

KENT FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

The organisation

While there has been historic support for apprenticeships at Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS), recent public sector cutbacks have meant there has been less opportunity to recruit apprentices.

However, this year KFRS has been in a position to employ apprentices again to respond to an ageing workforce, the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and the public sector apprenticeship target. The success of the programme is based on strategic leadership, embedded in workforce planning and development, and has buy-in across the whole organisation.

The service currently employs seven apprentices; from 2017 this will increase to 35 across all functions. KFRS have ambitious plans to place apprentices across the organisation and have put core approaches in place to ensure plans are achievable and successful.

The approach

The apprenticeships programme at KFRS is a strategic project accountable to the Corporate Management Board, with a clear business case and an allocation of adequate budget and resource. The Head of Learning has significant experience of the apprenticeship system and uses this to creatively address the need for properly trained staff, alongside meeting the public sector apprenticeship target.

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. Existing employees are also offered opportunities, including Leadership and Management apprenticeships at Level 5, 6 and 7, as a means of career progression.

Apprentices are given an induction into the organisation, their team and job role recognising that this may be their first experience of the workplace. A mentor is assigned and they are offered additional in-house training - writing CVs, interview skills and advanced IT skills - and experience other parts of the organisation through work-shadowing. It is hoped apprentices will continue to work at KFRS, but if this is not possible, they will leave with a firm foundation for their future career.

Line managers meet with the HR Manager to ensure they understand the requirements involved, the role of the tutor and the importance of setting clear targets.

KFRS has been involved in the development of the Operational Firefighter and the Leadership and Management standards and is becoming an approved training provider in large goods vehicle driving, leadership and firefighting.

The challenges

KFRS challenges the misconception that apprenticeships are for school leavers and of lesser value than university degrees. The service communicates how the benefits and purpose of apprenticeships are central to the success of the organisation by holding events with managers, and plan to host 'Lunch and Learn' events for other staff.

Other concerns include not being able to attract the right calibre of apprentices - in particular those able to cope with the realities of the traumas the service responds to - while also managing the sheer volume of applications. KFRS has been hosting open days at fire stations where potential applicants can visit and learn about the realities of the job, the values of the organisation and the opportunities available.

The benefits

KFRS has an ageing workforce, having been unable to recruit fire officers for 10 years due to a hiring freeze. 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, understand the ethos of the organisation, and have the potential to be recruited to On-call (retained firefighters), Whole Time or other support functions.

Using apprenticeships has led to lower recruitment costs and wage bills. By becoming an approved training provider, KFRS can recoup their apprenticeship levy funds and reduce costs by providing training in-house.

A wider pool of apprentices helps to improve diversity in an historically white and male organisation, and refreshes the existing workforce through the introduction of new ideas, different attitudes and behaviours.

For existing staff, they can gain a qualification without the risk of leaving their job or reducing their hours, consequently KFRS retains staff with a wealth of experience and knowledge whilst benefiting from their further training and development.