



Community Compass Advisory Group

Summary Minutes: 24th October 2024

Lewes HQ and online via MS Teams



Attendees - Redacted

Chair: DFCO DN ESFRS

GG

NG

LA

MA

NB

CW

JD

JM

CS

SG

KD

LA-L

JS

MB

HY ESFRS

AM ESFRS

DJ ESFRS

Apologies -Redacted

T C-G

KS

RK

AKS

HG

ISB

AA

KG

Welcome & Introductions.

DFCO DN led round table introductions and welcomed all advisors to the inaugural meeting of the Community Compass Advisory Group (CCAG)

Actions from previous meeting

There were no recorded actions to update

CCAG Background & ESFRS Overview

DFCO DN described the establishment of CCAG stating that it was modelled on the principles of independent advisory groups to consider the voices of diverse groups and communities and to inform ESFRS thinking around future planning and organisational culture.

DFCO DN described the wide range of activity carried out by the Service beyond firefighting and rescue which the public were often not aware of, clarifying that the service is primarily 'here to serve'. They crystallised the core principles of Service activity by referencing the fire service response to the Grenfell Tower fire, including '*how well the fire service works with our partners to understand the complex lives of our communities and to reduce risk.*'

DFCO DN outlined the details of ESFRS's medium term plan, which is due to be approved by the Fire Authority in 2026. They stated it was the Service's intention to have broader, more considered involvement from the public – to understand the needs of our communities and the areas of risk & vulnerability. This approach was especially important post Covid pandemic, as there is recognition that people, communities and staff alike live more complex lives. To support this endeavour, ESFRS welcomes the involvement and expertise of our community partners.

DFCO DN highlighted challenges that future financial constraints will have on the Service's intention to maintain current levels of service delivery, response service, prevention work and protection (enforcing fire legislation). They stated that choices would need to be made around aspects of delivery that the Service provided and welcomed involvement with advisors to ensure the choices ESFRS makes, are the right ones. DFCO DN referenced high profile cases which had damaged public confidence in policing and the health service in recent years, noting that while fire service culture had been relatively sheltered from public scrutiny, it was not unaffected. DFCO DN highlighted recent incidents of bad behaviour among employees of other fire

services, which had been exposed at the national level via external reviews and media coverage. They stated that while ESFRS does not experience behaviour problems to the same extent or systemically as other services – it is not immune and emphasised how important it was to maintain public confidence, while retaining the highest levels of public service.

DFCO DN recognised how valuable advisors and CCAG would be to support ESFRS's aspiration of attracting and retaining good people and to be as representative of our communities that we can; All within the context of a healthy organisational culture.

Meeting Chairperson: Roles and nominations

DJ described the role of CCAG Chairperson and provided context around ESFRS's decision to establish. DJ outlined how independently chaired advisory groups within the public sector were a recommendation of the 1999 Stephen Lawrence inquiry, stating that independence of the Chair supported CCAG's integrity and served to promote trust and confidence within the diverse communities which ESFRS serves.

DJ invited all advisors interested in the role to apply directly to themselves. A new Chair would be appointed in time of the next meeting following a ballot among advisors.

Action 01: DJ to invite all advisors to apply for role of Chair/Co Chair and organise subsequent advisor ballot

Advisor's comments

Advisors suggested adoption of a co-chair or rolling chair role. DJ clarified they would include some optional role choices in the ballot.

Wholetime Recruitment Programme

AM described how ESFRS were embarking on a recruitment programme for wholetime firefighters, they said this was an excellent opportunity for the Service to attract and successfully recruit as diverse a range of applicants as possible. AM sought insight from advisors about strategies ESFRS could adopt to achieve this aim, alongside those that the Service considered before.

AM provided a detailed overview of the varied roles that Firefighters carried out, including operational response work and community engagement activities under ESFRS's prevention strategy and the core skills required to undertake those complex roles, including essential and desirable criteria for application.

AM described in detail, a robust recruitment process which included pre-recruitment events, assessments to measure physical fitness, communication skills, core abilities & behaviours and compliance checks.

Advisor's comments:

- Regarding recruitment prerequisites: Advisors sought clarity around the 'desirable criteria' of applicants holding a full valid UK driving license. They asked if this would exclude applicants from continuing the recruitment process? Citing that for many younger people (below 25), driving is expensive, and in the university campus context- discouraged. Advisors noted that location of the training centre at Maresfield for physical assessment could affect people's ability to attend if they did not have access to a vehicle. HY responded that other locations like Sussex University had been used in the past and AM acknowledged that 'Have-A-Go' days took place across East Sussex on a regular basis.
Some advisors asked about the exact wording for prerequisite English Language. They acknowledged that English was essential, but that current wording could imply applicants have to speak English at equivalent level to native UK speaker, (which could discourage people with English as a second language). Advisors suggested incorporating an additional line like; *"we value other languages that are representative of our communities* to support inclusivity. AM agreed this was something ESFRS could consider at an early stage of the application process
- Regarding the interview: Advisors asked if the two interviewers on the panel were members of the Service? AM acknowledged that although this was presently the case, it was ESFRS's aspiration to invite advisors to joint those recruitment panels for independent insight. Advisors acknowledged the value of having independent panel members at interviews, for the depth of perspective they bring to the process. HY also acknowledged that the questions asked at interview under the ESFRS Leadership and Behavioural Framework, were in line with National Chief's Fire Council (NFCC) standards – which in turn had been developed in consultation with external partners.

AM provided an overview of ESFRS key demographics. As of October 2024, ESFRS employed 413 males and 213 females. In terms of firefighters; ESFRS employs 222 males (88.8%) and 28 women (11.2%) respectively. Regards Ethnicity, 88% of all staff defined themselves as White British, with a further 3.1% as other White. This compares with an East Sussex average of 93.3%, Brighton and Hove 85% and nationally 81% respectively.

Regards sexual orientation, AM noted comparatively high numbers (29.7%) of staff who preferred not to say/leave blank, compared with 2.2% who stated they were LGB (This compares with 10-11% self-defined LGB across East Sussex and Brighton & Hove respectively), with the remainder identifying as heterosexual. AM noted that changes were being made to the system (Firewatch) we use to monitor our equalities data. In future fields being left blank will not be available and the option 'prefer not to say' will remain.

Using statistics from the previous recruitment campaign in 2021, AM described how, out of 1137 applications received, 135 females applied to join ESFRS as Wholetime Firefighters (an increase of 38 since 2017), 146 candidates identifying as ethnic minorities applied (an increase of 121 since 2017) and 156 LGBTQ+ candidates applied (an increase of 94 since 2017). From these applications: 27 candidates were recruited, with 24 still in service. Of those who remained, 24 candidates identified as White British, 21 were male and 18 identified as heterosexual. AM noted that while these final successful candidates were not as representative as the Service had hoped for – they did represent the best candidates for the role based on a very thorough recruitment process.

Advisor's comments:

- Regarding demographics. Advisors asked what processes or facilities were in place to encourage transgender employees to feel comfortable at work as their authentic selves, confident that they would not be subject to discrimination? Were there support systems in place e.g. gender-neutral facilities (GN) to encourage TNBI inclusivity? DJ responded that ESFRS does operate fully within current EDI legislation, (based around 2010 Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty) and ESFRS continued to work to improve confidence for TNBI colleagues at all levels. DFCO DN acknowledged that ESFRS GN facilities were currently inadequate. This was because much of ESFRS's estate portfolio was built prior to the mid-1960s. DFCO DN clarified that as facilities come up for refurbishment (like the ongoing Preston Park development) updates of this nature will be considered during planning.
- Advisors asked about aspects of gender diversity within the Service's demographic questions, noting that ESFRS were just using Male/Female and prefer not to say as pronoun options. They suggested adopting more nonbinary or transgender inclusive options to reflect current best practice. This approach may encourage people from those communities to apply or feel more comfortable at work if they felt they were being represented. DJ agreed and responded that changes to the demographic questions ESFRS asks about gender were already underway. (Update. changes confirmed to be incorporated into the next version of Firewatch in Jan 2025).
- Advisors asked about ESFRS current age demographics re older people. HY responded that the average operational age within ESFRS was 46 and that our recruitment process tends to encourage candidates for across the age spectrum. HY described how working patterns were changing, people didn't necessarily want a 30-year career, some applicants were now older – 'post career' looking for more of a vocational role. DFCO DN stated that with a higher operational age – there was some imperative on the Service to diversify the workforce and encourage younger people to join.

AM outlined several recruitment strategies which the Service had undertaken to encourage applications. Most were open to all, but there were also events targeted towards less represented groups under the auspices of 'Positive Action.' These included: A Wholetime recruitment newsletter, targeted social media campaigns, online career events and 'Have a Go Days.'

Advisor's comments

- Regarding female recruitment, advisors asked if ESFRS had details of those who attended Have-A-Go Days and who were subsequently successful in the selection process. And, whether attending Have-A-Go Days were mandatory prior to formal application to join the fire service? They asked if attending Have-A-Go Days had improved the success rates of applicants who took part? (Re Positive Action, Have-A-Go Days applied especially to females because they could prepare for the level of physical exertion/techniques required to pass the physical selection process). DFCO DN and AM responded that Have a Go Days were not mandatory and agreed this was something for ESFRS to consider. This was especially apt as failure to pass the physical selection process was used as a 'filter' to remove candidates from the recruitment process, owing to the very high volume of initial applicants.

- Advisors suggested that people leading Have-A-Go Days, did not have to come from a pool of firefighters. There would be merit in colleagues from staff backgrounds or other fields – (especially females) who had passed the test to demonstrate that it was achievable.
- Advisors asked why none of the candidates who had applied for the role of Wholetime Firefighter from ethnically diverse backgrounds had been successful – was there anything within ESFRS application processes that was not equitable? AM agreed that ESFRS would explore the reasons.
- Advisors asked, in order to improve accessibility, whether ESFRS had considered training videos on Youtube or similar platform? To explain training techniques to applicants prior to attending training or Have-A-Go Days. In some ways taking the recruitment process back even further.
- Advisors asked if ESFRS had considered working with refugees? Pointing out that many refugees were already skilled, motivated and had good English language skills. DFCO DN acknowledged that ESFRS engages with these groups already via community safety / fire prevention work but had not considered turning those relationships into a recruitment opportunity. Advisors cited 5000 Afghan and Iraqi ex-soldiers who had moved to the UK, who were physically fit with good English skills as an example of this potential recruitment pool. Advisors also confirmed that many eligible refugees have a right to work within the UK. Advisors highlighted there were several organisations within East Sussex who work with local business to enable refugees into work. DJ requested contact details of those within ESCC or UK Govt to follow up.

Action 02: DJ/AM Ascertain the number of candidates who have attended have a go day and successfully completed the recruitment process, compared with those who did not.

Action 03 DJ/AM Identify which stages of the recruitment process, candidates from ethnically diverse backgrounds were screened out and ascertain the reasons where possible.

Action 04: DJ request details regarding refugee organisations & working contacts

Standing Items

DFCO DN asked advisors to consider possible standing items for future agendas. Examples might include:

- Future infrastructure planning
- Updates on major incidents
- Topical events relating to fire service provision

Any other business

- Advisors requested whether it would be possible to visit one of the bigger fire stations to see exactly how they work and what they do there. DFCO DN agreed this was a good idea and is something we will consider organising soon.
- Could ESFRS explore the engagement possibility of a sponsored challenge cup for Sussex and Brighton University female sports teams – many ex-students remain within East Sussex, and this may have recruitment opportunities going forwards.
- Meeting protocol for future meetings to schedule a break mid-way.