

KENT FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Introduction

Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS) is, at its heart, a learning organisation, striving for its employees to be highly competent in their roles, and have opportunities for further development. It employs approximately 1400 staff and 50 of these are within Learning & Development, including organisational development and in-house training for first aid, health and safety, technical skills, driving and road safety. There is historic support for apprenticeships for 'green book' employees (i.e. 'support' functions, such as IT, HR, leadership and business administration) and for 'grey book' employees (i.e. operation functions - such as firefighting, community safety, emergency contact handling and technical fire safety); however, with public sector cutbacks there has been less opportunity to recruit apprentices. In the last year KFRS has been in the position to employ apprentices again to respond to an ageing workforce, the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and the public sector apprenticeship target. To ensure the success of the programme, the organisation has implemented an approach which has strategic leadership, is embedded in workforce planning and development, and has buy-in across the organisation.

The service currently employs seven apprentices within green book functions, but from 2017 will expand this to include recruitment into project management, leadership, finance and grey book functions. The organisation has a target of recruiting 35 apprentices across both green and grey book functions.

"We all pride ourselves on being interested in seeing people grow, and I think there is a very genuine heart in the organisation about watching that." Chief Executive

"The beauty sometimes with the apprentices is home-growing your own talent." Director of Operations

Apprentices are employed directly by KFRS, although recruitment is carried out with the support of an approved third party provider. Responsibility for apprenticeships lies within the HR function, and training of apprentices is carried out in partnership with a government approved training provider or

internally wherever possible. Third party providers are used in some areas where it is not feasible to deliver the training in-house, e.g. finance or IT.

Ensuring quality, not just quantity

It is clear from KFRS that the vision for apprenticeships within the organisation is strategically driven. It has buy in from the top of the organisation, and is intrinsic to the workforce planning of the organisation. The scheme is managed as a strategic project, with

"We look at apprenticeships to provide the experience, the qualifications, the skills and the knowledge in order [that staff can] take that step into the organisation in a different path." Project Manager

a clear business case, and accountability to the Corporate Management Board.

To address the dual challenge of the public sector apprenticeship target, and an ageing workforce, the organisation approaches any vacancies with a view to converting them to apprenticeships, if there is an applicable standard. They also seek to free up entry level roles (and therefore potential apprenticeships) by looking at internal promotion of existing staff, thereby using the existing structures more effectively. Aligned with this, the organisation recognises the benefit of existing employees engaging with apprenticeships at a higher level, e.g. the Leadership and Management apprenticeships at Level 5, 6 and 7, as a means of career progression. These opportunities will be identified via staff appraisals and development plans.

Training and support

Apprentices are viewed as part of the core staff function and must be treated equally. They are therefore given an induction into their team and job role. There is acceptance that for some apprentices this will be their first experience of the workplace, and this is recognised in the induction process. They are also given an 'Introduction to KFRS' package which will help them understand the wider running of the organisation. Each apprentice is assigned a mentor. Once apprentices are settled into their roles, HR offer them the opportunity to feedback on their induction and their initial few months. Apprentices are offered additional in-house training opportunities around writing CVs, interview skills and advanced IT skills. They are also offered the opportunity to experience other parts of the organisation through work shadowing.

"You can be part of the development of who they are as young people, and help them think about what their career is for the rest of their life." Chief Executive

It is KFRS's aspiration that apprentices will gain employment within the organisation, but if this is not possible, that they will leave with a significantly enhanced CV, an understanding of what they do and don't want from a career

and a better understanding of what motivates them as an individual.

The service has developed an Apprenticeship Procedure Policy which is provided to each team employing an apprentice. This sets out the expectations and requirements clearly.

"You need to spend more time with an apprentice to show that you are developing them, and the training provider expects you to demonstrate how you have developed them." HR Manager

Alongside this each manager meets with the HR manager to ensure that they understand the requirements involved, the role of the tutor and the importance of setting clear work targets.

KFRS also provides support to the fire service more widely, as well as other public sector partners, in the development of apprenticeship schemes, via workshops, meetings and presentations.

Standards development

KFRS has been particularly involved in the development of the Operational Firefighter standard, and the Leadership and Management standards as the service sees the value in influencing the development of those standards which will directly affect its operation.

The Operational Firefighter standard is being developed by a consortium of fire services, which KFRS is part of. It is hoped that the standard will be available from September 2017 and it is an important part of the service's plans to meet the public sector target and to recruit and train their operational staff in the future. Until the standard is approved KFRS has lobbied, along with other fire services, to keep the existing framework in place to ensure apprenticeships can continue to be available to the sector.

The service has also been involved in the Leadership and Management standards which will be important in the staff development plans for Managers, up to Level 7. The service became involved in the development of these standards following an organisational drive to improve leadership and management. Whilst the Leadership and Management standards are not specific to the fire service, the organisation saw the value in influencing the development to ensure they met their needs. Organisationally, there was recognition that it is important for staff across the breadth of the organisation to have leadership and management skills and qualifications.

KFRS has ambitions to utilise their expertise in the sector by becoming an approved training provider in, for example, large goods vehicle driving, leadership and firefighting. As well as allowing them to provide direct training to their own staff, there will be the opportunity to open this to the wider sector, and possibilities of collaboration with other fire services.

Benefits to the organisation and the individual

The organisation has been unable to recruit fire officers for 10 years due to a hiring freeze, leading to an ageing workforce. Between 2017 and 2020, a large number of its firefighters will retire. By employing apprentices the organisation will develop a pool of candidates who have been trained to KFRS standards, who understand the ethos of the organisation, and who have the potential to be recruited to On-call (retained firefighters), Whole Time or other support functions where the opportunity arises.

There are also financial benefits to the organisation of using apprenticeships, such as

"We're looking at apprentices as one of the key pieces of that jigsaw puzzle for a lot of the other projects we do." Project Manager

lower recruitment costs and wage bills. By becoming an approved training provider, the organisation will also be able to recoup their apprenticeship levy funds, reduce costs by providing the training in-house.

Apprenticeships offer the opportunity for someone from the local community to gain new skills, employment and earn a wage. In addition, a wider pool of apprentices helps to improve diversity (in an historically white and male organisation), to remove stereotypes about what people think the Fire Service does and how they do it. It will refresh the existing workforce through the introduction of new ideas, different attitudes and behaviours.

“Once these apprentices get out on station and start working with some of our staff, I think it’s really going to lift morale, bring back some excitement and some new adrenaline into different work places.” Project Manager

Current staff are involved in helping develop apprentices. The structure and ethos of the organisation encourages staff to undertake opportunities outside of their traditional role, resulting in a workforce which has a wealth of skills and knowledge to be passed on to new recruits.

For existing staff, KFRS see the benefit of a converter apprenticeship is that they will be able to undertake a qualification without the risk of leaving their job or reducing their hours. Maintaining their terms and conditions, and their salary will be key messages KFRS will promote to those considering converter apprenticeships. The organisation, equally, retains a wealth of experience and knowledge whilst benefiting operationally from the further training and development.

“If we could look at an apprenticeship for someone like me who’s...been an operational firefighter for years, to take on a management role, although I’m in the same organisation, it’s a big change. I would have had the preconceived ideas and stereotypes that maybe I wouldn’t earn very much money. That I might lose the role or appreciation as to where I was. It’s about, as an organisation, making people understand that actually a Level six apprenticeship is the equivalent of a degree.” Project Manager

Apprentice views

Jamie* is an apprentice based in the administration function who struggled to find the right post-16 route and was unsuccessful in gaining employment despite having A-levels. On reflection, he feels that it would have been more beneficial to do an apprenticeship, rather than A-Levels, as he would have gained a qualification and experience. Jamie felt the on the job experience of the apprenticeship was most valuable to him, as the qualifications were at a lower level than the A-levels he already held. Jamie also felt that there is added benefit to working for a reputable, public sector organisation which will enhance their CV post- apprenticeship. Jamie feels he is treated like a full member of staff with the same expectations and responsibilities as any other admin assistant – something which was not his expectation of an apprenticeship role, but one that he values.

“Being in the organisation, there are a lot of things I’ve been able to do as an apprentice, that I may not have been as a full-time member of staff...that’s another good thing about the apprenticeship, you’re able to...try out different bits of the organisation.” Apprentice

Jamie has been able to participate in shadowing different roles within the organisation, giving him a more immersive experience. This has helped with career planning by making him aware of the variety of roles available. Jamie is in the middle of the apprenticeship, but hopes that he will either gain employment in his current team, or progress on to a Level 3 apprenticeship.

Chris* is completing a Level 3 IT apprenticeship as he wants to gain more practical experience in work (which he believes employers will value) rather than continuing down a traditional academic route. Chris prefers the apprenticeship as he enjoys a more ‘hands-on’ approach to working with IT software and hardware. Chris’s line manager feels that the apprenticeship had already added value to their team as it has provided a vital first line response role. In addition, Chris has been able to contribute new ideas to practical problems that other members of staff would not have considered. The additional support has also meant other members of staff have had more time to focus on other activities to support the continued improvement and modernisation of the service’s IT, which will result in improvements to the quality of the service offered overall.

Challenges

The organisation recognises that there is a persistent misconception amongst some that apprenticeships are for school leavers, and are of lesser value than university degrees. Communicating the benefits and purpose of apprenticeships is central to the success of the programme within the organisation. To help with this, the service has held events with managers to discuss apprenticeships and their benefits, and plan to host ‘Lunch and Learn’ events where staff can learn more about apprenticeships and pass this knowledge on to others.

“I didn’t really appreciate...that it was something you could do once you were in work, in order to develop yourself. I didn’t realise that there wasn’t an age limit. For me...after leaving school and being in work for fifteen years, that actually that would be an opportunity for me to look at.” Project Manager

KFRS also perceive that there is a challenge of underfunding of some apprenticeship bandings which are applicable to the fire service, and there are concerns that this may hamper the quality of the training. KFRS takes this seriously and is lobbying government to seek an improved outcome.

More general concerns about apprenticeships include not being able to

attract the right calibre of individual and also being able to manage the sheer volume of applications for positions when recruiting. To address this KFRS has been hosting open days at fire stations as part of their recruitment campaign for new fire fighter recruits where potential applicants can visit and learn about the realities of the job, the values of the organisation and the opportunities which are available. As a fire and rescue service, there are concerns about the ability of very young candidates to be able to cope with the realities of the traumas the service responds to and that this permeates both operational and support roles. This is managed through the recruitment process and a culture of looking after the mental wellbeing of staff.

In addition, maintaining consistent support for apprentices if line managers and tutors leave the organisation or the provider can be a challenge that can prove disruptive to their learning experience. KFRS aim to ensure minimal disruption by having a policy for the management and support of apprentices and ensuring they are present at meetings with the training provider.

Replicability

Whilst KFRS does not currently employ vast numbers of apprentices, it does have a culture of learning and investment in staff. The service has ambitious plans to see apprentices across the organisation and has put core approaches in place to ensure that these plans are achievable:

- **Strategic approach:** The apprenticeship plans have clear approval and support from the Corporate Management Board. By taking a project management approach, the organisation has ensured that there is understanding of the business case across the organisation at a strategic level, along with the allocation of adequate budget and resource. This ensures that there is momentum and accountability for the project.
- **Workforce planning and talent management:** The service has ensured that apprenticeships are a key component of workforce planning, enabling existing staff to be developed in a cost and time efficient manner, while at the same time opening up opportunities for new recruits.

- **Having an Apprenticeship Champion:** KFRS has benefited immensely from a Head of Learning who has a significant understanding of the apprenticeship system and has been able to use this to creatively address the need to have staff who are equipped, with the need to meet the public sector apprenticeship target. It is important to have staff who can engage on a national level with wider apprenticeship scheme development, as well as individual standards review and development.