



# AFSA Response to the Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade

**27 November 2022**

***The Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA) is an independent inclusive employee led support group operating within UK Fire & Rescue Services with the desire to raise the profile of Asian staff and associated issues. AFSA represents 43 fire and rescue services in the UK & altogether 53 organisations (See Appendix 1)***



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**ALL CFOs/CEOs – UK Fire & Rescue Services**

**2<sup>nd</sup> November 2022**

Dear CFOs/CEOs

As you will be aware, on 26 November 2020 the London Fire Brigade, published the outcome of an Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade.

Subsequently AFSA has written to the Fire minister, Chair of the NFCC, London Fire Commissioner, Andy Roe & all Chief Fire Officers & AFSA & has been in discussions with key stakeholders exploring ways of working together.

The purpose of this letter is to set out suggestions and to offer the NFCC the support of the AFSA in addressing the report's findings & recommendations.

The report concluded the following:

- The London Fire Brigade is “institutionally misogynist and racist”.
- The review’s author, Nazir Afzal OBE, said a “toxic culture that allows bullying and abuse” was found in the brigade in addition to “dangerous levels of ingrained prejudice against women”.
- Staff from ethnic minorities were more likely to be subject to disciplinary action, less likely to be promoted, largely unrepresented at senior levels and frequently racially abused.
- There were failings in the brigade's processes which meant that women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic people and members of the LGBT+ community were more likely to experience poor treatment and do less well in their careers.
- In some watches there appeared to be a deep resistance to women being firefighters, and senior figures explained that the approach of male colleagues was to “treat you badly and hope to get rid of you”.

Nazir Afzal said he hoped the review would be a “turning point” so that all firefighters could enjoy dignity at work and not have to run a gauntlet of abuse from colleagues.

The need to act now should not come a surprise to any one of us. This recent report, however, is not a ‘watershed moment’. Many reports, from the very first Tom Burke

report in 1974, have consistently pointed to the need to review a range of leadership and cultural issues as well as taking specific steps to improve practices linked to recruitment, retention, progression and the wider cultural issues of equality, fairness, dignity and respect. These have included: the fire service Thematic Review - Equality and Fairness in The Fire Service Report (1999); Smoke and Mirrors Report (AFSA 2018) and the Independent Cultural Review of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service. This is an issue that has not disappeared within our organisations and the fire service needs to commit to making real and substantial change now.

At the same time, we are of the view that real variations in practice exist across and within fire and rescue services with many providing positive evidence of good practice and workplace culture. Our range of toolkits and guidance documents include positive case studies which are available from the AFSA's website.

We would also like to stress that cultures within the fire and rescue services are not monolithic or homogeneous. The challenge for all fire and rescue services is to identify the centres of good practice and focus on likely 'hotspots'. Furthermore, we believe that fire and rescue services need to recognise three positive aspects highlighted in the report.

*Firstly*, at their best, the report finds, London firefighters work closely, look out for each other and share a keen sense of pride and purpose. "The work is frequently dangerous, so their closeness is based on a need for firefighters to be able to completely rely on each other and trust colleagues with their life". *Secondly*, "when it comes to saving lives, apparently firefighters do not discriminate its like someone pulls a switch they change when they are on the fire ground. It's like they remember why they are firefighters". We feel this conclusion needs testing as we are aware of isolated cases in which certain communities do not receive the same level of service. Likewise, our knowledge of other sectors indicates that where staff are hostile towards certain groups, this is reflected in the service delivered. *Thirdly* the work undertaken by the fire and rescue service in terms of engagement with communities focusing on prevention.

We believe the requirement for closeness, trust and the reasons people become firefighters could be key vehicles in addressing problems of behaviour, professionalism and civility. This could, therefore, provide an opportunity to help foster an environment where individuals and team members challenge each other on unacceptable behaviour to improve standards.

In our view, the report highlights the need to see the challenge not simply as an ED&I issue but as a commitment to creating a healthy and high performing organisation, underpinned by organisational values. This is, therefore, about Culture and Transformation and needs commitment from leadership to creating and maintaining a fair and supportive working environment and culture, in which

contributions are fully recognised and valued by all, and staff empowered to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities. In summary, as shocking as the testimonies in the report are, they are the symptoms of deeper, underlying issues that need to be addressed.

Doing so requires close partnership working involving the key stakeholders; HMICFRS, NFCC, Home Office, trades unions, Women in the Fire Service and others who are prepared to take responsibility and, ultimately, accountability. The AFSA has a long history of bringing together diverse stakeholders as demonstrated by the [‘Smoke & Mirrors Report’](#).

On behalf of the AFSA, we encourage all fire and rescue services to consider the following key actions:

- Acknowledge the report and respond to the findings and recommendations and treat it as another step in our journey towards creating a workplace where everyone belongs.
- Build an outcome-based dashboard that demonstrates how we have moved on from input-based action lists.
- Engage and listen to all staff networks and note their lived experience.
- Management and trades unions to work together to challenge unacceptable behaviour and engage in preventative activities that ensure poor behaviour does not happen.
- Invest and project the influence of those leading on cultural transformation and equality, diversity and inclusion by ensuring they have access to the senior leadership team and principal officers.
- Recognise that policies and procedures help but also the value of investing in ‘Bystander’ training that encourages individuals and teams to challenge unacceptable behaviour in a ‘self-policing’ way.
- Lead in creating a culture that enables a great work experience and sense of belonging for employees and therefore a great experience for the communities served.
- Adopt best practice on culture and improvement to scale at pace and as part of the organisation’s work to create ‘psychological safety’ for all staff.
- Invest in developing capacity to understand and facilitate culture change which is transformational rather than transactional.
- Convene experts, academics and leaders to review, consider and develop evidence to inform strategy and policy.
- Develop analytics and best practice to help inform approaches to cultural transformation and identify areas of good practice and hotspots.
- Take a strategic approach – national, regional and local.

The AFSA can support the process of cultural transformation across fire and rescue services and is committed to focusing on the following activities:

- Highlighting and communicating the latest evidence-based practice that targets *'collective leadership'* and which enables a just culture to thrive and which includes continuous improvement and equal partnerships where hierarchy is not a barrier and leaders are role models (visible, approachable, caring and supportive).
- Promote and advance the concept of *'civility and belonging'*, acknowledging that the way we treat each other is part of human factors – communication, teamwork and performance.
- Encouraging a *'climate of trust'*, by valuing diversity and engaging in healthy conflict.
- Encourage staff to *'speak up'* and ensure organisations listen and act on what is shared.
- Advance the evidence that suggests a *'positive staff experience'* equals great service delivery and health and wellbeing for our staff.
- Share the latest on the innovative *'culture and outcomes dashboard'* and explore cultural variations in your organisation.

We pledge to review the report in detail and redouble our efforts nationally and regionally to support cultural transformation. This will include regional events and our two 2023 National Conferences which will focus on the Independent Culture Review. Furthermore, we applaud the London Fire Brigade for taking this crucial step and we look forward to working with them and other fire and rescue services to creating an environment that is welcoming to all and we all work to implement the adage *'No one is safe at work unless everyone is safe'*.

Finally, we would welcome a 1-1 meeting with yourself & your respective teams in 2023 to look at ways of working together in 2023.

Sincerely



**Dalwinder Rai**  
AFSA Chair



**Jagtar Singh OBE**  
AFSA National Advisor

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