

# Wholetime Firefighter Recruitment Campaign 2020/21

## Report for the Chief Fire Officer

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### 1 Executive Summary

This report gives an overview of the 2020/21 Wholetime Firefighter recruitment campaign in terms of applicants; and outlines applied recommendations from the 2018 campaign, with further recommendations for future campaigns.

### 2 Recommendations

The Service Management Team is asked to:

- a) Note the report
- b) Note the recommendations for future campaigns.

### 3 Background

In August 2020, the Service instructed HR Solutions Hub Consultants to manage the online application and testing process for the 2020/21 Wholetime Firefighter Recruitment Campaign. The objective of this service was to manage the registration and sifting of applicants using SIFT (computerised system) which utilises the National Fire and Rescue Services ability tests. This resulted in a final list of successful applicants for shortlisting to progress to Job related testing.

The initial sifting process was entirely managed by HR Solutions using the specialist national Fire and Rescue Service ability tests. The Service were provided with a database of applicants and a breakdown of data at each stage of the process. The campaign opened on 9 November 2020 with various key dates set for three stages of psychometric and general ability tests. The opening process attracted 1047 applicants. The sifting process closed on 10 December 2020.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and the national lockdowns affecting the Job Related Tests and role play exercises, the entire recruitment process concluded on 7 June 2021. Six new recruits started employment with Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) on 1 July 2021. The breakdown profile of the new recruits are two white females and four white males.

## **4 Summary of Campaign**

SFRS follow the National Firefighter selection process which has been developed to standardise selection for new Firefighter recruits across all the Fire and Rescue Services (FRS). Some FRSs have deviated from the standard process making adjustments to suit local needs. A review of the Service's 2018 campaign made recommendations to determine if local adjustments were required to maximise opportunities to improve diversity in its recruit selection processes. The recommendations were incorporated into this campaign in that previous unsuccessful female applicants were contacted to attend a structured fitness boot camp. Fitness training programmes were circulated to give candidates advice and guidance. Postcode restrictions were again applied to applicants and the service offered both full time and part time working as a desired option. Due to the pandemic the fitness boot camp closed part way through the programme, however, one of the female candidates who participated in the boot camp successfully secured a position in the final intake of 6 new recruits.

### **Application process**

The application stage of the campaign ran for approximately 4 weeks with strict cut off dates. The initial registration stage attracted 1047 applicants however the computerised process eliminates those that are not eligible to apply for reasons such as postcode restrictions, and the overall sift gave a total of 911 eligible applicants. Data breakdown of minority groups follows for each stage of the process:

173 females (19%) 71 BAME (8%), 1 transgender (0.1%), 11 candidates applied for a job share contract (1.2%) and 655 males (71.7%)

### **Assessment 1: Behavioural Styles Questionnaire (BSQ)**

The BSQ assessments measure typical behaviour and preferences in a work related environment. The purpose of the test is to assess whether the applicant has the behaviours and attitudes required to undertake the role effectively. A standard consultancy advised percentile rating (calculated against the percentage of applicants completing the tests) is applied as a pass score. This is consistent with the Service's previous campaigns and with other FRS campaigns ensuring a consistent and fair approach for all applicants. Out of 911 applicants, 510 passed this part of the assessment:

83 females (16%), 35 BAME (7%), 6 Job Share (1.2%) and 386 males (75.8%)

### **Assessment 2: Situational Judgement Test (SJT)**

The SJT assesses judgement and decision-making skills in relation to situations relevant to the role. Again, a standard advised percentile rating was applied as a pass score. 510 applicants were invited to this stage and 472 successfully passed this part of the assessment:

78 Females (17%), 34 BAME (7%) 5 Job Share (1%) and 355 males (68%)

### **Assessment 3: Ability Tests**

The ability tests consist of two parts: verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning. Numerical Reasoning measures an applicant's ability to understand, interpret and evaluate numerical information. Verbal Reasoning measures an applicant's ability to understand and interpret written information. The applicant is required to answer a series of questions to demonstrate their ability to interpret and analyse verbal information. This part of the testing process is competitive in that applicants are competing against each other to gain the highest scores.

472 applicants were invited to this stage and 452 successfully completed this part of the assessment:

75 Females (17%) 26 BAME (6%) 4 Job Share (0.8%) and 105 males (76.2%)

A percentile pass score is not set at this stage as it is the highest scoring applicants that are top sliced and invited to the Job Related Tests. In previous campaigns, the Service has worked with higher numbers at this stage but due to COVID-19 restrictions in the early part of 2021, the maximum number of candidates that could be safely accommodated within the timescales was 140. Restrictions were also due to kit availability and the need to clean kit following use.

### **Job Related Tests (JRTs)**

The JRTs are comprised of the National Firefighter Selection practical tests and include:

- Enclosed space
- Equipment assembly
- Equipment carry
- Ladder climb
- Casualty evacuation
- Ladder lift simulator

The tests are designed to assess fitness in relation to the requirements of the role. 140 candidates were invited to the JRTs:

25 Females (18%) and 3 BAME (2.1%) 1 Job Share (0.7%) and 71 males (79.2%)

Of the 25 female candidates, six did not attend and six failed the tests. One BAME candidate also failed the tests. HR contacted the females who failed to show to determine their reasons. General reasons consisted of no longer interested, role was not what they thought it would be and recruited to other jobs due to COVID-19. 106 applicants were successful at the JRTs.

### **Role Plays**

The role plays are carried out by trained external assessors and have been designed as a practical combination of comprehension, presentation and role play exercises. This measures competencies, leadership qualities and other relevant criteria.

106 candidates were invited to the role play assessments and again due to restrictions, the Service modified the arrangements for these. The role play exercise took place in the form of a telephone conversation and candidates were invited into Headquarters to carry out the assessments. Previously assessments have been carried out face to face. The breakdown of the 106 candidates:

13 Females (12%) 2 BAME (1.8%) and 91 males (86.2%)

### **Interviews**

The questions were developed in line with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Leadership Framework and incorporated behavioural style questioning to ensure inclusion and to identify different ways of thinking and behaving to enable a creative, flexible and innovative workforce. Three interview panels were set up consisting of a HR Officer and Station Manager. Watch Managers were offered the opportunity to volunteer to be a panel member. This offered individual personal development and also the opportunity to engage with the process of recruiting their potential watch members. All panel members received standardisation briefings to encourage consistency with their approach to interviewing skills and techniques and all panel members undertook formal interview skills and unconscious bias training.

In conjunction with consultancy advice and a comparison of other FRS data the percentile pass mark was set resulting in 63 candidates attending for interviews. The interviews were conducted during May 2021. This data shows a positive representation of minority groups:

12 Females (19%) 2 BAME (3%). 49 males (78%)

Following the interview process, overall results concluded with six firefighter recruits starting employment on the 1 July 2021.

2 (33%) White Females and 4 (67%) White males.

In addition to the initial six that were selected, the Service has also selected a pool of a further 10 candidates that will be recruited as part of succession planning over the next 12 – 18 months. This consists of:

1 female (10%) 1 BAME (10%) and 8 males (80%)

### **Positive action taster sessions**

A number of positive action sessions took place prior to going live with the process. Candidates were given the opportunity to attend the Training and Development Centre and were given the opportunity to experience the JRTs.

A training boot camp was offered to potential female candidates with a 10-week structured training programme to encourage females to be fitness ready to undertake the JRTs. On average there were 18 candidates per session coordinated by the Service's own qualified training instructors. This took place offsite over weekends at a private gym facility. Due to further lockdown restrictions this was forced to close part way through.

A comprehensive candidate information booklet was made available via the Service's website which explained the process in detail and included links to websites for useful information regarding online testing and fitness standards. The booklet contained sample questions for the tests and links were placed on the SFRS website in order for candidates to understand what the tests would involve.

## 5 Conclusions

The 2020/21 campaign proved challenging managing the restrictions of COVID 19 and numbers had to be limited to ensure the safety of all those involved. The process has delivered a positive outcome for female representation. The postcode restriction target has also proved successful with all six recruits living within the Shropshire boundaries.

Utilising the services of HR Solutions Hub reduced the level of resources required by HR in the early application stage. The Service did, however, receive one formal complaint with regards to automated emails sent by HR Solutions Hub and this has been fed back to the provider with regards to clear communication.

A Recruitment Steering Committee was formulated to keep communication channels open between the stakeholder departments in the process. This consisted of HR, Training & Development, Area Command and the Communications Team. The Steering Committee met on a fortnightly basis to discuss each stage of the process and ensured priorities were met and responsibilities were defined. This proved to be successful in ensuring key target dates were met and highlighted how each department played a key role to support the process.

### Application Data 2016 – 2021

2016 Campaign			
Total Registered	Female	BAME	
1541	187 (12.13%)	38 (2.5%)	
2018 Campaign			
Total Registered	Female	BAME	Job Share
746 (postcode restricted)	109 (14.9%)	24 (3.2%)	16 (2.1%)
2020/21 Campaign			
Total Registered	Female	BAME	Job Share
911 (postcode restricted)	173 (19%)	71 (8%)	11 (1.2%)

The 2020/21 campaign has attracted a higher percentage of female and BAME applicants in comparison to the previous two campaigns. Postcode restrictions have not had a major impact on initial application numbers from minority groups.

### Recommendations

Data shows that the highest level of female and BAME applicants were lost at the first testing stage, the BSQ; a total of 90 (9.8%) female applicants were unsuccessful at this assessment and 36 (3.9%) BAME applicants. The figures then remained consistent over the remaining assessments, losing 1.9% of females and 0.19% of BAME applicants at the SJT stage. The ability

tests lost 0.42% of females and 1.69% of BAME applicants which indicates the ability testing does not have a significant negative impact on applicants from minority groups. There may be some preparatory work that HR could undertake through positive action to focus on the BSQ stage of the process to support female and BAME candidates. This needs further exploring and advice will be sought from HR Solutions Hub as subject matter experts.

In order to allow sufficient positive action to be undertaken preparatory work should be planned well in advance of the campaign and plans formulated through the Recruitment Steering Group to allow all parties involved to be fully informed and allocated priorities.

The fitness boot camp needs structured planning and could essentially take place at any point during the six months prior to the campaign opening. This would also allow a longer timeframe for the camp. This would also give time to embed the message of fitness standards being a key requirement of the role of a firefighter and to ensure female applicants are successful at this stage. The Service lost 48% (out of those that reached this stage) of our successful female applicants at the JRT stage.

A mechanism to enable shortlisting applicants from the JRTs to interview stage needs to be explored. Currently this is a pass or fail process and does not allow for scoring or assessment of practical ability on any kind of scale. An analysis of other FRS would determine if this is feasible.

## **6 Capacity**

There are no capacity impacts arising from this report.

## **7 Fire Alliance / Collaboration / Partnership Working**

Opportunities were sought to collaborate with both Hereford and Worcester and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Services on their wholetime recruitment campaigns, however due to timing Hereford and Worcester's process was already underway and Staffordshire had completed. Future recruitment collaborations will be explored.

## **8 Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

## **9 Legal Comment**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **10 Community Safety**

There are no community safety impacts arising from this report.

## **11 Environmental**

There are no environmental impacts arising from this report.

## **12 Equality Impact Assessment**

An e-EQIA has been completed.

## **13 Health and Safety**

There are no health and safety impacts arising from this report.

## **14 Human Rights (including Data Protection)**

There are no human rights impacts arising from this report.

## **15 ICT**

There are no ICT impacts arising from this report.

## **16 Insurance**

There are no insurance impacts arising from this report.

## **17 The On-call Service**

There are no impacts on the On-call service arising from this report.

## **18 Public Value / Service Delivery**

There are no public value or service delivery impacts arising from this report.

## **19 Reputation**

There are no reputational impacts arising from this report.

## **20 Security**

There are no security impacts arising from this report.

## **21 Training**

There are no training impacts arising from this report.

## **22 Appendices**

There are no appendices attached to this report.

## **23 Background Papers**

There are no background papers associated with this report.