People Strategy
2022-2025

Contents

Foreword

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Our People

Changing lives, protecting lives and saving lives every day

Our vision is a Cheshire where there are no deaths, injuries or damage from fires or other emergencies. In order to achieve this, our people must feel proud and motivated to work for an organisation that is connected closely to its communities and be committed to changing, protecting and saving lives.

People are our greatest asset and in times of changing demands, appreciating the value of staff and embracing a changing workforce and working environment is more important than ever before.

The pace of technological, social and environmental change and the Covid-19 pandemic has put pressure on our Service in many ways, affecting the way we carry out our core duties and how we look after the well-being of our people. Moving forward, out of the pandemic, we must continue to balance our operational responsibilities with the need to safeguard the well-being of our people, while remaining responsive to the diverse needs of our communities and embracing new, more modern and efficient ways of working.

Attracting the best people to work for us is key to enabling us to deliver our strategic people aims and ensuring we consistently provide an excellent experience for them and the communities they support. We remain committed to maintaining our clear focus on diversity and inclusion, to strengthen our reputation as a compassionate and inclusive workplace. Everyone within our Service is and will continue to be treated fairly, and able to enjoy their work in a welcoming and collaborative environment where they know their contributions are recognised and valued.

Through this strategy and the associated delivery plan, we will deliver on our commitment to supporting, developing and enabling our staff to provide the best possible fire and rescue service to our communities.

02 Introduction and context

According to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS):

> "A well-led fire and rescue service develops and maintains a workforce that is supported, professional, resilient, skilled, flexible and diverse. The service's leaders should be positive role models, and this should be reflected in the behaviour of staff at all levels. All staff should feel supported and be given opportunities to develop. Equality, diversity and inclusion should also be embedded in everything that is done with a wide understanding amongst staff of their role in promoting it."

Set against this backdrop, we were encouraged that the inspection recognised our well-defined values, inclusive culture and the progress made as a result of the previous People Strategy in its first two inspections. We know, however, there is more work to do in the years ahead, with significant challenges to overcome.

The environment and the way that the fire and rescue service operates has changed in the past 15 years, with an overall reduction of fires, greater collaborative working with partner agencies and an increased emphasis on national resilience. All this is set against a backdrop of uncertainty and shrinking budgets.

Over the next three years we will need to navigate ever-more complex internal and external influences and drivers for change that will inevitably impact and shape the way we operate.

HMICFRS

National picture

There are a number of external drivers for change that we need to consider in the delivery of our people strategy. These include the following:

- **Economy:** The UK faces a long road to recovery from Covid-19. There is likely to be significant pressure on public funds with challenging decisions about how to best deliver services while continuing to look after our people. We will need to be transparent about the budgetary pressures we face and involve staff in designing service improvements and new ways of working.

- **Technology:** There is a major push towards a digital approach to service delivery and self-service. We now need to build on what we have learnt during the pandemic to explore how technology can better and more efficiently support our staff and customers.

- **Environmental sustainability:** We must continue to work hard to reduce our carbon footprint by modernising working practices. Agile working and further investment in communications technology could have a significant impact on our need to drive to work.

- **Social divisions:** These are exacerbating through rising unemployment, an ageing population, the digital divide and issues with community cohesion. We need to be conscious of these differences when delivering of our services. The nature of work itself and its balance with life are being tested by changing aspirations of new generations. Covid-19 has shown that we can work differently.

- **Mental health and well-being:** Well-being issues are becoming more complex in our fast paced and challenging world. Access to healthcare will be difficult over the next few years so we need to continue to invest in well-being and plan for bridging that gap

- **Pensions and retirement:** An increasingly older workforce, coupled with the ongoing changes in pensions legislation, will directly impact the number of people we employ. This may result in a loss of expertise over a short period and require greater investment in recruitment and succession planning.

- **Major incidents and events:** The Grenfell Tower fire and the Manchester Arena attack will drive changes to legislation that mean fire and rescue services have to re-evaluate skills, resilience and ways of working. This will have a significant impact on service delivery and reinforce the need for effective training, well-being and safety of our people.

- **Workforce transformation and fire reform:** As highlighted by HMICFRS, the Thomas Review and the Local Government Association (LGA) Fire Vision 2024, workforce transformation is the biggest challenge for our sector. HMICFRS's 2020 State of Fire and Rescue report cites "a woeful lack of race and gender diversity" with only five per cent of fire and rescue staff from an ethnic minority background. We must strengthen our commitment to build a diverse, inclusive and truly representative workforce and build greater trust and understanding of our communities.

The Government's White Paper on Fire Reform will be published during the lifespan of this strategy. It is expected the paper will set the future direction for English fire and rescue services, ensuring we put the public first and become more agile in respect of societal changes. It is also likely to have a significant impact on how we operate, engage with our communities and continue to foster a culture where staff are valued and feel able to give of their best.

Local picture

Some of the areas we need to address include:

- **Representation:** Although progress has been made, we still have too few women and black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) firefighters. Progression is slow and our current recruitment policy does not include a plan to target underrepresented groups to middle and senior management level roles.

- **Succession planning:** We have an ageing workforce and during the life of this strategy the majority of the Service Management Team could retire. There are limited opportunities for middle and senior leaders, particularly in non-operational roles. More needs to be done to support non-operational staff looking for career progression, especially into leadership roles.

- **Reliance on the on-call duty system:** The risk profile and needs of our communities justify an approach to service delivery predicated on on-call firefighters. However, there are significant challenges in recruiting and retaining people to these roles.

- **Local action plans:** Our HMICFRS report and staff survey findings have generated clear priorities for us to work to that will impact ways of working, organisational culture, pensions and professionalism.

- **Blue Light Collaboration:** We are committed to working with our emergency services partners where collaboration provides extra efficiency and effectiveness and where it is appropriate in order to provide a first class service to our people and our communities.

Our proudest achievements

As a result of our 2018-22 People Strategy, we have:

- maintained a top 5 place in the **Stonewall Workplace Equality Index**, reaching 4th in 2018, 3rd in 2019 and 2020 and 2nd in 2022. We have been ranked the most LGBT+ inclusive emergency service in the UK for the past seven years and are currently the top UK public sector organisation

- regularly achieved some of the **lowest sickness absence rates** in the country for our operational workforce and improved our absence management processes through the provision of additional guidance and support for staff

- created clear **core values** in consultation with staff that are widely understood and reflective of the behaviours that are shown at all levels across the Service

- achieved **positive cultural improvements** and improved **staff engagement** as evidenced by the 2021 staff survey with increased visibility of, and accessibility to, senior managers

- developed a **state-of-the-art training facility** to promote high performance, firefighter safety and a culture of continuous improvement and learning

- introduced a **Staff Engagement Forum** that actively progresses and resolves issues that are important to staff with direct sponsorship and support from the Chief Fire Officer

- enhanced our **mental health and well-being** provision, employing a dedicated advisor and creating a steering group and staff-led well-being community group

- made measurable progress in the **recruitment of female and LGBT+ staff** and have acted positively and proactively to improve diversity within recruitment

- achieved **Living Wage Employer accreditation** from the Living Wage Foundation

- launched a world-class **Maternity and Adoption Policy** and doubled the provision for paternity leave

- introduced a new **'Step into Leadership'** programme for new and aspiring supervisors and relaunched our high potential development scheme for future leaders

- led on the development of a **national recruitment hub** and contributed to a range of **national people-related projects** with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC)

- extended the range of **apprenticeship opportunities** for both fire staff and operational staff, including the launch of a **higher apprenticeship degree programme** to support the development of current and future leaders

- introduced more robust processes to ensure the **health and well-being** of our workforce including the implementation of improved arrangements for monitoring adherence to working time regulations and the delivery of fatigue management training

Our Core Values

Be Inclusive

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

Do the Right Thing

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

Act with Compassion

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

Make 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.

Our **Core Values**

At the heart of this strategy are our Core Values, which guide our internal culture as well as our relationships with our communities, stakeholders and partners. The Core Values were developed with colleagues during 2019 and launched in 2020.

In addition to our own Core Values, we fully support the NFCC Core Code of Ethics which sets out five principles to improve cultures and promote inclusion in the sector:

- Putting our communities first
- Integrity
- Dignity and Respect
- Leadership
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Our Strategy
2022 - 2025

We have developed a framework that encompasses and structures the Service's strategic people priorities and objectives. This is referred to as the 'Steps' Framework and aligns the aims and activities to the employee lifecycle under four key stages.
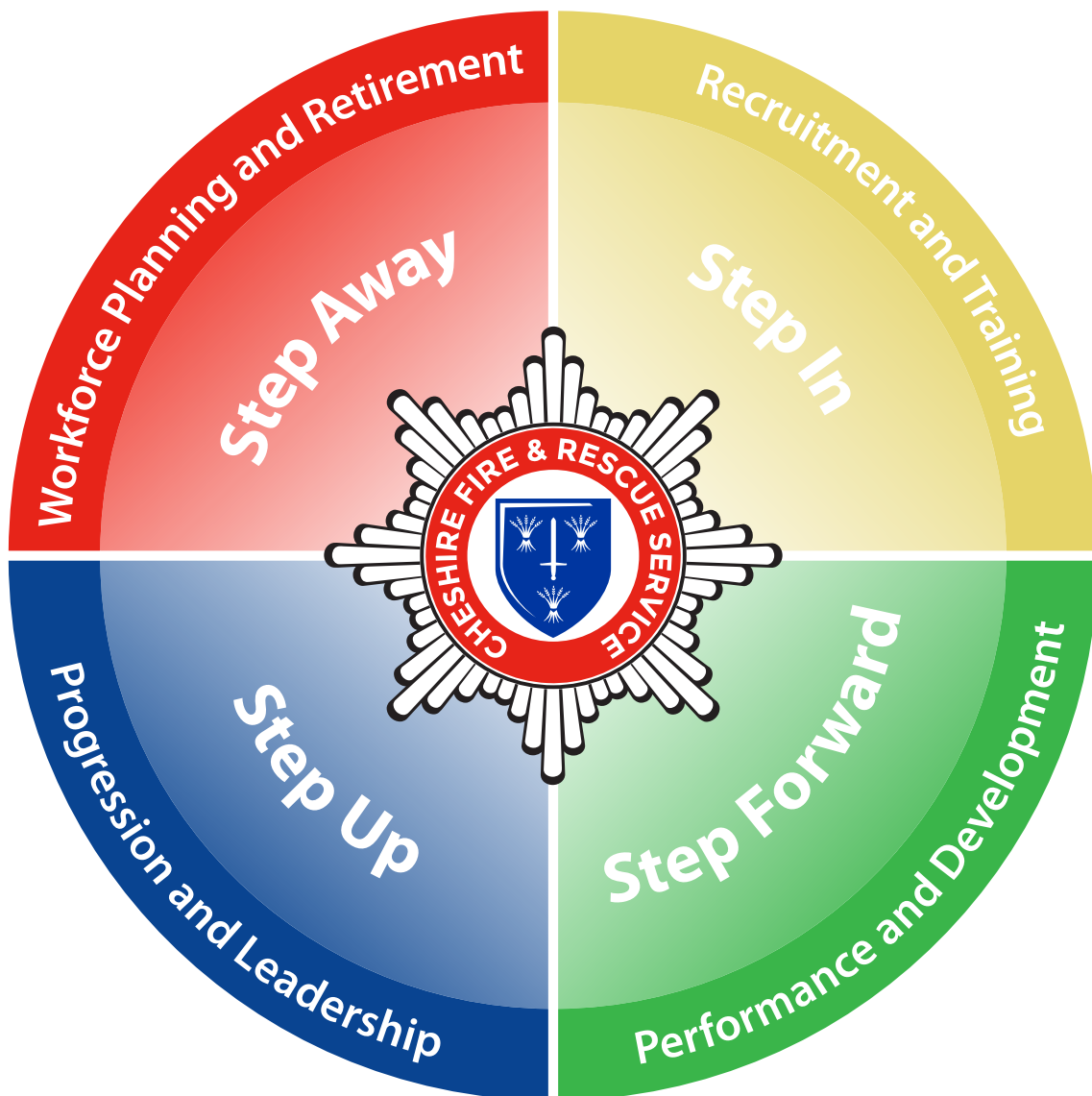
Step In

Recruitment and Training

We aim to employ the right people with the right skills in the right jobs, while upholding high standards of transparency, objectivity and fairness in the way we select staff and acting positively to improve diversity within recruitment. We will ensure that we provide first class training to equip staff with the required skills, knowledge and experiences they need to perform well in their roles. This will be underpinned by a culture of continuous improvement where staff are encouraged to learn and develop new skills throughout their careers.

We will achieve this by:

- Attracting the best people through a modern, forward-thinking approach to recruitment incorporating wider use of social media, creative campaigns and positive action.

- Recruiting people using rigorous, fair and professional selection methods that showcase us as an employer of choice and a family-friendly and inclusive organisation.

- Ensuring there are no barriers in our recruitment processes to improve opportunities for our diverse communities.

- Exploring opportunities to maximise the benefits of the apprenticeship levy through the broadening of apprenticeship opportunities across the service.

- Engaging with young people and under-represented communities to raise awareness of fire and rescue service careers and to break down any negative perceptions and stereotyping of working in our sector.

- Creating different points of entry into our Service to widen opportunities and to improve representation of non-operational staff, females and BAME staff in middle and senior management roles.

- Reviewing recruitment methods for the on-call duty system to improve the candidate journey, develop ways to achieve greater involvement with primary employers and recognise commitment to support retention.

- Providing structured induction and initial training of staff at all levels to ensure they receive the information, guidance and support they need to get the best possible start and to perform their role in line with Service culture.

Step Forward

Performance and Development

We aim to have appropriate support and performance management arrangements in place to maintain our high performance culture and to ensure that staff are supported, rewarded, developed and managed appropriately. This will require us to listen, understand and address the issues affecting staff morale and, in turn, performance through more effective and meaningful engagement with the workforce.

We will achieve this by:

- Creating a shared sense of endeavour and creating a culture of trust and engagement through listening, seeking to understand and acting on feedback that influences staff morale, well-being and performance.

- Strengthening the employee voice and ability to share issues and shape solutions via the Staff Engagement Forum, the Ignite suggestion scheme, staff surveys, exit interviews and through regular dialogue with representative bodies.

- Maintaining an appreciative eye for success, performance and excellence and providing meaningful, timely and memorable reward and recognition.

- Ensuring we have a system of performance management and appraisal that is fit for purpose and consistently applied, and one that encourages ownership and ongoing dialogue to help people achieve their full potential.

- Providing development opportunities for staff at all levels both for role-related skills and for personal development.

- Developing a culture of coaching, mentoring, debriefing and other forms of continuous feedback to achieve a more agile learning environment.

- Equipping and enabling managers to have informed and effective performance management conversations, supported by transparent performance information and regular two-way feedback.

- Ensuring the quality of our HR policies and processes to support, develop and maintain high performance and the delivery of improvements.

- Ensuring our senior leaders and managers maintain visibility, are accessible and consistently model and maintain our core values.

- Identifying opportunities to achieve improvements and to reinforce an environment conducive to change through the commissioning of a series of Service Improvement Reviews.

Step Up

Progression and Leadership

We aim to strengthen organisational leadership and ensure our staff have the best opportunity, experience, knowledge and practical skills to progress in their roles to fulfil both individual career aspirations and organisational requirements. This will require us to ensure we offer both vertical and lateral progression opportunities for all staff in preparation for future opportunities, with specific emphasis on extending development opportunities for non-operational staff. Underpinning progression into leadership roles will be fair and transparent promotion processes that enable the selection of the most appropriate people for leadership roles.

We will achieve this by:

- Widening leadership development and 'on the job' shadowing opportunities for staff to expand their skills beyond existing areas of expertise and knowledge.

- Undertaking a review of promotion processes to ensure they are fair, transparent, understood and communicated effectively.

- Ensuring equal access to leadership development opportunities through the development and promotion of career pathways and progression opportunities for non-operational staff.

- Continuing to transform and develop new leadership programmes and interventions to meet future needs by adopting blended learning approaches and the effective use of technology.

- Seeking opportunities to enable staff to broaden their professional and personal development both within and outside the fire and rescue sector.

- Ensuring we have sufficient accredited workplace assessors, coaches and mentors to support, develop and measure the professional and personal development of staff.

- Developing a bespoke high potential development scheme for non-operational staff to encourage both lateral and vertical progression and to support the retention of key talent.

- Developing organisational and governance skills for leaders and building business acumen.

- Enabling leaders to manage and develop remote teams.

Step Away

Workforce Planning and Retirement

We aim to maximise the capacity of our workforce and futureproof the Service through strategic workforce planning and succession planning. This will take into consideration the challenges of our ageing workforce against a backdrop of an uncertain pensions landscape and the inevitable loss of key skills, knowledge and experience as people retire. It is important we ensure that lost experience will not threaten longer-term performance and we will continue to use workforce and succession planning intelligence to expose: emerging gaps in our leadership; skills; experience and knowledge; and potential future risks. At the same time we are committed to ensuring a well-managed exit for retiring staff with appropriate support provided to assist with future plans, while celebrating long and valuable service.

We will achieve this by:

- Continuing to undertake monthly analysis of establishments to understand and facilitate decision making around recruitment and promotion processes.

- Identifying and understanding where there are key risk/business critical posts and ensuring they are regularly reviewed with plans in place to backfill vacancies as soon as they are vacated.

- Encouraging early discussions about retirement plans to enable both individuals and us to consider implications and put appropriate planning in place for business continuity.

- Reducing the uncertainty and anxiety associated with retirement through the provision of support and independent advice relating to lifestyle and financial planning.

- Developing a suite of 'Step Away' workshops and/or products to prepare staff for retirement and future plans.

- Minimising the loss of investment and retaining valuable skills and experience through the promotion of volunteering opportunites and/or consideration of re-engagement where appropriate.

- Ensuring the effective transfer of critical knowledge and skills prior to retirement through coaching and reverse mentoring.

- Retaining staff through the promotion of options such as changes to working hours, agile working or flexible retirement in order to facilitate a more gradual process of knowledge and skill transfer and better succession planning.

- Ensuring all retiring staff are given appropriate recognition and leave the service with dignity and a sense of achievement.

Supporting strategies

This Strategy is supported by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy which ensures inclusivity and delivery of fair and accessible workplaces and services. It is also supported by the Mental Health Strategy which outlines our commitment to supporting the positive mental health and well-being of our staff.

Both are fundamental to attracting the best people to work for us and support, develop and enable them to provide the best possible fire and rescue service to our communities.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy 2021-2024

The Strategy explains how we have invested significant effort and resource to support EDI and to foster everybody's right to be different, to be valued as individuals and to be afforded dignity in the workplace. It is underpinned by a detailed action plan with progress monitored by our Equality Steering Group, chaired by the Chief Fire Officer.

At the centre of the Strategy is our Core Value ambition to **'be inclusive'** and be recognised as the most inclusive employer in our sector. To do this we will focus on four key themes: Our Organisation, Our People, Our Partners and Our Communities.

Our Organisation
Inclusive leadership
Openness and transparency
Accessible

Our People
Attract
Engage
Develop

Be Inclusive

Our Communities
Build trust and confidence
Keep safe
Understand

Our Partners
Make a difference
Collaborate
Identify

In respect of **'Our Organisation'** we aim to ensure that being inclusive comes as second nature, regardless of the role being fulfilled or the service being provided. All of our senior leaders, Fire Authority members and managers are required to lead by example, encouraging colleagues across the service and beyond to be role models in their own right and champion EDI issues.

In respect of **'Our People'** we intend to attract, recruit and retain the very best talent to firefighting and fire staff roles. The aspiration is that our workforce will reflect the full spectrum of our diverse communities and will feel safe, valued and able to bring their whole selves to work. We want them to feel supported to reach their full potential, regardless of their background or any challenges they have experienced.

We also want to ensure that our HR policies reflect our commitment to being a family friendly and inclusive organisation. Through our Equality Steering Group and in conjunction with HR colleagues we will continue to seek and develop ways to be more agile and supportive in the development of policies, practices and terms and conditions that will attract and secure the recruitment of staff with increasingly diverse needs and preferences.

Our aspiration relating to **'Our Communities'** relates to our desire to ensure that every person we interact with feels they have received the very best service and that we understand their needs. Our frontline staff will understand how EDI impacts on their work and they will carry out their duties in a respectful, empathetic and compassionate manner.

In respect of **'Our Partners'**, we aim to continue developing a broad network of active and meaningful partnerships across all sectors and sections of the community. This will help us to better engage with marginalised groups, understand their needs, develop our EDI expertise and extend our reach.

Our three staff and volunteer EDI networks will play an integral role in the achievement of this aim. They are led by employees, supported by allies and have a seat on the Equality Steering Group.

Mental Health and Well-being Strategy 2021-2024

As a Service and employer we know that the increasingly complex and fast-paced world we live in puts pressures on people and this can have an impact on their health and well-being. We also recognise that the nature of our work is such that firefighters and fire staff may be exposed to traumatic and challenging situations.

By creating a supportive and compassionate environment and culture that enables people to flourish, and work responsibly and safely, we will be able to do right by our people and improve our service to the communities we serve.

To this end in 2021 we published our first Mental Health Strategy. It describes how we will support the mental health and well-being of our staff and how we will encourage the enjoyment of work and life and provides tools and support to cope with life's stresses and occasional sadness. It also outlines how we intend to raise awareness of mental health issues through our work.

Cheshire Fire Authority also approved the appointment of a Mental Health Advisor who works closely with our Fitness Advisor and Health and Safety Advisor. Our Mental Health Steering Group, comprising of a cross-section of people from across our Service, meets quarterly to provide leadership, advice and co-ordination of the work intended to help us become a beacon of excellence for physical and mental well-being.

Our ambition for health and well-being is simple; it is to ensure the experience of working for our Service is positive and that we treat mental health and physical health problems with equal levels of commitment, passion and drive.

Our Mental Health Strategy comprises of **four key elements:**		
1	**Leadership and Responsibility**	We believe that positive health and well-being is everyone's responsibility and requires a visible commitment from all staff, regardless of role or pay grade.
2	**Communication and Education**	We believe that the key to maintaining good mental health and well-being is a systematic programme of engagement, promotion and education.

3	Support and Intervention	We will continue to support and intervene to improve mental and physical health and are committed to increasing organisational confidence, skills and capability to address risks and deal with well-being issues.
4	Culture and Compassion	We believe an open and compassionate culture around mental health is essential to eliminating stigma and promoting a positive environment that reduces the exacerbation of existing mental health problems and concerns. The parity we afford to both physical and mental health is also directly in line with our Core Values

Leadership & Responsibility

Culture & Compassion

Mental Health Strategy

Education & Communication

Support & Intervention

Key benefits

The delivery of our People Strategy will result in:

- all staff having a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills, experience, abilities and attitudes required and expected of them in line with our Core Values.

- us making tangible progress in the diversification of our workforce through the recruitment, development and retention of women, BAME and other underrepresented groups and through the broadening of our apprenticeships

- having a wider range of development opportunities for non-operational staff and an increase in women and BAME staff seeking to progress into middle and senior management level roles

- a resilient, physically healthy and emotionally balanced workforce and a reduction in sickness levels and accidents in the workplace

- staff being able to seek development for role-related support and professional development and having regular and honest feedback through regular performance and career conversations

- leaders having the skills and versatility to sustain change, improvement and excellence

- staff having a voice and the opportunity to be heard through involvement in decision making, problem solving and shaping the future of our Service

- revised promotion and appraisal processes being introduced that are fair, transparent and fit for purpose and support the progression and development of staff

- retiring staff feeling valued and supported, with options available to support them as they transition out of the Service

07 **Making it happen**

This People Strategy provides a high level framework for the three years spanning 2022-2025. Primarily it will be delivered through a detailed annual action plan, progress against which will be performance managed.

Scrutiny of progress against the strategy will be undertaken by the Staffing Committee, which will receive an annual report from the Head of People Services, in their role as strategic lead for people.

We will also ask for feedback from our staff to inform us of our progress on elements within the People Strategy. This will be done through the Staff Engagement Forum, a range of leadership forums and through meetings with representative bodies. Their opinions and suggestions will be used to influence progress.

Our People Strategy is an integral part of the way we work and ownership for its delivery rests across the Service.

Role of the Fire Authority and Service Management Team (SMT)

Both Members of the Fire Authority and SMT are committed to this strategy and believe that it will deliver the Service's vision for the future as an employer. Leading by example, our Members of the Fire Authority and SMT will set the standard for what is expected of all staff.

Role of People Services

People Services, one of the joint corporate services, will have overarching responsibility for monitoring and providing progress updates on the plan and determining how the respective priorities will be resourced and actioned. Responsibility for the identification of priorities will rest with SMT and the Head of People Services.

Role of our staff

This strategy will only be successful if our staff support it, making the vision of what the organisation will look like a reality. Staff will not only assist in the delivery of its actions, but they will also demonstrate their support through their behaviour and attitudes.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Measures of Success

We will develop some Key Performance indicators and measures of success to help monitor and recognise the progress of this strategy. Our two-yearly staff survey will also provide insight into the motivations, attitudes and behaviours of our staff.

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