the PDR process.

Some of the comments around career progression are listed below.

*“Training for FRS staff does not exist. I have worked at LFB and heads of training who have come and gone have always been told they are working to change the FRS training but nothing...”*

*“The organisation is not set up for success and just lets people sit in roles for years with no accountability or questions asked. The same people are managing key processes that they were at the time of Grenfell and if you dare challenge them about how crap the work is, they get all upset and defensive. How can you have someone in role for ten years, but yet they are still developing critical processes?”*

*“There have also been unfair recruitment processes within my team (roles being created and then people appointed outside the recruitment process) and good people not being promoted when they should, and then we lose them.*

*“The promotion system has been poor for the last 20 years. We have NEVER had two processes the same and this inconsistency has rewarded mediocrity. In the last five years we have promoted a large number of SC/SM’s from outside London rather than identify suitable candidates from within. Most of the external promotions have been to enhance their pensions toward the end of their careers. It has been*

*demotivating and demoralising.*

*“The system is not transparent and never has been. I have had friends interviewed by previous managers yet when I have been in that position I have been told it wouldn’t be possible to be interviewed by a friend. We have promoted people to Stn Officer with a score of just over 50% with a PDP one year yet 78% didn’t make it the next round. I have questioned this a couple of times and said we need to change the system but met with silence or fobbed off.*

*Career progression is unfair and subject to nepotism and networking. I have given up on trying to progress my career and will be leaving the LFB early. The LFB just give the impression that developing its staff is such a tedious drag and you are made to feel like a nuisance for wanting to advance in your career.*

*When I was an assessor we had an 80 per cent failure rate. So the head of recruitment changed the scoring process because they didn’t get enough through. We were told if you get a zero or a one that’s a fail. But then that was changed. It didn’t exactly give me confidence that we were bringing talent through.*

*“I know some people have been given the questions before they went to interviews because they’ve told us. There’s no integrity at all.*

*We’ve not had a head of recruitment for over a year.*

# Conclusion

**When I agreed to undertake this independent review of the culture of London Fire Brigade, I knew something about the excellent service they provide to Londoners in responding to emergencies and working to keep them safe. I knew very little about the workforce and how they were treated, nor how Londoners felt about them.**

I can safely say that the stories we have heard, the evidence we have collected and the observations we have made reinforce the perception that I had about the excellent service they provide. Indeed, the capital owes a debt of gratitude for the outstanding work carried out by the LFB on ‘Operation Braidwood’ – where all staff played a part in the Covid-19 pandemic response and went far beyond their call of duty to support Londoners during a national crisis.

However, our work also alerted me to significant concerns that the people who work in LFB have about their ability to contribute fully and to their highest potential without harassment or discrimination.

Diversity is about more than numbers or representation, it’s ultimately about the quality of decision-making and the culture that creates the best environment for people who work there. That is a matter of fairness and equity, but it’s also the strongest business case for change.

My Review found evidence that supports a finding that LFB is institutionally misogynist and racist. We found dangerous levels of ingrained prejudice against women and the barriers faced by people of colour spoke for themselves. Not only were they more likely to be subject

to disciplinary action, less likely to be promoted and largely unrepresented at senior levels, but they were also frequently the target of racist abuse.

We also saw examples of how this was driving some people of colour out of the brigade and there was evidence that talented people, committed to public service were being lost as a result.

It was encouraging to see an increase in diversity at board level, including the first Asian director. But there needs to be more urgency in rooting out deeply prejudiced staff and inappropriate behaviour and attitudes because they undermine the hard work of the many decent, public spirited people in the Brigade. We also found that LGBTQ+ staff and people who are neurologically diverse are treated unfavourably compared to others.

However, we wish to draw an important distinction with similar problems experienced by the Metropolitan Police. Where there has been flagrant examples of police officers misusing power and allowing prejudice to shape their actions, we did not find the same level of operational bigotry.

The behaviour of firefighters going through women’s drawers was particularly troubling, but we did not see evidence of demonstrable bigotry in fire stations impacting on their work with the public. “It’s like someone pulls a switch,” one black firefighter told us. “They change when they’re on the fireground. It’s like they remember why they’re firefighters.



This was one of the paradoxes we wrestled with. For despite the fact that we saw clear evidence of racism, misogyny and bullying, which made it hard for many firefighters to do their job and forced others out of the Brigade, we do not wish to invite the same comparisons with the Metropolitan Police with regard to abuse of power.

The accounts we have received, both orally and in writing, from large numbers of staff who previously had never been heard are clear, consistent and compelling.

They have often been convinced that the consequences of speaking out will be worse than the consequences of silence. Perpetrators, faced with exposure, commonly turn on their victims, try to assassinate their characters, and get others to do the same.

Most abuse goes undetected and it takes courage to ask for help. Victims are beset by feelings of shame, guilt and fear. They should be able to have confidence that credible allegations will be adequately investigated and that they will be appropriately supported. Instead, experience shows that the abuse is often compounded by sceptical or inadequate reactions. Worse, the person making the allegations is taken to task.

Unless a toxic culture that allows bullying and abuse to be normalised is tackled then I fear that, like Jaden, other firefighters will tragically take their lives. This review has to be a turning point, not just a talking point. Everyone who works for the emergency services should be afforded dignity at work. That is the very least they are owed.

The exposure of prejudice in the workplace at one of the world's largest firefighting and rescue organisations should put other Brigades on notice. Because while London's public services are very much in the spotlight at the moment, I have no doubt that similar cultural problems exist in other Fire Brigades across the country. Our findings should serve as an urgent reminder that fire doesn't discriminate and neither should any firefighter.

Culture begins at the top – and it has to be said that the Commissioner is seen as part of the solution, but considered by many to be an isolated figure who is not wholly supported by those around him. It will be important for his new Directors' team to be visibly committed to culture change, and supporting the Commissioner in his mission.

It will not be enough to set up an internal programme to deliver change, but the Commissioner needs to lead it himself for it to have credibility. It needs to be properly resourced and supported.

LFB is an organisation dedicated and committed to protecting people and supporting them when they need help the most. But it needs to do more to protect its own people and give them the help they need to experience dignity in the workplace and be able to thrive in a job they love.

**NAZIR AFZAL OBE**  
Independent chair



# Recommendations

## Creating a workplace where everyone is afforded dignity

**Recommendation 1:** All managers should adopt a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, racist and misogynistic behaviour in the workplace and appropriate disciplinary action must be taken to root out a toxic culture.

*Outcome 1: EDI training for managers and an independent complaints service.*

*Outcome 2: Managers can identify inappropriate behaviours and values and act decisively to tackle them.*

**Recommendation 2:** Consider anonymised reporting of incidents relating to bullying, misogyny and racism. In a closed team-based culture individuals /groups can and have become stigmatised for reporting poor behaviour or bad experiences.

*Outcome 3: Staff can report incidents anonymously with no fear of the repercussions.*

**Recommendation 3:** Consider historic review of complaints about bullying, racism and misogyny over the last five years. This would establish a team to determine whether further action is necessary in cases where justice has been denied.

*Outcome 4: Review past cases and ensure all complaints over the past five years have been managed appropriately and the correct sanctions applied and where not an appropriate remedy has been introduced.*

**Recommendation 4:** Recognise the 'Safe to Speak' programme is not sufficiently trusted and that further policies and dedicated resources are needed to make it easier for people to report clear examples of racism, misogyny and bullying of staff.

*Outcome 5: Ensure staff are confident to speak up when they witness or experience racism, misogyny or bullying.*

**Recommendation 5:** In conversation with the workforce and stakeholders, develop Brigade values that are 'public service' first, underpinning how we behave within the organisation and towards our public and partners. These values should inform the core code of ethics, recruitment, promotion, discipline, talent management, industrial relations, staff engagement, leadership development and strategic planning.

*Outcome 6: Eliminate the potential for bias or unfair treatment.*

*Outcome 7: For this to be successful the values must be visible in everything from the most strategic plans through to staff appraisals. They must run as a golden thread through recruitment, promotion, discipline, talent management, Industrial Relations, staff engagement. All of which must be transparent and open to challenge. Action must also be visible where there have been transgressions.*



**Recommendation 6:** Build a culture dashboard of LFB stations and teams that uses a mix of metrics to assess whether these are red, amber or green on a scale of risk where the working environment is concerned. The worst offenders (red) will demonstrate toxic behaviours, while at risk stations (amber) will demonstrate some areas of concern, and good practice stations (green) will demonstrate a healthy and supportive culture. Data to use includes grievances, staff turnover, exit interviews, people survey data, diversity and more. Use these dashboards to proactively address problem teams and identify and learn from good practice.

*Outcome 8: The Brigade can identify where toxic culture is a threat and managers take swift action to address it. Good practice is identified and shared, so that others can learn from it.*

**Recommendation 7:** Develop a robust mechanism for measuring LFB culture, which operates on an ongoing basis using a number of tools and metrics, including big data, social media, exit interviews, complaints levels, turnover etc.

*Outcome 9: LFB can monitor the health of its culture on an ongoing basis and take action to address emerging issues.*

**Recommendation 8:** Consider introducing body worn video for fire safety home visits.

*Outcome 10: Drive up standards of behaviour and professionalism.*

*Outcome 11: To be rolled out across station and inspection teams.*

**Recommendation 9:** Ensure there are secure facilities for all women in stations.

*Outcome 12: Afford greater dignity for all staff.*



## Better engagement with London communities

**Recommendation 10:** Borough Commanders should build a better understanding of and closer relationships with their local communities, which should include learning from them and seeking the input of diverse staff and the communities themselves.

*Outcome 13: Borough Commanders will own and implement their local Borough Community Risk Management Plan, informed by the community and local partners.*

*Outcome 14: By 2024, local fire stations are seen as a community resource. Services are shaped by a deep understanding of local community needs.*

**Recommendation 11:** Recruit and progress firefighters who reflect and can demonstrate their commitment to London's diverse communities.

*Outcome 15: All Brigade staff understand London and its communities and are proud to serve them. Diversity is visible in all levels in the Brigade.*

**Recommendation 12:** Improve post-incident care by providing a named person to members of the public directly impacted by an event that required LFB attendance.

*Outcome 16: Members of the public affected by incidents are provided with an LFB Family Liaison Officer who offers sensitive and compassionate support. This increases community trust and confidence.*

## Building a leadership model of trust

**Recommendation 13:** Consider ways to integrate Head Office with operations immediately, and longer term when the lease of the Unions Street HQ expires in 2027.

*Outcome 17: Senior leaders work alongside operational and control staff regularly. Senior leaders are visible and regularly demonstrate their commitment to Brigade values and their understanding of the workforce at all levels.*

**Recommendation 14:** Improve the fairness and transparency of senior selection panels by appointing independent chairs and panel members and asking all candidates and panel members to declare any interests, including membership of the Freemasons.

*Outcome 18: Ensure there are transparent processes around ethics and conduct that reassure staff and communities that selection processes are fair. Selection data demonstrates that no groups of people experience bias in the process.*

*Outcome 19: LFB staff declare potential conflicts of interest and memberships of any organisation that may conflict with our values and expectations.*



## Improved wellbeing

**Recommendation 15:** Increase the focus on mental health prevention by providing training for leaders and managers to identify and respond to stress at work; to understand their role in creating healthy cultures and understand the connection between inclusion and wellbeing

*Outcome 20: Training is delivered across all leadership roles. By 2024 - leaders and managers build and maintain inclusive, healthy and high performing teams. They can spot the signs of stress and anxiety and know their team members well, understand sources of stress and where more specialist support is needed to maintain or restore individual health and wellbeing. This is well funded, well signposted, well known and well used. The link between inclusion and wellbeing is well understood, and wellbeing metrics are integrated into culture measures.*

**Recommendation 16:** Gather better information on employee red flags that signal the need for early intervention to prevent deteriorating mental health.

*Outcome 21: Staff are able to spot red flags that indicate deteriorating mental health and know how to access appropriate support for those at risk.*

**Recommendation 17:** Investigate the root causes for LFB FRS staff being significantly more impacted by stress, anxiety and depression in comparison to their national colleagues and design wellbeing interventions that address these issues directly.

*Outcome 22: Ensure the sources of stress for FRS colleagues have been identified and appropriate support introduced to reduce occurrences*

*Outcome 23: By April 2024 the particular workplace sources of stress for FRS colleagues have been reduced, so that stress, anxiety and depression are at or below national levels.*

*Outcome 24: FRS staff are an integral part of the LFB community and their knowledge and expertise are valued and rewarded.*

**Recommendation 18:** Make it a priority to try to understand the reasons for suicide by ensuring that a clear and robust system of reporting is established. Capture the learnings in a Guidance document that includes a communication plan and action plan to support staff in the event of a colleague's death by suicide.

*Outcome 25: In the event of a suicide, the Brigade is prepared to act promptly and compassionately to offer staff information and support. LFB gathers and records information to build an understanding of the issues and design interventions to address them.*



## Transforming HR services

**Recommendation 19:** Review the triggers that are needed to generate interventions to support mental health and wellbeing. A more detailed critical incident log of all firefighters will show what they have been exposed to and indicate where wellbeing support is necessary.

*Outcome 26: Ensure LFB has a clear understanding of the range of incidents their staff are exposed to and systematically reaches out to those who could be particularly at risk. There is a range of easy to access support and all colleagues are offered a comprehensive programme of support for their mental health.*

**Recommendation 20:** Conduct an independent review of People Services resourcing and provision to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of the service and deliver leading-edge HR solutions that managers and staff trust.

*Outcome 27: Ensure your HR service is valued and respected by all colleagues and plays an integral role in maintaining an inclusive culture.*

**Recommendation 21:** Create an HR Data Analytics Strategy and develop HR data analytics skills. Use data to design and implement People Services' strategies, policies and practices (including the 'Togetherness Strategy'), as well as lead the organisation in the desired cultural change.

*Outcome 28: The LFB people strategy and underpinning decisions will be evidence based and will use data to support a process of continuous improvement across people management practices.*

*Outcome 29: LFB staff will always understand why decisions are made that affect them at work.*

**Recommendation 22:** Create an LFB workforce planning strategy to support the 'Togetherness Strategy', using data to link practices to long-term goals and outcomes. This will understand the reasons why BAME staff and women are significantly under-represented in the organisation in comparison to their White, male counterparts, and design interventions to improve this ratio.

It will also deliver positive action to ensure talent at all levels is identified and, where appropriate, fast track development programmes enable people to fulfil their talent, particularly underrepresented groups.

*Outcome 30: LFB's recruitment and promotion processes are reviewed and revised.*

*Outcome 31: By April 2024 LFB are trusted by all colleagues. The selection of leaders is a transparent, well understood process based on merit, capability, and demonstration of clear, well-communicated values. Many colleagues across all levels help to select LFB leaders and there is never any doubt that leaders are in post because they are the right people for the role.*

*Outcome 32: Within 5 years - LFB's workforce composition better reflects the communities they serve at all levels, including a diverse talent pipeline for the most senior leadership roles.*

**Recommendation 23:** Investigate the root causes why BAME staff are more likely to raise a grievance and twice as likely to be subject to disciplinary hearings in comparison to their White counterparts.

Review the ways in which grievance and discipline policies are currently used and received by staff with protected characteristics across all occupational groups.

*Outcome 33: Ensure LFB has a clear approach to responding to inappropriate behaviour that everyone trusts, understands and acts upon. Groups will use this in numbers that reflect their representation in the workforce.*

*LFB staff subsequently feel confident in, and protected by, policies and systems to be able to raise concerns regarding other people's behaviour; they know they are safe and that their complaints will be taken seriously.*



# Introducing the team



Nazir Afzal OBE is the Chancellor of the University of Manchester. He was Chief Crown Prosecutor for NW England, formerly Director in London and Chief Executive of the country's Police & Crime Commissioners.

During a 24 year career, he has prosecuted some of the most high profile cases in the country, advised on many others and led nationally on several legal topics including Violence against Women & Girls, child sexual abuse, and honour based violence. His prosecutions of the so called Rochdale grooming gang, BBC presenter Stuart Hall and hundreds of others were ground breaking and drove the work that has changed the landscape of child protection. He is the Chair of Hopwood Hall College and also a member of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). Passionate about social justice and protecting the vulnerable, he has published two books; his memoirs *The Prosecutor* by Penguin Random House and *The Race to the Top* by Harper Collins.



An award winning consultant, Matt has over two decades of experience of working on sensitive and challenging stakeholder engagement and communications projects. He is the founder of Rise Associates and the campaign he delivered for the Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insights Team to support positive behavioural change in 2020 won two Chartered Institute of Public Relations Pride Awards in 2021 for best Covid-19 response and healthcare campaigns.



A Professor of Human Resource Management at London South Bank University. Rea's research expertise is on work relationships, working conditions and working life. Rea is Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Academic Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Affiliate Member of the Chartered Management Institute and a member of the British Sociological Association.





**Jeff Greenidge**

A former school teacher and director with training provider Learndirect, Jeff has a wealth of coaching experience in education and business. As the first-ever Director for Diversity for the Association of Colleges and the Education and Training Foundation, he has considerable expertise in driving initiatives to encourage diversity and inclusive practices.



**Leslie Bowman**

Previously the Borough Commander of Enfield, Les retired in 2016 as London Fire Brigade's longest serving black senior officer.

With more than 30-years of operational service, he was recognised as an individual who could engage with all staff and external organisations, allowing him the opportunity to qualify as a peer challenge officer for public bodies, and a trained mediator for the LFB. In 2009 he was awarded the Queen's Fire Service Medal for outstanding contribution to the UK fire service.



**Jo Yarker**

Jo is an award-winning Registered and Chartered occupational psychologist, specialising in work, health and wellbeing. She is Managing Partner of Affinity Health at Work, and a Reader at Birkbeck, University of London. Jo is passionate about understanding what we can do to foster fulfilling, healthy and productive work, particularly during times of challenge.



**Yasmin Khan**

A Welsh government national adviser, charity director and diversity specialist, Yasmin is a passionate campaigner on eradicating violence against all women and girls worldwide.

As a strategic leader and partnership builder, Yasmin proactively liaises with key partners including statutory service providers such as the police, social services and health, education, and housing providers to ensure the necessary safeguarding is in place to protect victims and reduce risk.

# Appendices

## Online survey – further staff views

Our online survey captured a wide variety of views of which there are too many to include in this review. Below are a representative sample of comments that further illustrate the diverse views of staff.

- I spoke to a leading firefighter at my station regarding the way I was feeling at work. I explained to him that I feel unappreciated, unfulfilled, not taken seriously and that I felt like nothing more than a source of entertainment for my watch when they wanted someone to belittle.

His response wasn't to try to address this behaviour, but instead told me I should just transfer away from it or consider joining another service.

- The culture within the LFB has made my mental health worse. The worry and anxiety I suffer before my tour is often overwhelming. I do my best at work to try and avoid certain situations to avoid a verbal kicking.
- The problem with the LFB is once you are classified as a problem, there's no consideration for your mental health or wellbeing. The LFB line is, that you have not adhered to our position in this matter, and therefore, you must be dealt with under our in-house policies and procedures.
- I suffer with anxiety and my line manager is always incredibly supportive and accommodating to my needs.
- People don't have time to support they just take you off

the run and make it a big deal for their progression as an officer or advise you go sick.

- We need a meaningful pay rise. We are still far behind the rate of inflation, even with the pathetic 2 per cent we received for MTFA and are currently down around £5,000 since 2014. The stresses of day to day life, loaded with the stresses of this job can take its toll and working in central London we have to travel more than most with no extra benefit. Everything costs more but our pay has remained under the rate of inflation for years.
- I have been labelled, ignored and mistreated continuously since I started to suffer with my mental health due to the menopause. There is no true understanding of the mental health impact that the menopause has on women and when we are struggling and needing understanding, support and time to explain our feelings, instead we are labelled and punished for being difficult and too emotional.
- I am very pleased with the support that was offered to me by our counselling and trauma team, I have used the services on a number of occasions and cannot fault them.
- In October 2020 I was diagnosed with cancer, I couldn't do shift work anymore. A day job was created for me, where I could work mainly from home while I was receiving treatment. I have felt, in the main, very supported through this tough time and I am enjoying the job I am doing very much.

- My managers have no training in mental health or the triggers that can affect any of the conditions, having official training would equip them better to deal with staff in the correct way and not hinder their mental health conditions. I had no support from my managers when I experienced my mental crash and subsequent diagnoses of PTSD which have been linked to my service in the fire service.
- Managers did not seem to recognise that I was being bullied by my staff - I was told it was personal conflict. I had to go off sick before getting any support.
- Having 9 line managers makes the support inconsistent and having to retell my story 9 times is retraumatising. One line manager when writing a report to our Occupational Health team, wrote what they believed and made assumptions, which wasn't true. OH disregarded the report. Our line managers need effective and consistent guidance on how to support staff with their mental health and wellbeing, as the wrong support can have a huge adverse impact on the individual.
- I went through a tough time when my uncle died and was discovered by my mother. My line manager fully supported me, recommended support options and listened to me.
- Management are too stretched with high workloads to meet the needs of employees. Middle managers are generally unsupported and left to 'get on with it', especially regarding development, welfare and promotion.
- No support, instead I was disciplined for a situation caused by my bully. I have asked on numerous occasions to be moved to somewhere which will help with my mental health but still have to go via the normal transfer procedure...even though transfers I was offered in the past were blocked by the then DAC.
- I complained about a manager within my department, as I felt harassed and undermined by their behaviours. My manager wanted to support me but had to do it quietly and behind the scenes. This was because a) they couldn't be seen to offend this particular manager as (ironically) they had a reputation of bullying if challenged by a peer and b) they didn't want to offend their mutual line manager who has a reputation of protecting that individual.

All I really wanted was acknowledgment that the behaviour was unprofessional. A sorry would have done. The resolution was for me to back down and walk away and to be told my behaviour was unusual and unwanted. I've put in 20-years' service and that one incident made me remember that there are other job opportunities out there, which I'll be looking into as the new financial year starts.

