



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report

2024/25



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Introduction

This annual report provides an update on progress during 2024/25 towards the aims and objectives of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy 2021-24.

During the final 12 months of this strategy's three-year lifespan, we consolidated progress against all four of its themes, which are illustrated on the next page.

We have summarised the work undertaken by colleagues across our organisation against each of these themes, to demonstrate the breadth and depth 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.

In April 2025, we launched our new three-year EDI Strategy, which is entitled **Including Everyone**. It builds on much of the work described in this annual report and we look forward to providing an update on the first year of its implementation in the summer of 2026.

This annual report is a public document, which has been presented to Cheshire Fire Authority's Performance and Overview Committee and is available to download from our website. We will also promote it through our internal and external communications channels in the spirit of openness and transparency required under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty.



If you would like this information in another format or language, please call **01606 868700** or email **equalities@cheshirefire.gov.uk**



We are active members of:



A reminder of our EDI Strategy

The four themes of our EDI Strategy reflect our responsibilities as an employer, a provider of 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, Fire Authority Members and trade union colleagues, all of whom are represented on our EDI Group, which meets quarterly to drive forward the Strategy.



Challenges, opportunities and headlines in 2024/25

- In response to significant national media and stakeholder focus on fire and rescue service culture during 2023/24, the sector has continued to respond to the recommendations of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) **Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services** spotlight report and the National Fire Chiefs Council's **Culture Action Plan**.
- Debate about the **value and impact of EDI** in public and corporate life intensified during general election campaigns at home and abroad. For our Service, diverse perspectives on this issue have become increasingly apparent in our engagement with the community through social media, particularly when we support diverse celebrations or run recruitment campaigns.
- 2024/25 was the first year of our new Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2024-28, entitled **More Prevention, More Protection, Better Response**. The implementation of ambitious projects to change the way we operate some fire engines, and a major review of our Prevention function, required significant engagement with colleagues.



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

Progress this year

- We launched a new **EDI Policy** that describes in one user-friendly document the governance mechanisms, roles and responsibilities that enable us to meet our statutory equality obligations.
- Following consultation with our Divergence neurodiversity staff network and the Business Disability Forum, we developed a **Workplace Adjustments Policy**. This sets out roles, responsibilities and processes for anyone who requires additional support to do their jobs or is looking to progress their career.
- In response to the results of our 2023 Staff Survey, we launched the **Engaging Everyone** internal communications and engagement framework. This provides opportunities for greater dialogue between colleagues and leaders and strengthens the role of our staff networks in shaping the direction of our Service.

Engaging *everyone*

- Our first **Elev8** programme concluded in March 2025, with seven of the 14 participants achieving promotion. The scheme aims to unblock perceived barriers to operational staff from diverse backgrounds progressing to leadership roles through confidence building, reverse mentoring, incident command practice and workshops on topics such as imposter syndrome.
- Our **Wider Horizons** programme, commended by HMICFRS in 2023 as an example of “innovative practice”, continued to open doors for non-uniformed staff (63% of whom are female) to new career development opportunities and secondments.
- The Leadership and Development Team delivered further **Dignity at Work** training sessions to raise awareness of addressing bullying, harassment and victimisation. In response to ongoing coverage of culture issues, we continued to promote our **Who Do I Turn To?** campaign to raise awareness of the advice, support and information available to colleagues.
- Average completion rates of our **EDI e-learning packages** decreased from 79% in 2023/24 to 77% in 2024/25. As a result, work began on a project to review all EDI e-learning in response to colleague feedback. EDI continued to be a golden thread through our in-house induction and leadership development programmes.
- We undertook **modernisations of Knutsford and Winsford fire stations**, significantly improving washroom and toilet facilities for all firefighters and members of the public with disabilities using our community rooms.





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

- We have made significant progress in recent years to diversify our workforce and increase the representation of women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, people with disabilities and colleagues who identify as lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT+).
- Despite our workforce getting smaller in 2024/25, principally as a result of changes to the way we operate some fire engines, overall there was no significant change in this representation. The number of women in the Service increased, but there were very small decreases in the number of ethnic minority, disabled and LGB staff.



	2023/24	2024/25	Change
Total staff in Service	871	839	-32
Total women in Service	210 (24.1%)	219 (26.1%)	+9
Total firefighters and officers	660	619	-41
Female firefighters and officers	77 (11.7%)	75 (12.1%)	-2
Total fire staff	211	220	+9
Female fire staff	133 (63.0%)	144 (65.5%)	+11
Colleagues from minority ethnic communities	52 (6.0%)	49 (5.8%)	-3
Colleagues stating a religion other than Christian	36 (4.1%)	36 (4.3%)	No change
Colleagues declaring a disability	41 (4.7%)	37 (4.4%)	-4
Lesbian, gay or bisexual colleagues*	46 (5.3%)	39 (4.6%)	-7

*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.

- To support the accurate reporting of this data, it was encouraging to see that more colleagues feel comfortable **recording their protected characteristics** on our workforce system, with non-disclosure rates for sexual orientation, for example, falling to 15.9%.
- Thanks to a far-reaching **recruitment campaign and positive action activity**, we almost doubled the number of people applying to be a wholetime firefighter in 2024 compared with the previous year. This included doubling the number of female applicants and a proportion of ethnic minority applicants broadly in line with the overall demographic composition of Cheshire.
- The 2023/24 **Gender Pay Gap Report**, published in March 2025, showed we are maintaining progress in reducing the disparity between average pay for men and women. Although one per cent wider than the previous year, the gap has more than halved to 9.61% compared with 24.6% in 2019. The report, available to read on the Service's website, also shows an encouraging increase in the number of women in higher pay quartiles, which should reduce the gap further in time.
- We strengthened the support we offer to our five **staff networks**, ensuring each has an SLT-level senior sponsor, dedicated administration and events support, and a defined budget to support engagement activity. Twice a year, including on Staff Networks Day in May, the networks come together for joint meetings.

- Network representatives formed a **colleague interview panel** to explore the attitudes to diversity and inclusion of candidates for the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer.
- While not specifically supporting colleagues on the basis of their minority protected characteristics, in the spirit of collaboration our new **Armed Forces Network** became part of our family of staff networks. During the year, members agreed their terms of reference and helped to review our Special Leave Policy, to recognise reserves' training and deployments. They also helped to mark Remembrance Sunday and took part in a 10-mile memorial race.
- Our **Divergence** network continued to go from strength to strength and has developed into a well-attended group providing informal mutual advice and support. This year members updated their terms of reference and started working towards having a neurodiversity champion on each fire station.
- Our longest established network **Firepride** co-ordinated attendance at 2024's pride events and supported fire stations to fly the pride flag during LGBT History Month. Members also took part in a 5km colour run to raise funds for Chester Pride, delivered training on inclusive language to volunteers and helped UK Firepride plan its 2025 national conference.
- It was another busy year for our **Limitless** women's network, which ran events including an International Women's Day Conference, menopause cafes and a Baby Loss Awareness Week coffee morning. Members also organised incident command training sessions, reviewed our menopause risk assessment, started to review our buddying scheme and supported our Step In development programme.
- Our **Race, Ethnicity and Cultural Heritage (REACH)** network focussed on community engagement. Members strengthened relationships with a number of places of worship to offer safety advice, promote careers and learn about faiths, reached out to Cheshire's Chinese community and organised a football game with a Bangladeshi team. They also organised meals to celebrate Diwali, Eid and Black History Month.





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

- Our fire stations are at the heart of our communities and take every opportunity to **engage with people from a diverse range of backgrounds** during the year. Some highlights include:
 - visits to **places of worship** including mosques in Chester and Warrington, the Salvation Army and a Buddhist temple in Runcorn, including the offer of follow-up Safe and Well visits to their communities following civil unrest in other parts of the country
 - supporting organisations that serve **families or people with complex or caring needs** including the Down Syndrome Network, Glendale Family Centre, Hebden Green School, Her Place Charitable Trust, Trewan House Care Home, Halton Haven Hospice, Vivo Care Group and Chester Zoo's Dreamnight for families with children with life-limiting conditions



- o engaging **children and young people** at careers fairs and working with partners to reduce anti-social behaviour and fire-setting
- o engagement with groups that serve **people at risk of isolation** including the Evergreen over 55s group, Gateway Recovery Centre, Danielle Ashley Activities and Dial West Cheshire who use our community room at Chester Fire Station
- Our Protection Teams worked closely with local authorities and housing providers to ensure the safety of accommodation for **asylum seekers** and engage with residents about staying safe. Similarly, inspectors have supported the responsible persons for **specialised housing premises for people with disabilities**.
- The structure of our **Prevention Department** was overhauled so that we can provide an even more inclusive, person-centred approach to helping people stay safe. Our new Persons at Heightened Risk (PaHR) team plays an important EDI role by tailoring fire prevention and safeguarding services to people who are most vulnerable. Through proactive engagement and targeted interventions, the team supports:
 - o **older adults** by delivering Safe and Well visits that address mobility challenges and cognitive impairments through home safety adaptations to support ageing safely at home
 - o **people with physical, sensory or learning disabilities** through tailored fire safety advice and the provision of equipment such as sensory alarms and fire-retardant bedding

- o **people experiencing mental ill-health**, working alongside partners to support those living with hoarding, self-neglect or crisis in a way that is trauma-informed and respectful
 - o **people at risk of domestic abuse** through multi-agency interventions that include home fire safety for survivors, safety planning and discreet risk assessments
 - o **ethnically diverse communities** by collaborating with community groups and interpreters to overcome language and cultural barriers, ensuring that services are inclusive and understood
 - o **people affected by poverty or social isolation** including those experiencing fuel poverty and poor housing conditions, ensuring equitable access to fire prevention support.
- For the second year running, our fire station and headquarters open days included a **quiet hour for families with children who have special educational needs**, with less noise and visual stimulus.
 - Once again, 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.
 - Our firefighters supported a dozen **LGBT+ pride events** in Cheshire during summer 2024, promoting safety messages and our wholetime firefighter campaign. In August, our participation in the Manchester Pride parade – one of the biggest celebrations of diversity in the country – earned us the ‘most joyful entry’ prize.





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 supported colleagues to represent the Service at the 2024 **Asian Fire Services Association (AFSA)** Summer Conference in Nottingham and Winter Conference in Bristol, where a range of speakers presented on topics relevant to inclusion in the fire sector.
- We climbed from 50th to 39th in the **Inclusive Companies Top 50 UK Employers** scheme. More than 200 large private sector companies and public sector organisations take part in this national benchmarking initiative, which encompasses all strands of diversity and inclusion.
- For the second year running we were proud to host at our headquarters and training centre the national **Women Talking Fire** conference. This is an opportunity for female fire safety and engineering professionals to network and learn about the operational needs of crews when attending incidents. This is organised by our Protection team and was this year supported by Crewe's white watch.



- Our **White Ribbon** steering group continued to deliver against its action plan, to help eradicate violence against women and girls. The group is chaired by the Head of Prevention and Protection, to harness our expertise in safeguarding and community engagement. As a result, Congleton Fire Station took part in a national awareness-raising video to mark White Ribbon Day. Chester's blue watch once again hoisted a giant white ribbon from an aerial ladder platform and Crewe's green watch supported partner agencies at an event to signpost people affected by domestic abuse to appropriate support.
- Our EDI Advisor joined a regional fire and rescue service working group to appoint **new uniform suppliers**, undertaking an equality impact assessment to ensure inclusive options are available under the new contracts.
- 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 LGBT+ people. In return, Chester Pride shares our career opportunities to its followers on social media.
- To show girls, young women and people with disabilities that they can enjoy a career in our Service, we supported and sponsored a number of **inclusive grassroots sports teams and events**. These include Widnes Vikings' women's, wheelchair and learning disability rugby teams, the Warrington girls' rugby league team and the Cheshire primary schools' rugby sevens challenge cup organised by Warrington Wolves.
- Once again, three female colleagues participated in the **Women in the Fire Service (WFS) Development Weekend** at the Fire Service College. This popular event offers an opportunity to network with women from across the sector, practice operational skills and develop confidence and resilience.
- One of our watches provides fire safety advice at monthly **Let's Talk multi-agency drop-in sessions**, coordinated by Cheshire West and Chester Council alongside Refugee Assist, housing associations and Cheshire Police, for marginalised communities including East Timorese and other Pacific Island nationals, the gypsy, Roma and traveller community, and refugees.
- We partnered with **Guide Dogs** to familiarise puppies in training with the sights, sounds and smells of an emergency at Northwich Fire Station.



Looking forward

In April 2025, Cheshire Fire Authority approved our new EDI Strategy for the next three years.

Entitled **Including Everyone** and developed in consultation with our staff networks and our EDI Group, the new strategy sets out six missions across the themes of our workplace and our communities.

In our workplace:



everyone can be themselves and feel safe, respected and able to be themselves



everyone has a voice so they can share their experiences and shape our Service for the better



everyone has a fair opportunity to reach their full potential because of their skills and talents, not their backgrounds.

Serving our communities by:



understanding everyone by talking and listening to people from a diverse range of backgrounds



meeting the needs of everyone through services that recognise the different risks and challenges people face



supporting everyone by being proud champions for diversity and inclusion, and strong and visible allies to people who feel underrepresented.

The new strategy is available to [download from our website](#).

It will be underpinned by a detailed action plan and its delivery will be monitored through our EDI Group. We will continue to publish an EDI Annual Report each September, setting out the progress we are making.



Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service

Our Vision is a Cheshire where there are no deaths, injuries or damage from fires and other emergencies.

Our Mission is to help create safer communities, to rescue people and protect economic, environmental and community interests.

We will deliver this through our **Core Values**

Being Inclusive

By acting fairly, with integrity, respect and without prejudice.

Doing the Right Thing

By holding each other to account for ensuring high standards of professionalism in everything we do.

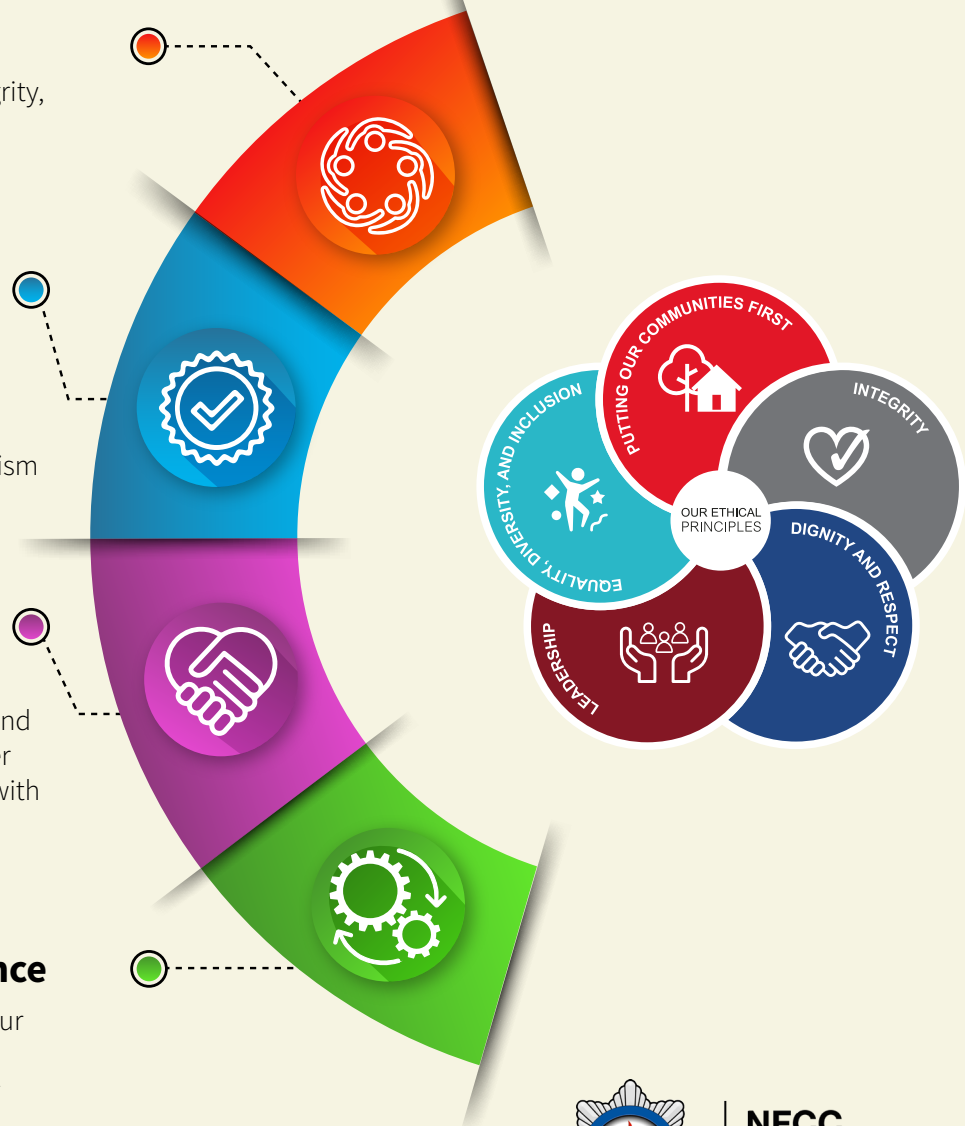
Acting with Compassion

By being understanding and offering help to each other and to our communities with warmth, patience and kindness.

Making a Difference

By making an impact in our organisation and in our communities in whatever ways we can, for as many people as we can.

Recognising the Fire and Rescue Service's **Code of Ethics**



NFCC
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Chiefs Council

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