

MEETING

**HUMAN RESOURCES AND
EQUALITIES PANEL**

AGENDA ITEM

9

MEETING DATE

16th July 2004

DOCUMENT NUMBER

HRE 145

SUBJECT

Staff Support Groups - Update

REPORT

(01.07.04) by the Head of Equalities

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the progress of staff support groups recognised by the Authority since the last report to HRE Panel on 20th February 2003.

RECOMMENDATION

That the report be noted.

BACKGROUND

1. A concern raised by the Home Office Thematic Review in 1999 was the lack of a framework to provide support to those staff that are most likely to experience discrimination or unfair treatment.
2. The Authority is committed to consult all sections of staff in the formulation of policy, so that decisions are informed by the experiences of staff at all levels and across all groups.
3. The CRE has also recommended that staff support groups be used as part of the consultation process for Equality Impact Assessments.
4. This report notes the progress of the staff support networks developed to meet the Home Office recommendation "that all brigades review their arrangements to ensure that all staff can gain high quality personal help and support in any circumstance when they need it", to provide support groups with access to principal management level and vice versa, and to provide a consultative route to obtain feedback on proposed internal and service delivery policy.

CURRENT SITUATION

5. There are currently five non-union staff support groups recognised by the Authority:

- Staff with Disabilities Group
- Fairness
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) Support Group
- Networking Women in the Fire Service (NWFS)
- Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA)

Staff with Disabilities Group

6. The group is open to both operational and non-operational disabled staff members, and to those who have an interest in disability issues. Bi-monthly meetings are held at which topics of interest are discussed and approaches to the Authority are formulated.
7. The group was actively involved in providing advice and assistance to Communications Department for the Authority's contribution to Deaf Awareness Week, held on May 6th 2004.
8. The event raised awareness of deaf culture and the issues facing deaf and hearing-impaired staff members. Workshops were held by the British Deaf Association and the Royal National Institute for the Blind, which were well received. The keynote speaker was Clive Mason, presenter on BBC's 'See Hear' programme, and a video called 'Share Our Experience', with staff members discussing the issues they face at work, was produced for the event. The BBC has expressed an interest in featuring this video in a future edition of 'See Hear'.
9. There has also been recognition within the group of the need for British Sign Language users (deaf, hearing impaired and interpreters) to meet regularly as a sub group to practice and develop their skills, for the benefit of both existing and potential staff, as well as service users.

Fairness

10. Fairness, the support group for both operational and non-operational BME staff, continues to provide development opportunities for BME staff.
11. Group members offer advice and assistance on completing application forms, sitting Assessment Centres, and interview techniques. The group also works with the Authority on raising awareness of BME issues and assisting in resolving workplace conflict.
12. Fairness has formed strong links with BME staff groups from other statutory organisations, including the Home Office, Metropolitan Police Service and the Prison Service.

Lgbt Support Group

13. The lgbt support group has maintained regular meetings and social events at external venues. The group is open to both operational and non-operational staff, and has made links with other organisations such as Southwark LGBT Network.

14. The Authority has consulted with the group on the development of support mechanisms for LGBT staff, and the group were also instrumental in organising the LGBT open day for potential trainee firefighters.
15. After a successful initial event and attendance at Pride 2002, unfortunately no event was held last year due to industrial action. The support group has been involved in the organisation of this year's events on 3rd July, being arranged by Communications Department.
16. The group's members are also exploring the feasibility of the Authority's participation in the World AIDS Day festival on December 3rd 2004.

Networking Women in the Fire Service (NWFS)

17. The London Region of NWFS is part of a larger established national network, and is open to all staff. There are currently 75 members in the London Region.
18. This year, the Authority was co-host of the biannual conference, which was held at the Fire Service College in Moreton-in-Marsh. The conference, with over 200 attendees, held workshops on subjects ranging from stress management to practical leadership skills.
19. London Region also held a Networking and Teambuilding Day on 3rd October last year at Southwark Training Centre. The day was open for all LFEPA staff to attend. 15 NWFS members facilitated and provided training on the day, with a further 38 delegates attending. The event received very positive feedback, and the group hope to hold a further event on 10th December this year.
20. NWFS are now established as a source of advice and representation on women's operational issues nationally, and provide an information resource for members and other organisations on request.
21. Nationally, NWFS is supported by subscriptions from fire services as well as from individuals, and now employs part-time staff to help with administration. Each region, however, is required to raise funds to pay for local events, and to contribute towards the cost of national events.

Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA)

22. AFSA is a newly established national organisation open to all operational and non-operational staff, which aims to provide advice and support to fire authorities on issues affecting the Asian community and Asian staff.
23. AFSA works with Fairness and other BME support groups.

FUNDING

24. £20,000 annually has been included in the budget for 2004/05 and the Authority on 22nd July will be asked to release this sum from the Reserve for New Developments Foreseen, and make provision for this sum annually to further facilitate the aims and activities of under-represented staff and support networks. The funds will be held and allocated by the Training and Development Department.

CONCLUSION

25. The groups provide an opportunity for staff to network with other staff, and to provide support, advice and information valuable to individual staff members and to the Authority.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985	
List of background documents	
Nil	
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