



# Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report 2023/24



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# Introduction

Our current Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy was published in 2021 and runs until the end of 2024. This annual report provides an update on progress towards its aims and objectives during 2023/24 as we near the end of the Strategy's lifespan and begin to define our EDI objectives for the future.

During the last 12 months, we have continued to make steady progress against all four themes of the EDI Strategy, which are illustrated on the following page.

The work undertaken by colleagues across the organisation over the past year is summarised under each theme, demonstrating the breadth of commitment to EDI and our core value to 'be inclusive'. Where data is available to show evidence of progress, it has been referenced in the relevant section.

This public-facing document is available to read on our website and is promoted through our internal and external communications channels in line with our commitment to openness and transparency, an obligation of the Equality Act (2010) public sector duty.



## A reminder of our EDI Strategy

The four themes of our Strategy reflect our EDI responsibilities as an employer, a provider of vital services to the community, a trusted partner and as an organisation recognised as one of the most forward-thinking champions of inclusion in the fire and rescue sector. They were defined and agreed by colleagues, staff networks, Members and trade union colleagues, all of whom are represented on the Equality Steering Group (now the EDI Group) which meets quarterly.



## Challenges, opportunities and headlines in 2023/24

- Continued media and stakeholder focus on the culture of fire and rescue services nationally. This follows the publication of a spotlight report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) entitled 'Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services', released in March 2023, and media coverage of issues at a number of services elsewhere in the country.
- Following its first Culture and Inclusion Conference in March 2023, the National Fire Chiefs Council published Culture Action Plan to address culture and inclusion within the fire and rescue sector, which outlines the expectations on fire and rescue services nationally.
- After the third routine inspection of our Service, HMICFRS, published its findings in August 2023 and described us as 'good' in areas such as 'ensuring fairness and promoting diversity' and 'promoting the right values and culture'.
- In the summer of 2023, we carried out our biannual staff survey. Some 80% of colleagues feel the Service is an inclusive place to work and 82% feel able to be themselves in the workplace.
- During the autumn of 2023 we undertook our biggest ever consultation with our staff, communities and stakeholders, to develop our new Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2024-28. Staff networks and diverse community groups were integral to the programme of engagement.



## Our organisation

**Aim:** to make inclusivity second nature. Leaders, managers and Members will lead by example, encouraging colleagues to be role models and champion EDI issues that matter to them. Policies, systems and processes will not disregard individuals' or groups' specific needs.

### Objectives:

- embed EDI in **leadership development**
- ensure senior leaders, managers and Members are **visible EDI champions**
- maintain an **ongoing dialogue** around EDI
- monitor uptake in **EDI training and development** activities
- enforce a **zero-tolerance approach** to bullying, harassment and discrimination
- monitor **suppliers' commitment** to EDI
- **design and adapt buildings** to be inclusive and

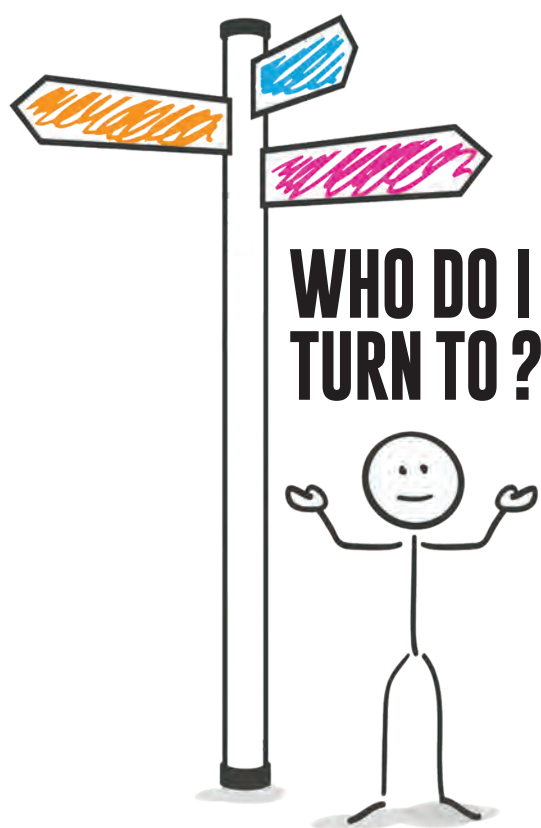
### Progress this year

- Our Wider Horizons programme, which supports fire staff in their career progression launched in 2022, was commended by HMICFRS as an area of 'innovative practice'.
- In March 2023, to address perceived barriers to operational staff from diverse backgrounds progressing, we launched 'Elev8'. This aims to build confidence in leadership, incident command and address issues such as 'imposter syndrome'. In addition, changes have been made to remove barriers to the promotion process, such as removing the written and group discussion stages of the process for some ranks and providing interview questions in advance.

**WIDER**  
**HORIZONS**

Elev8

- Our Service was revalidated as a Disability Confident Employer for another three years, following a self-assessment process. This means we commit to inclusive employment practices such as interviewing all applicants who state they have a disability, so long as they meet all of the essential criteria for the role. We also renewed our membership of the Business Disability Forum, further confirming our commitment to preventing and eliminating disability discrimination.
- Completion rates of our EDI e-learning packages rose from 72% in 2022/23 to 79% in 2023/24. In addition, all new starters received EDI awareness as part of their induction process.
- The Leadership and Development Team began to roll out a new programme of well-received Dignity at Work training sessions to raise awareness of addressing bullying, harassment and victimisation. In response to continued coverage of culture issues in our sector, promotion of our 'Who Do I Turn To?' campaign was strengthened to raise awareness of the wide range of advice, support and information available to colleagues experiencing difficulties inside or outside work.
- Construction of a new Crewe Community Fire Station was completed in October 2023, replacing the outdated station which had limited facilities for female firefighters and members of the public with disabilities wishing to use the community rooms. The new fire station features improved changing facilities and individual washrooms for firefighters.





## Our people

**Aim:** to become an employer of choice and attract, recruit and retain the very best talent. The workforce will represent Cheshire's diverse communities and staff will feel safe, valued and able to be themselves. They will feel supported to reach their full potential.

### Objectives:

- be creative and innovative in the approach to **positive action recruitment**
- **monitor workforce demographic data** to target recruitment at under-represented groups
- **review policies and procedures** to reinforce a safe and inclusive culture
- develop mechanisms for people to **make suggestions or report concerns**
- **educate colleagues** to better understand EDI issues
- promote **mentoring, reverse mentoring and coaching**
- develop **staff networks and equality champions**

### Progress this year

- The workforce continues to become ever more diverse, with small but steady increases in representation among most minority groups. The table on page 8 provides more detailed information.



	2022/23	2023/24	Change
Total staff in Service	861	871	+10
Total women in Service	200 (23.2%)	210 (24.1%)	+10 (+0.9%)
Total firefighters and officers	663	660	-3
Female firefighters and officers	69 (10.4%)	77 (11.7%)	+8 (+1.3%)
Total fire staff	198	211	+13
Female fire staff	131 (66.1%)	133 (63.0%)	+2 (-3.1%)
Colleagues from minority ethnic communities	39 (4.5%)	52 (6.0%)	+13 (+1.4%)
Colleagues stating a religion other than Christian	35 (4.1%)	36 (4.1%)	+1 (+0.1%)
Colleagues declaring a disability	34 (3.9%)	41 (4.7%)	+7 (+0.8%)
Lesbian, gay or bisexual colleagues*	30 (3.5%)	38 (4.4%)	+8 (+0.9%)

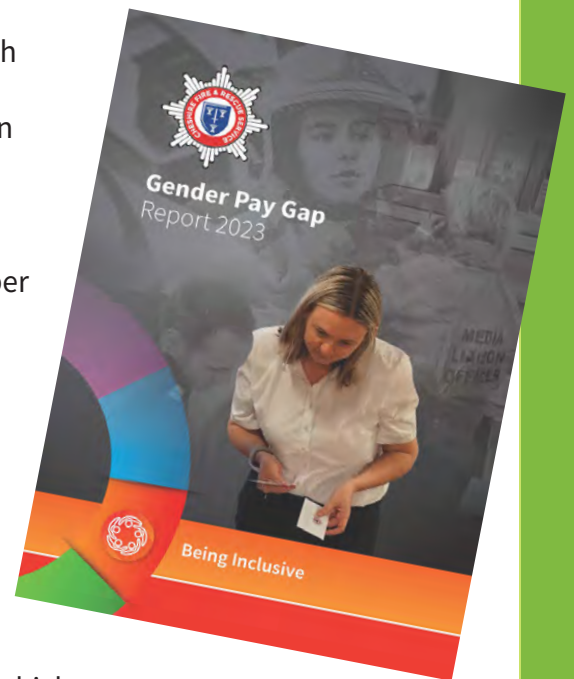
\*Trans (T) colleagues are not included in this category, which refers to sexual orientation and not gender identity. The number of trans staff in the Service is too small to disclose.

- More women than ever before work for our Service and the number of female firefighters or fire officers stands at its highest ever. This is in spite of the overall number of operational staff decreasing slightly, principally as a result of on-call staff leaving. Our success in recruiting operational women is bettered percentage terms only by the three English fire and rescue services.





- A wholetime firefighter recruitment campaign in early 2023 attracted large numbers of female applicants, despite the overall number of applications falling to 829 from almost 2,000 in 2021. As a result, across the next two cohorts of new recruits, women outnumbered men for the first time ever. The Service welcomed 10 female and 7 male trainee firefighters in September 2023 and April 2024.
- Positive action activity to support under-represented groups through the recruitment process included engaging women and ethnically diverse applicants who missed out on roles in the last recruitment process, two taster days at the Training Centre in Winsford attracting 60 people and buddying and mentorship from 30 serving firefighters from diverse backgrounds.
- The return of the finance, information management and procurement teams to the Service helped boost overall numbers of women in fire staff roles. This in turn will have a positive impact on reducing the gender pay gap, which for 2023/24 will be reported by March 2025.
- The 2022/23 Gender Pay Gap Report, published March 2024, showed continued progress in reducing the disparity between average pay for men and women in the Service. The gap has more than halved to 8.57% compared with 18.9% the year before and 24.6% in 2019. The report, available to read on the Service's website, shows an encouraging increase in the number of women in higher pay quartiles.
- Colleagues from Ethnic minority communities has risen significantly, whilst minority religious representation remains static and slightly below that of the Cheshire population in general according to newly published Census data. The REACH (race, ethnicity and cultural heritage) staff inclusion network continues to lead work to engage diverse community groups through positive action. This included the production of a video for social media, which showed a day in the life of a firefighter fasting during Ramadan.
- There was an increase in the number of colleagues declaring a disability. The newly-established Divergence inclusion network for neurodiverse colleagues played a key role in the development of the Service's first Workplace Adjustments Policy during 2023/24.



## Divergence

### Neurodiversity Network

- Our Service continues to be an employer of choice for LGB people. In addition, more colleagues than ever before (81.8%) feel comfortable declaring their sexual orientation on the workforce system. A number of new recruits have become involved in the well-established Firepride staff inclusion network. Members successfully made the case for flying the trans-inclusive 'Progress' pride flag at all fire stations during LGBT History Month in February 2023.
- Limitless held a number of Menopause cafes and celebrated International Women's Day by hosting a self-defence workshop and an inspirational speaker.



**Limitless**  
Women's Network





## Our communities

**Aim:** To ensure everyone receives the very best service and their needs are understood. Frontline colleagues will understand how EDI impacts their work and carry out their duties with respect, empathy and compassion. A person-centred approach to prevention will keep children, young people and adults at risk safe. Protection teams will know how EDI impacts technical fire safety.

### Objectives:

- **consult and engage** a diverse range of people when developing plans
- **communicate** in ways that connect with all communities
- undertake **data-led risk and analysis** to target our services
- consider the longer-term impact of **Covid-19** on risk
- consider the EDI implications from **Grenfell Tower and the Fire Reform Programme**
- develop **function-specific EDI guidance** to enable colleagues to understand how it affects their role
- be **visible EDI champions and role models** in the community

### Progress this year

- The way in which Safe and Well visits, the Service's flagship community safety intervention, are targeted continued to be refined to include not only people over the age of 65 who are most at risk of fire in the home, but also younger adults who live alone or have young families. Addresses for firefighters and prevention colleagues to visit are identified through increasingly sophisticated risk analysis, taking into account age, health, disability and socio-economic status. A total of 25,519 homes were visited in 2023/24.
- Our prevention team continues to take an inclusive, person-centred approach to helping people stay safe. Examples of how they have adapted their approach this year include providing bespoke advice to gypsy and traveller communities about heating and cooking in caravans, bringing in a British Sign Language Interpreter to work with a particularly vulnerable deaf resident, referring lonely or isolated older people for support and sourcing fire safety advice in multiple languages.

- We monitor participation in our children and young people's programmes. Over a third of Prince's Trust team members are female and nearly six in 10 young people completing the programme declared some form of disability. The number of children and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds taking part in all three programmes is broadly representative of the local population.
- Safety Central, our safety and lifeskills education centre, has secured funding from a number of sources to subsidise coach travel for schools in disadvantaged areas, where children are statistically more likely to be injured or killed in accidents.
- Our trauma care training lead and EDI Advisor attended the Warrington Guru Nanak Gudwara alongside the EDI Advisor and one of the co-chairs of the REACH network to deliver a first aid demonstration to members of the Sikh community. The session also provided an opportunity talk about staying safe and barriers to becoming a firefighter or working for the Service.
- REACH represented the Service at the Warrington Mela, a colourful celebration of Hindu culture held in September. Safety literature and information about career opportunities was given out to festivalgoers. REACH also visited a number of non-Christian places of worship throughout the county during the year including the newly established Wat Phra Singh Buddhist Temple in Runcorn, and the Shah Jalal Mosque and Islamic Centre in Blacon.
- A number of female firefighters have been supporting local women's rugby teams and have also joined the Great British Fire Rugby Union team, which is raising the profile of women in sports and in the emergency services. This is especially relevant given the rise in popularity and success of women's sports, such as the England Lionesses football team.
- Our crews supported nearly a dozen pride events right across the county during summer 2023, promoting safety messages and career opportunities, but more importantly showing our Service stands shoulder to shoulder with the LGBT+ community.





## Our partners

**Aim:** To develop a broad network of active, meaningful partnerships to engage with marginalised groups and understand their needs. The Service will share experiences with other fire and rescue services and public organisations and seek out examples of notable practice elsewhere.

### Objectives:

- develop relationships with **new and emerging specialist EDI groups**
- undertake **external benchmarking** to ensure best practice is followed
- **organise events** to provide learning opportunities for staff, partners and the community
- be active and influential members of the **National Fire Chiefs Council's EDI network**
- work with partners to **target safety messages and promote vacancies**

### Progress this year

- We were once again proud to send representatives to attend the 2023 Asian Fire Services Association (AFSA) Summer Conference at Hertfordshire. Selina Blain, co-chair of the REACH network, Rosie Saxon, the EDI Advisor and Mark Shone, Head of Communications and Engagement attended the event where a range of speakers presented on topics relevant to inclusion in the fire sector.
- In November 2023 representatives from each of our four staff networks attended the AFSA Winter Conference and Awards at Leeds Armoury. They all found it useful to learn more about inclusion and meet people from other fire and rescue services and networks.



- For the first time ever we took part in the Top 50 Inclusive Employers Index, a well-recognised benchmarking scheme that represents all strands of diversity and inclusion. We placed 50th in the list, a significant achievement given more than 200 large private sector companies and public sector organisations take part.



- We renewed our White Ribbon accreditation and established a dedicated steering group to develop an action plan that will set out ways in which we will play our part in eradicating violence against women and girls. The group is chaired by the Head of Prevention and Protection so that our expertise in safeguarding and community engagement can be harnessed in this important work. The steering group has already commissioned a number of well-attended domestic abuse for colleagues.



- As one of its founding partners, we continue to be a committed supporter and sponsor of the Chester Pride charity, which not only hosts Cheshire's flagship LGBT+ pride event each August but also offers a range of support to people of minority sexual orientation and gender identities. In return, Chester Pride carries our 'one team, many superpowers' campaign in its event programme and frequently shares our career opportunities to its followers on social media.
- Three female colleagues took part in the annual Women in the Fire Service (WFS) Development Weekend at the Fire Service College, one of whom is a wholetime firefighter, one an on-call firefighter and one an advocate in the prevention team. This provided an opportunity to network with other women from across the sector, hone operational skills and develop confidence and resilience. The Service also supported WFS's fundraising walk in Mam Tor later in the year.

# Looking forward

The current EDI Strategy runs until the end of 2024. In the coming months, we will be developing a new strategy in consultation with our colleagues and communities to take our equality, diversity and inclusion work to the next level. The new strategy will help us deliver our recently-published Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2024-28 and reflect changing societal and cultural demands on our organisation as a service provider and as an employer.

In addition to developing our new strategy, we will:

- consider the practical impact any changes to the Equality Act 2010 made by the new UK government, including the recognition of socio-economic status as a protected characteristic, strengthening equality impact assessments (EIAs) and expanded pay gap reporting
- launch a new EDI Policy for the Service that underpins the four-year EDI Strategy and action plans and describes in one document the governance mechanisms that enable us to meet our statutory equality obligations
- participate once again in the Top 50 Inclusive companies programme with the aim of improving our current ranking of 50th
- finalise and launch our first Workplace Adjustments Policy, together with supporting guidance for colleagues and managers
- undertake a targeted programme of positive action activity in support of a recruitment campaign for new wholetime firefighters in the late summer of 2024. The aim will be to attract more female applicants and people from minority ethnic backgrounds
- migrate our EIAs to the Service's new document management system, ensuring they are easier to refer to and keep under review
- streamline EDI training and awareness for colleagues by reducing and simplifying the number of e-learning modules to just two, embedding EDI as a theme throughout our existing leadership development programmes and working with our staff networks to run a lively programme of interactive workshops and activities focused on lived experience
- bringing our staff networks together at least twice a year to discuss common themes, ensure their views feed into our new staff engagement strategy and empower co-chairs by creating dedicated budgets for network activities.

# One team, many **SUPERPOWERS**



**SAVING LIVES    CHANGING LIVES    PROTECTING LIVES**

