Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. I'm your host Jim Millard, and in this week's episode I'm joined by firefighter Georgina Mann from the London Fire Brigade based in Richmond talking to me from Twickenham Fire Station for a very important discussion on public sexual harassment or PSH for short.

Just to say before beginning that this topic might be upsetting for some, so please be aware of that. In the wake of Sarah Everard's death, women across the UK shared thousands of stories of the precautions they take on a daily basis to protect themselves from male violence and harassment on the street. Georgina joins us today as a representative of one of the Council's key partners to talk about public sexual harassment, why it happens and the London Fire Brigade's plans to help create safe places. So, without further ado, welcome Georgina.

Georgina Mann: Hi, how are you?

Cllr Millard: I'm very well. How are you?

Georgina: I'm good, thank you. Thanks for having me.

Cllr Millard: You've just come off night shift as well, which is amazing.

Georgina: Yeah, just finished a night shift, but it's all good!

Cllr Millard: And here you are coming to talk to us after, so impressed. Let's start with an introduction. Can you tell us a bit more about how long have you been a firefighter and what is your role at Richmond Fire Brigade?

Georgina: So, I've been a firefighter for just over a year now. I work within the Richmond borough for the London Fire Brigade. I specifically work at Twickenham Fire station. So as a firefighter, as well as responding to calls for fires or car crashes or anything like that, we also have a duty of care for community, and so we do a lot of fire prevention work and work for any sort of safety issue within our communities.

Cllr Millard: So that's what leads us on to this, I guess.

Georgina: Yeah.

Cllr Millard: Thank you. The figures I've got here say that an investigation by UN women UK published in March this year reports that 71% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. Could you explain to listeners what we mean by public sexual harassments?

Georgina: Yeah sure, so public sexual harassment is basically unwanted sexual advances, attention or actions through intimidating behaviour, and so this can come in many different forms. So, this could be catcalling, wolf whistling, sexual comments, sexual propositioning, leering, persistent staring. We have things like up skirting, public viewing of pornography and also non-consensual physical contact, for example groping. And this can be in places that are accessed by any member of the public, so streets, parks, gyms, hospitality venues such as bars, nightclubs. This could be educational institutions such as University campuses. And it can also be on public transport as well.

Cllr Millard: Yes understood, understood, and what are the impacts of PSH?

Georgina: So, this kind of behaviour has a real knock-on effect for girls and women. So basically, it has a real effect on mental health, so it leaves you with feelings of guilt and shame and feeling quite humiliated. And that can lead onto different feelings of low self-esteem, low self-worth, a lack of

bodily or autonomy, which is a big thing, not feeling like you have control of yourself. And it was a real restriction on girls and women's access to public places. So, if you know the place where you regularly get sexually harassed, that is somewhere that you're not going to want to go anymore. It also has restrictions on women's and girls' expressions. So not feeling like we can wear certain clothes because we're victim blamed and that leads on to this myth that we have of victim blaming, which has a knock-on effect decreasing reporting and so girls feel like we can't report because of how normalised and trivialised these things are and how the finger is always pointed at them instead. What were you wearing? What time were you out? How much did you have to drink? How many sexual partners do you have? This always comes down to them which has a feeling of self-blame within women because of that.

Cllr Millard: And what about you, have you had any personal experiences in public sexual harassment?

Georgina: Um yeah, so I think ever since I was about 13 maybe younger, I've experienced it. I think the first time I went out shopping with my friends. You know, and it would be something that you get used to, but at first, it's very strange - having my clothes commented on when I'm 13 years old. It was usually by older men, and it's happened throughout my entire life, and it's not got any different. And it becomes part of your everyday life. I used to live in a flat opposite an Italian restaurant and a lot of the waiters used to, when I came out my flat, used to you know, say sexual things to me and leer at me, which it is intimidating, is very intimidating. And I've had experiences where I feel like I can challenge it, but there are certain experiences that I've had where you kind of go into a flight or fight kind of moment, but there's also freeze as well, and a lot of people who have experienced sexual assault, they freeze. I was once sexually assaulted in a nightclub, and it was very busy and in the middle of the dance floor and I completely froze. I completely froze. I didn't know what to do. And then that because you didn't do anything yourself, you didn't protect yourself, you're kind of left with this feeling of self-blame because you didn't do anything. And so, all these experiences that I've had, you know, they've had a knock-on effect with me and my mental health. I suffer quite badly with body dysmorphia, and that I presume has been because I've had my body commented on from such a young age that I don't view it the way that other people might.

Cllr Millard: Thank you for being so brave and talking about your own experiences as well. Obviously, there's been, recently in the media, quite a lot of focus on this, following recent events, and there's a sense that we don't want to let this go back, there's an opportunity to talk about this more and to move forward and this is, I mean one of the key questions I think we have to be asking is why do we think public sexual harassment happens? I mean what do you think about that? What are the reasons for it?

Georgina: We've never got to the root of it, and that is why it keeps happening. When you've got a problem and you're not getting to the root of that problem, it's going to keep going. And the problem with public sexual harassment is we've always labelled it a women's issue. So, we've never actually gone to the root and said no, this is not a women's issue. This is coming from somewhere else. So, you know the responsibility needs to be shifted off of women taking care of themselves and protecting themselves and needs to be placed back on where it's coming from. So, from perpetrators. This is quite a sensitive topic in itself, talking about the reason behind it. Unfortunately, men do feel very attacked, but it's not actually about pointing the finger at boys and men, it's actually about having a reality check and thinking we as a society have created this culture. And we need to stop trivialising it and normalising this behaviour and do something about it. And so, I think that the fact that we are bombarded with sexualised images of women from a very young age through the media, and now we have social media, it gives boys a sense of entitlement from a young

age, and it gives girls a lack of bodily autonomy because they view themselves as objects. The fact that we have such easy access to things like pornography and children are able to see that. They are viewing intimate images between a man and a woman, which are very farfetched and it's dangerous to those young eyes because they're viewing those things as things that aren't true. They are violent and damaging. And so, I think those are the things that we need to start looking at and taking responsibility for.

There are other issues such as I know that in education now children are starting to be taught about consent. But when I was a child at school, we didn't have any sort of education on consent in sexual education and I'm sure generations before me didn't, so I went to school in the 90s. So, think about how many people are out there that went to school in the 90s, 80s, 70s. There are whole generations of people who have never had any sort of education on consent. And so, it is that lack of education, that lack of understanding of respect and equality, that we're really lacking. And once we start giving that consent education, then we're going to start a cultural shift.

Cllr Millard: Well said Georgina. That cultural shift needs to happen and at the same time we need to do all we can as partners in the borough and I'd love to hear what are the London Fire Brigade's plans on raising awareness of public sexual harassment and how we can try and stop incidents from happening in Richmond upon Thames?

Geogina: I think first of all, as I said earlier, so the London Fire Brigade have a duty of care for their communities, so we want to connect with our communities and make sure that we're looking at all the safety issues within our boroughs and in Richmond borough. So, this is a problem within the entire country, so it's definitely a problem within Richmond Borough and we want people to know that the station is open at 24/7 365 days a year. If you are being followed, harassed, threatened, please come knock on the door this is a safe place, you will be listened to. Even if it's not on the street that you're being harassed, if it's a safety issue at home, if you are suffering domestic abuse, please come to the fire station because we can help you. And that's something really important that we want all our communities to know. Please save it in your phone, the location, especially university students. We have a uni quite close to us.

But apart from that we are actually concentrating on prevention work and awareness work so that will be a public sexual harassment awareness seminars where we basically want to make young students, so this will be within schools, colleges, universities, we want to make them aware this is a problem that is happening within society. You can do something about it. We need to teach girls that is something that can happen to them, that it's not right. And teach boys that this is a culture you do not want to be a part of because it is dangerous. We also want to teach our communities that they need to intervene. We need to teach them the signs of sexual harassment and we want to do this by creating bystander training, so this will be basically to, you know, simply stepping in when someone is being harassed, diverting the attention away from them and talking to the perpetrator maybe saying, "Oh excuse me, do you have the time?" Just simple little things like that can help a victim move away into a safe place. I don't want to say, and we don't want to say that you know to challenge every single incident, because sometimes a victim might not feel confident enough or it might not be safe. If it does feel safe, if you are confident enough, I would say definitely challenge it. Things like pointing out what the person is wearing, saying "man in the red T-shirt please stop harassing me" and things like that can really draw attention to the situation. But if you do not feel confident to do that; this is why we're going to have bystander training.

Cllr Millard: That's great to hear Georgina, sounds amazing. I think, as I say, we all need to be doing everything we can as partners. The Council is preparing a Violence Against Women and Girls

strategy, looking at all this across the Council and how we work with our strategic partners across the borough. We're becoming a White Ribbon accredited organisation this year which demonstrates our commitment to meeting the public sector Equality Duty and this will make a difference in our communities and across our workforce. We are determined to continue this conversation. This is something that is going to be talked about moving forward. We're not going to let this go. We can't move backwards. We have to continue to grapple with all the things that you've pointed out. And play our part in that cultural shift, that shift across the community, and across the country. And to continue our commitment to the mission of ending gender-based violence. Now I think it be great to end on some advice for what we can all do on the individual level to stop public sexual harassment. Could you expand on that?

Georgina: Yeah sure. So, I think people get a little bit intimidated about how big the issue is, so it's a little bit like climate change and recycling. Everybody thinks that 'oh just me putting my plastic and recycling bin is not going to change climate change,' but it is because if we all collectively do something together and we all do something, it is going to change the problem. So, I encourage people to call out misogyny. Call out your friends if you see them doing something to harass a woman or girl. Educate your sons. Teach your daughters their rights. And I encourage men to speak to their wives and mothers, their daughters or sisters, their girlfriends, any woman in their life and listen. Listen to their experiences of sexual harassment because I guarantee you that at least one will have an experience. And you know, then it makes it personal. It makes it your problem because it's somebody in your life that suffered something like this and it's not something that is to be trivialised. It's something that really does have an effect on us all.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely. Sitting listening to you as a man, I feel very, you know, an awful lot of concern about the fact that this is essentially an issue that comes from men...

Georgina: I think it be good for men to talk about this with other men. I think it's something that men should have a conversation about.

Cllr Millard: Yeah, exactly.

Georgina: And it's like I said, it's not about pointing the finger, it's not about having any revenge, it's about sitting down and taking some responsibility and saying, 'oh I might have done something like that in the past, like that is something I've done, or you know I've seen one of my friends do that, I should have called that out.' And unfortunately, because of things like toxic masculinity, you know calling out misogyny can isolate men in itself. The more people do it, if you see something wrong, say something, more people do it, the more we'll have a cultural shift.

Cllr Millard: And the more we can talk about toxic masculinity as well. These are all connected, and the more we can talk about this and give advice like you've given, I think is so helpful. It's amazing what the fire brigade are doing. And you know, talking about reporting incidents, how to intervene has been fantastic. Something else worth mentioning, I think, is the Hollie Guard app, which is a smartphone app that provides enhanced levels of protection. If someone is feeling in danger, with a simple shake or tap, it activates Hollie Guard immediately notifying your chosen contacts, pinpointing your location and sending audio and video evidence directly to their mobile phones. That's something that our Community Safety team have let me know about and really want people to hear about.

So, thank you so much, Georgina, it's absolutely fascinating talking to you. Thank you for speaking to us, telling us all about that, speaking to us on behalf of the London Fire Brigade, clearly, it's a very important conversation. Thank you very much.

Georgina: Yeah, no problem my pleasure, I'm so happy that you're giving me the opportunity to come here today and talk about such an important issue.

Cllr Millard: Thank you. The show notes of this episode include the number for free advice and support service the Women and Girls Network, which is run by women, for women, and is for anyone who may have experienced any form of violence or abuse. As always, you can direct any questions to talk@richmond.gov.uk and please do like and subscribe, Leave us a review if you're able to. And once again, thanks very much for listening. I'm Jim Millard goodbye.