

# FireWorks

For equality in the Fire Service

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The FireWorks project - 2003-2005 - was timely in that it fell within the UK Government Social Inclusion Agenda when legislation aimed at removing social and employment barriers to under-represented groups was being introduced and/or strengthened. A diverse workforce is one of the key indicators of a fair, inclusive, democratic society and in 1999 the British Home Secretary set targets for the English Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) which required it to ensure that by 2009:

- 15% of firefighters are women
- 7% of the total Fire and Rescue Service workforce is from minority ethnic groups.

The Project, jointly funded by Anglia Ruskin University and the European Social Fund, aimed to assist the FRS in its attempts to meet these targets and address the equality and diversity (E&D) issues identified in the Independent Review of the Fire and Rescue Service by Bain et al (2002)<sup>1</sup>. To this end, the research aim can be stated as:

*'To identify and address the barriers to the employment, retention and promotion of women and minority ethnic groups (W/ME) within the FRS.'*

However, it was further intended that the research activity required to achieve this aim would provide more than a purely academic report. The research team was mindful that practical help in achieving the Government targets was - in many ways - as important to the FRS as further knowledge of the issues. Therefore, we identified a number of intended research outputs which informed the design of the research with the aim of facilitating networking and the sharing of good practice between FRSs and - where possible - other uniformed emergency service personnel:

- The provision of an arena, throughout the Project, for the discussion and promotion of equality and diversity issues in the FRS and exchange of good practice.
- A contribution to the development of policy within the FRS Modernisation Agenda, eg informed comment on FRS diversity targets.
- Practical tools for understanding local communities and evaluating the impact of FRS diversity initiatives including diversity training, and initiatives involving local communities.

### Research Methods

The research adopted a multi-method approach. This included literature reviews, accessing key academic texts and policy documents and the use of structured observations, case studies, guided focus group techniques and open and semi-structured interviews. Further, the dependence of the research on underpinning quantitative statistical evidence of patterns of FRS employment and local minority ethnic communities required some in-depth analysis of a range of statistics which also enabled us to comment on Government targets and processes of statistical collection.

### Sample and other contributors

The research took place with the assistance of 17 English fire and rescue services, who were selected to ensure that the sample contained:

- A service governed by one of each of the four types of fire authority: County Council Fire Authorities, Combined Fire Authorities, Metropolitan Fire and Civil Defence Authorities, and the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority.
- Rural and urban fire and rescue services.
- Services operated by primarily wholetime and services operated by primarily retained duty system firefighters.
- Fire and rescue services in locations with substantial minority ethnic populations.

In order to facilitate the collaborative working focus of the research and to provide the researchers with on-going evaluation and monitoring of research activity, a Stakeholder Group was convened with representatives from:

- The Asian Fire Service Association
- The Audit Commission
- Black and minority ethnic members of the FBU (B&EMM)
- The Chief Fire Officer's Association (CFROA)
- CFA Equality and Diversity Professionals
- CFA National Equality Forum
- The Equal Opportunities Commission
- The Fire Brigade Union (FBU)
- ODPM (The Fire Service Effectiveness Division)
- The Metropolitan Police
- Networking Women in the Fire Service (NWFS)
- The Retained Firefighters Union (RFU)
- Unison

### Summary of Project Findings

Fire and rescue services are undertaking an enormous amount of work through initiatives designed to address the Modernisation Agenda and in most cases have in place the E&D policies required to meet their legal obligations. The widespread commitment to addressing equality and diversity issues has also been demonstrated through an increase in the level of financing over the past 5 years. Resource allocation was identified as an issue in the HM Fire Service Inspectorate report 'Equality and Fairness in the Fire Service' (HMI 1999). That report identified a huge variation in allocated budgets and found that of the 45 fire services surveyed, 31 had no resources available to support equality. This had changed significantly by 2004 when in only one of our sample fire services was there no identifiable equality budget.

However, despite all this activity, there remains a broad perception that FRSs are not managing to address equality and diversity issues and move forward and in our research we noted that, in many FRSs, there was evidence of a lack of organisational alignment in terms of the embedding of E&D within the Service. This is not really surprising, having regard to the enormous number of centrally sponsored initiatives being undertaken by the Service over the past two years. Nevertheless, there appears to be a real need for alignment of policies and practice with regard to the breadth of service delivery from the employment of under-represented groups to community fire safety. Whilst we have witnessed a proliferation of interventions designed to address issues of equality and diversity, frequently these lacked an adequate supporting theory of change or a compelling body of evidence. For example, the concept of 'workplace champions for diversity' requires much greater evidential support. Evidence for these conclusions derives from the majority of our findings from the Project, as summarised below:

1. There remains some confusion about terminology in the field. EG diversity v. inclusion, equality v. fairness, positive action v. positive discrimination, community fire safety v. community outreach, Black and Ethnic Minority v. Minority Ethnic<sup>2</sup>. Some Project feedback indicated that this observation constituted a focus on 'semantics' to the detriment of 'getting things done'. However, if FRSs are to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, they need first to understand what other members of their Service, and other Services are talking about! A lack of understanding of key terms such as 'positive action' and 'positive discrimination' lies at the heart of much resistance to attempts to address the issues, whilst the use of inappropriate terms to describe local communities may be detrimental to the achievement of co-operative relationships.
2. There is some lack of understanding of 'who' the local community is. However, this lack of understanding is implicitly supported by the perception of the basis for the Government targets. There is little understanding of the theoretical basis for the targets given the complexity of the occupational setting. In addition, the format for Government statistical output in relation to FRS gender and ethnicity employment data contravened advice from the Audit Commission and CRE, with the result that FRSs were implicitly directed towards considering only visible minority ethnic groups in their targets which, in themselves, may cause the Service to be unrepresentative of the local community it serves<sup>3</sup>.
3. Many uniform and non-uniform FRS employees saw the ODPM targets as unattainable in a situation where there were few wholetime vacancies and hence very little recruitment. However, the perception of targets as unattainable also seems to lead to initiatives which appear to have been designed for the purpose of 'being seen to be doing something', rather than activities carefully designed, planned and evaluated with the potential to address the issues directly. Such findings reflect the widespread proliferation of activity which is taking place across Services under the equality and diversity banner but which is - in many cases - conducted to little observable effect.
4. The reasons for this were often signposted very early in the development of initiatives. For example, in some cases policies were not clearly translated - or translatable - into action plans. Action plans did not always contain clear objectives, and the ownership and responsibility for the implementation and evaluation of action plans too was often unclear. Initiatives were often undertaken as though the needs of different under-represented groups were the same and/or were based on untested assumptions about minority perceptions and other barriers to recruitment.

5. Whilst there continue to be examples of bullying and harassment based on gender and racial/ethnic identity, our research suggests that the relationship of these issues to levels of retention and promotion among under-represented groups in the FRS is not as straight forward as might have been previously assumed. The experiences of women are not always the same as those of minority ethnic members of the FRS, although they are both under-represented groups. Nor are the experiences of all women, or indeed all minority ethnic members, the same. Previous assumptions about the effects upon under-represented groups of behaviours such as teasing and bullying, must be considered and seen in greater complexity. Despite the undoubted existence of high profile cases of bullying and harassment, we were unable to find conclusive evidence that experiences such as these, due to gender and/or racial/ethnic identity, was a major barrier to the retention and promotion of female and minority ethnic staff in general. Indeed, an increase in these cases may be indicative of a growing intolerance of such behaviour.
6. To some members of FRS management who participated in this study, the fact that very few members of a small female and minority ethnic workforce left the Service, indicates that there is no need to consider retention or promotion a 'problem'. Yet the evidence found in studies of the Police Service in particular, suggests that it is not enough to attempt a large-scale recruitment campaign for W/ME without giving consideration to retention and career progression issues from the outset.
7. A lack of adequate alignment results in multiple activities being organised by people in different roles within an FRS, eg an HR person, a Station Manager and a Crew Manager all organising a retained recruitment day with no definition of the responsibilities of each, or recruitment initiatives being targeted at non-existent wholetime vacancies rather than the recruitment of staff to retained duty system and/or community fire safety roles. However, where such activities did appear to have had the potential to support, for example, a more diverse applicant profile in the future - such as young firefighter programmes - these were generally run by volunteer firefighters with limited support from the FRS.
8. It was often unclear whether training was part of a holistic organisational approach towards addressing equality and diversity. Once again, the Service's approach to delivering E&D training did not, in many cases, reflect an understanding of what was required by the workforce in order for them to integrate E&D within their roles. Very little training needs analysis had been undertaken therefore much of the training observed was designed upon what was perceived to be necessary. There was little differentiation made between 'training' and 'informing'. In many cases, examples of 'informing' were observed under the guise of 'training'. This often focused on policy related issues and personal 'skill' or behaviour development where a knowledge or skill need had not been established. Very little evaluation of training had been undertaken at any level beyond the end of course feedback sheets. Most courses required no evaluation in terms of assessing what had been learned. No examples were found of evaluation of performance in the workplace, impact evaluation on the FRS and thus ultimately service delivery.
9. The primary issue here is a widespread lack of understanding about evaluation. Although some excellent evaluations were observed, in general the FRS were aware that their evaluation processes were poor but did not have the time, knowledge, support or investment to improve. The FireWorks project team considered that an understanding of evaluation was key to enabling FRSs to become reflexive organisations with the ability to recognise and learn from their own actions. FireWorks has developed and disseminated two evaluation toolkits - one for diversity training and one for initiatives involving the local community - and a community profiling tool to help FRSs identify their local communities and more accurately target, plan and evaluate their equality and diversity initiatives.
10. Role maps and the national competency framework are not fully integrated into FRS E&D activity. In diversity training, there is little understanding of how the diversity competences within each role can be demonstrated in the workplace. This further manifests itself through the use of out of date materials, and subsequently the over-emphasis of the incidence response part of the firefighter role, in recruitment activity. However, the lack of understanding of roles and competencies within the FRS is reflected within the community where an informed appreciation of the role of the firefighter is lacking.
11. The perception from within the FRS that young people from minority ethnic backgrounds and young women are reluctant to consider the FRS as a career due to concerns about discrimination on the grounds of faith, ethnicity and gender were not borne out by our in-depth interviews. This finding requires further research, however, if it were found to be true, current recruitment strategies developed specifically to overcome these perceptions would be likely to fail.
12. There is a high attrition rate amongst equality practitioners. There is no common understanding of the nature of the role and/or the nature and level of responsibility and authority which may be required to support it. The role is commonly situated with the human resource function which may limit the holder's ability to inform effective service delivery. Further study is needed in this area to discover what the issues and solutions are to maintaining the knowledge base and moving on the agenda via qualified and motivated equality practitioners.

1 Bain et al (2002), The Future of the Fire Service: Reducing Risk, Saving Lives, <http://www.irfs.org.uk/index.htm> 2/12/05

2 Our observations of the inconsistency in terminology in reports from the ODPM were fed back. For consistency, the Fire and Social and Statistics Branch has agreed to use the term 'minority ethnic' in future publications.

3 These findings were relayed to the Fire and Social and Statistics Branch at the ODPM, who responded positively.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

<b>Audience</b> <b>ODPM &amp; CFA</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Should establish a framework for data collection and monitor brigades to ensure appropriate qualitative and quantitative data is collected and used to:</b></li> <li>identify and promote successful pathways to FRS careers for women and minority ethnic groups;</li> <li>identify and address issues relating to retention and promotion and post-employment plans;</li> <li>identify good practice and support learning both across the FRS and within individual brigades.</li> </ol>
<b>ODPM &amp; CFA &amp; Representative Bodies</b>	5. Undertake a national targeted multi-media programme to inform the public about roles within the FRS.
<b>FRS</b>	6. Ensure that initiatives with young people to raise the profile of the service as a career choice are based on young people's real perceptions of the role and potential barriers.
<b>ODPM &amp; CFA</b>	7. Consider commissioning further research into the perceptions of people from minority ethnic backgrounds on the FRS as a career.
<b>ODPM &amp; CFA</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Develop a common performance management framework for equality and diversity within the Service.</b></li> <li>Support FRA in developing a common framework for policy development action planning and monitoring and evaluation of equality initiatives and communication strategies.</li> <li>Ensure that the national occupational standard is adopted and that these standards are applied in an open and transparent manner by all.</li> <li>Review and establish appropriate targets for the representation of women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the FRS.</li> </ol>
<b>FRA</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a systematic approach to E&amp;D work and policy development which also supports the FRA performance management system.</li> <li>Ensure that action plans developed for E&amp;D have clear indications of ownership, SMART objectives and evaluation strategies.</li> <li>Consider adopting the FireWorks Diversity Initiative Evaluation Toolkit.</li> <li>Maintain on-going dialogue with women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds on issues of retention and promotion.</li> <li>Introduce shadowing schemes to allow managers to learn best practice in recruitment retention and promotion from other organisations.</li> </ol>
<b>FRA &amp; FSC</b>	17. <b>Training in E&amp;D should be aligned with the needs of the organisation as identified through role maps and national occupational standards.</b>
<b>FRA</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>E&amp;D Training should be based on a training needs analysis.</li> <li>Consider adopting the FireWorks Diversity Training Evaluation Toolkit.</li> </ol>
<b>FRS</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Develop their understanding of, and work with, local communities by:</b></li> <li>profiling their local communities and considering using the FireWorks Community Profiling Tool;</li> <li>using Community Outreach as an umbrella term for describing work with local communities, and further categorising Community Outreach as Community Relations, Community Fire Safety and Recruitment.</li> </ol>
<b>FRA</b>	23. Ensure that representatives from local minority ethnic communities are included as stakeholders in evaluating E&D, CFS and IRMP initiatives.
<b>FRA</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Equality officers should have more influence on the strategic planning of the FRS.</b></li> <li>Review the EQ officer's role and the issues arising from their responsibilities, accountability and strategic placement within the organisation.</li> </ol>
<b>CFA</b>	26. Establish a network for all E&D practitioners.
<b>ODPM</b>	27. Commission research to identify the issues leading to the rapid turnover of staff working as equality and diversity practitioners.

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Published for the FireWorks Final Conference, 12-13 December 2005, Homerton College Cambridge.