



**CFOA**  
Chief Fire Officers  
Association

Equality Peer Challenge

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service

March 2013

Report



# 1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of an equality peer challenge organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework (FRSEF) for an external assessment at the 'excellent' level. The peer challenge is designed to validate a service's own self-assessment at this level by considering documentary evidence and carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees, councillors and other stakeholders.

The basis for the peer challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your communities and equality mapping
- Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A modern and diverse workforce

The peer challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment of an organisation's own judgement of itself against the equality framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality agenda in their own organisation. The assessment is a reflection of the evidence presented to the peer team, through reading the documentary evidence submitted in advance, and the interviews and focus groups when on site.

The team was:

Lead peer: CFO Sean Frayne - Derbyshire Fire and Rescue Service  
Member peer: Councillor Alan Dean - Liverpool City Council  
Officer peer: Garry Collins – East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service  
Officer peer: Paul Peng - Knowsley Borough Council  
Challenge Manager: Gill Elliott - Local Government Association

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by the Service and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

## 2. Executive summary

Following this equality peer challenge, we have reached the following conclusion:

**Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service have completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for the 'excellent' level of the Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework.**

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service is committed to equality and diversity as a means of reducing the risks for the most vulnerable within its community and preventing deaths and injuries from fires and road traffic collisions. Over the past five years it has substantially reduced the number of accidental and deliberate fires and the number of deaths and serious injuries from fire.

The Service has a high reputation for equality amongst its statutory partners and the third sector and it is a lead agency and key player in a number of partnerships throughout its area. The Service is rightly proud of its many achievements and outcomes from the projects it has undertaken. The Service knows its community well and has used the information to target its prevention work to the most vulnerable in the communities it serves.

The Service has shown its commitment to a diverse workforce through its positive action recruitment in the past; its comprehensive training for staff and its support for minority staff via the Disability and Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) staff networks.

To help the Service continue to achieve outcomes we have suggested some areas for consideration in the detailed paragraphs below. There were two key issues which peers feel need to be addressed most urgently. The first is the need to ensure that all staff understand the Service's priorities and are empowered to contribute. Secondly, as funding within the sector gets tighter there will be a greater need for more formal arrangements with partners to ensure that excellent projects like Safetyworks can continue.

### **3. Impact of the challenge**

The Service made the following observations on the impact of the peer challenge:

Our peer challenge was well organised and well-structured and we received valuable on-going guidance from the Challenge Manager which greatly assisted us in creating our on-site programme.

When developing our case for excellent we consulted with our staff which gave us richer and deeper evidence thus creating a lengthy self-assessment. Consolidating the vast amount of evidence into the self-assessment template was complex and time consuming. In addition, we occasionally found it difficult to determine what evidence related to the specific framework criteria due to some elements crossing over into the key performance areas.

This was a learning process for us and following the advice and support provided by the Challenge Manager and peer team whilst on site, we would certainly seek their guidance at the earlier stages when we were preparing our documentation.

We welcomed the opportunity to have a say in selecting the peer team that we felt was of benefit in terms of ensuring we had the right balance of equality and fire and rescue expertise for our challenge.

During the on-site visit it was clear that the peer team were well trained with an in-depth understanding of equality. Whilst the team were challenging and thorough, they were also supportive throughout the process, discussing findings and allowing us the opportunity to provide clarification and seek further evidence where required.

The peer team included equality specialists who were able to advise on ways we could improve on specific areas and offered additional support following the challenge. For example, we were invited to visit one team member's organisation to look at how they undertake Equality Impact Assessments to improve our own process.

At the end of the process the team delivered a presentation highlighting our strengths and areas for consideration. It was helpful to be able to discuss their findings with them at this stage and to consider our priorities for the future.

We found the overall process to be rigorous and challenging yet extremely worthwhile and we would highly recommend this to other Services. It has enabled us to obtain an independent and accurate view of our overall performance in relation to equality and diversity and provided some interesting insights into our culture. We are now able to develop an action plan based on the team's recommendations that will help us to continuously improve on our journey to excellence.

## 4. Detailed findings

### 4.1 Knowing your communities and equality mapping

#### Strengths:

- The Service knows its community well. Indices of multiple deprivation provide good information
  - The Service directs resources to areas of vulnerability intelligence led activity. e.g District plans; Mosaic ; Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC), historical data and partnership information
  - Community Relationship Manager and advocates are used to build relationships with minority groups and share intelligence across functions
  - Data sharing protocols allow information to be shared with partners. Enable targeting Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSCs) and local engagement
1. The Service knows its community well and understands where it needs to engage. This knowledge has helped to drive down risk and keep communities safe. Local engagement is supported by profiling data, community stations, the Prevention and Education team, operational staff and community advocates. This knowledge enables activities to be intelligence led. An example of this is targeted youth initiatives which have led to a reduction in anti-social behaviour and deliberate fires.
  2. The Community Relationship Manager and the team of advocates are used to build relationships with minority groups and share intelligence across functions. The work of the advocates has helped to overcome language barriers (including the use of British Sign Language) and cultural differences e.g. there is now greater adherence to fire safety requirements in mosques. Work done by the advocates has also helped staff to better understand the needs and requirements of local community groups e.g. Jewish community in Gateshead.
  3. Data sharing protocols allow information to be shared with partners. This has ensured that HFSCs and other support from the fire service is targeted at the most vulnerable e.g. “Partners For Life” a scheme to promote the sharing of information with partners; Care at Homes – a re-ablement process for which the Service has trained council and independent home care providers.

#### Areas for consideration:

- Increase the opportunities for partners, stakeholders, staff and community to influence service plans
- Little evidence of engagement with transient communities e.g. Gypsies and Travellers and other minority groups
- Some consideration of including “socio economic” status within Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) could support future targeted work
- Lack of a secure e-mail facility restricts data sharing exchange from some partners for sensitive referrals

4. The Service recognises that consultation is not as good or as widespread as it could be. An example of this is the District Plan where consultation was considered to be rather “light”. Consultation on this and other plans such as the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), service and safety plans, require a more in-depth programme of communication in order to input from the voluntary sector. The Service could consider establishing a community inclusion board.
5. Much of the Services resource around equalities is directed at LGBT and disability. More focus could be given to other equality strands. The team saw little evidence of engagement with more transient groups such as rough sleepers, and Gypsies and Travellers, although advocates indicated they did some work in some areas with homeless people, migrants and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities.
6. Some consideration of including “socio economic” status within EqIAs could support future targeted work. The Tyne and Wear area has areas of profound deprivation which are significant in vulnerability and risk. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly who may be asset rich but cash poor could be reflected in future equality and diversity focussed assessments. This supported by paragraph 5 would demonstrate a more holistic approach to equality and diversity.
7. Lack of a secure e-mail facility restricts data sharing exchange and confidence from some partners to share sensitive referrals and information e.g. from the police and Health. The Service could consider a criminal justice secure email facility for officers who may have to swap sensitive information with other public sector partners.

## **4.2. Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment**

### **Strengths:**

- Strong positive leadership from Members, and from Senior Management Team to Middle Managers – Service leaders speak with a common voice
  - Clear commitment to inform and develop staff on equality has helped to translate the equality vision into meaningful action
  - Tyne and Wear FRS is a lead agency that brings people together “feels like an agency for social change”
  - Hosting LGBT/Disability conferences – “they’ve got it about right with the disabled people we work with” - voluntary sector
  - South Tyneside Homes carries out 18000 HFSC each year
8. There is positive leadership from the Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) to the Chief Fire Officer and down to middle managers. The FRA chair, vice-chair, Members on the human resources committee and the Chief Fire Officer all provide strong leadership on equalities which has helped to embed equalities and diversity as a core belief within the Service. The Service maintains consistent attendance at a variety of responsible authority groups such as safeguarding boards, information sharing protocol groups, multi-agency problem solving groups, council and regional equality forums. The Service has involvement in specific aspects of community cohesion. This is a developing agenda and the Service should consider having

more regular attendance at forums like MARACs (Multi agency risk assessment conferences). It is also a signatory to the Armed Forces Covenant to support ex-service personnel.

9. TWFRS has a strong pro-active partnership ethos to prevent fires. Despite diminishing finances the Service is committed to supporting multi-agency work with partners at current levels.
10. Disability and LGBT groups praised the work the Service has done with these minorities. Over 1500 LGBT people were engaged with in 2012 and numerous links were established with voluntary groups at LGBT events. The Service's annual conferences on disability and LGBT issues were widely praised. One stakeholder said of the disability conference "I have nothing but admiration for the range of work which Tyne and Wear Fire Service are involved with".
11. Disabled personnel actively celebrate their disabilities and are proud to be employed by and associated with the Service. Disability is clearly not seen as a problem to be hidden. The Service actively supports and engages with its disabled employees.
12. TWFRS has an excellent partnership scheme with South Tyneside Homes whereby it has trained its gas engineers to undertake HFSCs while they carry out annual gas appliance checks. As a result all 18000 homes managed by South Tyneside Homes have HFSC's.
13. Commitment to a high volume of HFSC's (30,000) continues, with a revisit cycle focused on individual needs to target resources to those most vulnerable.

**Areas for consideration:**

- Sustainability of and expectations of Community Advocates
  - There is a difference in awareness/understanding of corporate policy between the centre and satellite workplaces
14. There are only 2.5 full time equivalent advocate posts carrying out a wide range of tasks across a large area. As a limited resource the Service needs to consider how other people and agencies can assist with some of this work.
  15. The Service needs to consider how it can ensure that all staff including those outside the corporate HQ are aware of and understand corporate policies and Service priorities. This apparent dis-connect between corporate and operational areas does not appear to be detrimental to the services being provided, but there is still considerable potential to further empower operational staff to ensure that capacity is increased and services in the future are sustainable. An awareness raising programme across the range of perceived disconnected employee groups would help to address this issue. Member engagement at station level giving consistent messages around equalities and diversity would also help to ensure that collective involvement is meaningful for all staff. Exhibitions and displays of cultural events, and different faiths which regularly take place in the HQ building could also be held at the community fire stations.

## 4.3 Community engagement and satisfaction

### Strengths:

- Community Relationship Manager and advocates are used effectively to engage with minority groups and support events
  - Case studies are used from fatal fire evaluations to inform and educate partners/community and TWFRS personnel
  - There are a high volume of HFSCs undertaken across the Service, prioritised by an index rating, with positive customer satisfaction feedback captured through evaluation.
16. The Prevention and Education team structure under the Community Relationship Manager is impressive and the staff in the team are passionate about their work. The skills and diverse backgrounds of the community advocates greatly assists the Service to break down barriers for isolated individuals and groups and to carry out activities such as conflict resolution. Between them, they speak seven different community languages and practice a variety of faiths. Advocates used the Ramadan campaign to make contact with a local Imam and committee members to raise awareness of the fire risks at the mosques during Ramadan. During the campaign the Service worked with 28 mosques.
17. The Service conducts sample evaluation of customer satisfaction and intelligence gathering at three levels: by telephone; face to face and “after fire” visits. The Service has updated after fire surveys to capture more detailed customer feedback from both domestic and non-domestic incidents, while also capturing customer feedback from groups using Community Fire Stations and receiving HFSC’s. Collective feedback shows high levels of service satisfaction. Information is also used to prioritise future community needs, such as follow up HFSC’s. The Service completes a high number of home fire safety checks either using its own staff or partners such as South Tyneside Homes and Your Homes Newcastle. There is a target of 30,000 HFSCs for TWFRS staff and a further 24,000 are carried out by the housing ALMOs.

### Areas for consideration:

- Community engagement strategy could be broader than the protected characteristics
  - Wider consultation in the development of district plans
  - Broaden HSC referrals to include private landlords
18. The Community Engagement Strategy includes localism considerations. However, the strategy could emphasise more vulnerable groups which may not fall within protected characteristics. Although the voluntary sector’s positive comments reflect their appreciation of the equality and diversity work of TWFRS there was very little formal on-going joint work. Advocates gave good evidence of wide and diverse engagement, but their community relations management structure appeared vague on the formalities of how this is scheduled, planned and delivered, although it is happening by reactive advocate intervention, which is working well.



19. The Service needs to triangulate consultation on district plans with other community plans. Some partners were unfamiliar with district plans and were not aware of their existence. Broader consultation would give them more ownership of the plans and the services they receive. Consideration may also be given to the involvement of internal staff in the development of the plans so that they are aware how they influence their work.
20. HFSC referrals to the Service come from many sources including social landlords. This type of referral could be broadened out to include private landlords. E.g. use of a common memorandum of understanding for partnership work with private letting agencies, who can refer HFSC's on to the Service at any change of tenant.

#### **4.4 Responsive services and customer care**

##### **Strengths:**

- Incident reductions across the board, reducing fire deaths and injuries and impact to the community
  - Prevention and Education referral schemes are comprehensive and they cover a wide range of voluntary and community providers (based in every district which gives consistency)
  - Community station facilities are open accessible, well used and received by community groups
  - Fire safety information is provided in a variety of languages to support community events e.g. Ramadan, Vasakhi, Mosque prayers
  - Range of fire safety solutions are offered to match levels of vulnerability beyond standard smoke alarms, e.g. specialist alarms, temporary misting systems or fixed sprinkler installations
21. Targeted preventative work has played a significant role in the reduction of incidents that the Service are called to deal with. Over the past five years the number of accidental house fires has reduced by over 48%. During the same period deliberate anti-social behaviour fires have reduced by 37%. There is good work on case reviews and lessons learnt from Fatal Fire reviews, with information openly shared and reviewed around the table with partners. This is supported with the publication of comprehensive case studies. This is good evidence of evaluation which highlights the clear vulnerability of elderly people living alone who are known to other agencies.
22. Prevention and Education personnel receive referrals from over twelve different types of agencies including domiciliary care providers, the NHS, Social Services and housing providers. Work is on-going to deliver HFSC's to the groups that are hardest to reach e.g. The Roma Gypsy community in Newcastle. Children centres have amended their referral form to reflect Fire Service priorities. The follow up procedure for HFSCs are prioritised on vulnerability.
23. Fire stations are used by a wide range of community groups including a variety of BME groups, Lesbian and Gay groups, people with Multiple Sclerosis and groups

for people with a learning disability. Users have high levels of customer satisfaction with the facility.

24. Fire safety information is produced in a wide range of languages and community advocates are used as a point of contact to further clarify the understanding within the Sikh, Asian and BME business sectors for non English speaking groups. Generic fire safety leaflets are available in over 30 languages.
25. The range of fire safety solutions are offered to match the level of vulnerability. Misting and sprinkler systems have been fitted in the homes of very vulnerable people with complex needs who are at high risk of a fire. This has enabled these people to remain living in their homes more safely. Deaf alarms are also available.

#### **Areas for consideration:**

- EqIAs need to be brought up to date. Guidelines and forms should be updated to reflect the Equality Act and Human Rights Act
  - Community engagement is established but consider expanding services to address wider homecare needs beyond fire safety
  - Consider the sustainability of the high number of responsive services – consider involving partners even more
26. EqIAs and other policy documents need to be brought up to date and contemporised to reflect changes in legislation. This should include the Equality Act 2010, the Human Rights Act, the Social Welfare Act 2012 and considerations around community cohesion.
  27. Now that the Service has established good community engagement and prevention work it could consider broadening the support functions for vulnerable people during HFSC's. E.g. referrals to other agencies regarding risks of trips and falls, home security etc.
  28. The Service provides a wide range and high number of responsive services. It now needs to consider how sustainable these will be in the future with a shrinking fire service. There needs to be a greater use of joint agency approaches to deliver joint objectives. A positive example that TWFRS may want to consider is the Handy Van Scheme that operates in Derbyshire. A pilot for this type of approach might be the Phoenix Project, whose delivery could be improved by a multi-agency approach.

## **4.5 A modern and diverse workforce**

#### **Strengths:**

- External recognition gained for good people practices. E.g. Stonewall, IIP (Gold award)
- Equality data report shows a positive involvement with training and development access
- High level of satisfaction and contentment within the workforce
- Various communication streams in place to keep staff informed and updated

- All staff receive an annual Personal Development Plan (PDP) which includes equality objectives
  - There are a variety of mechanisms for improving staff awareness around equality e.g. advocates, equality team, Prevention and Education, managers
  - Trauma support unit/occupational health service
29. There are many impressive examples of external recognition for the achievements of TWFRS for its workforce practices. These include being the highest placed fire service in the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index; gaining the Investors in People Gold Award; achieving the Networking Women in The Fire Service (NWFS) Silver Award for the support the Senior HR Advisor has provided to NWFS and women's issues; finalists in the Equality North East Awards 2010 under the category of 'Outstanding Practice by a Larger Organisation' for the successful implementation of a Positive Action Plan. The Service has a diverse senior management and it has made considerable efforts in the past to increase the number of women and BME applicants.
30. The equality data report shows a positive involvement with training and development access. The report demonstrated good dis-aggregation and proportionality of access for BME, women, disabled people, and LGBT.
31. There is a high level of satisfaction and contentment within the workforce. More detailed analysis could be undertaken of future staff surveys to consider the satisfaction of minority groups.
32. All staff have an annual appraisal, referred to as a PDP, which includes equality objectives and there is a requirement to undertake assessable learning and development.
33. Various communication streams keep staff informed and updated. The opportunity to feedback via Team Talk and Listening Events is appreciated by staff. There is strong evidence that messages are consistently conveyed throughout the organisation.
34. There are a variety of mechanisms for improving staff awareness around equality e.g. advocates, equality team, Prevention and Education managers. Fire Crews are aware of safeguarding issues and are confident in identifying risks and passing information on to a relevant officer.
35. The occupational health service and trauma support programme is impressive. Volunteers from across the Service receive accredited training to provide support to colleagues. Stress awareness sessions have been developed and delivered jointly by the Welfare Officer and the Fire Brigade Union Secretary.

**Areas for consideration:**

- All staff are trained on equalities but need to consider the checking mechanisms
- Wider opportunities for all staff to influence/innovate/participate
- Conflicting views about the purpose and value of Safecall

- Workforce development needs to reflect all protected characteristics/widen internal ability to consider the needs of under- represented groups
36. There are good e-learning and other mechanisms to ensure that all staff are trained on equalities. However there needs to be mechanisms for checking understanding beyond completion of a course and passing a test. There was a lack of engagement by some station personnel on equality and diversity issues at watch level. They felt they were “told what to do “rather than being involved in setting the direction for themselves and owning the responsibility. Some staff feedback indicated that it was the Prevention and Education teams and advocates who managed minority groups and community rooms.
37. More could be done to harness the creativity and interest of all staff in the way the Service operates. More opportunities could be provided for all staff to innovate/participate and suggest ideas for improvements or efficiencies.
38. The peers heard conflicting views about the purpose and value of Safecall, which is a confidential telephone service for employees to raise complaints and other problems. Although an independent service is good practice, use of Safecall is not necessarily considered as a viable or trusted option based on a variety of staff comments. Many staff said they would rather involve their line managers if they had a problem. Others were concerned about the security of the system. It is also not clear what the benefits of the system are compared to the costs and whether there are better alternatives. TWFRS should consider undertaking a review of this service.
39. It is very unlikely that there will be any significant recruitment over the next few years. For this reason it is even more important for the Service to ensure that its workforce development reflects the needs of all protected characteristics. The work force development strategy would benefit from including some context to reflect that through training and awareness raising more staff more will have the capacity to deal with a wide range of service users. This would also counter the issue of not being able to recruit a more representative staff cohort relative to Tyne and Wear demographics, a situation experienced nationally by other public sector service providers.

## **5. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives**

- SafetyWorks! is an impressive example of how the Fire Service has been the lead partner agency in a project that provides interactive safety advice to a range of users from primary aged children to people with disabilities, teenagers, young parents and the elderly.
- The Service has produced a Ramadan prayer calendar to signpost the Muslim community to its services.
- Partners for Life - an initiative to enable other organisations to work with the Service to protect the most vulnerable people in the community. The priorities are sharing data, referral agreements and HSC training. Current partners include housing organisations and local councils.
- Partners delivering HFSCs – South Tyneside Homes’ gas engineers deliver 18000 HFSCs annually at no additional cost once trained by the Tyne and Wear Fire and

Rescue Service. As a result every single home managed by the housing provider receives an annual fire safety check.

- Phoenix Project – is a long term community initiative that is well embedded in the Service and has evidence of good outcomes. The project is a partnership run between TWFRS and the Sunderland and Newcastle Youth Offending Services and funded through the Youth Justice Board. It was established in September 2000 and provides an intensive five-day work experience course for young people, between the ages of 12 and 18 who are known to be offending or at risk of offending. All the participants volunteer for the course, which seeks to foster the benefits of working within a disciplined uniformed team. An independent review by Newcastle University carried out early on in the project proved how successful Phoenix was.
- Broad range of communication media to inform the community e.g. DVDs, Twitter; Dogs Blog – (a fire service dog handler’s blog).
- Hotshots is an innovative football coaching programme which combined football with key fire safety messages delivered to young minority ethnic individuals in the local community. The project won a Community for Local Government Equality and Diversity award in 2010.

## **6. Signposting to areas of good practice**

- Merseyside FRS for a conversation about the use of Insight – a process which focusses on vulnerable localities and vulnerable people. Data analysis goes beyond the protected characteristics.
- Merseyside FRS for its involvement in city and regional local authority cohesion or local strategic partnership groups.
- Local Authority Housing organisations for information on any schemes they may be developing to put private land lords on a preferred list due to their compliance to be part of good practice standards compliance.
- Lancashire FRS for its work with the Polish Community.
- Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council – for it’s comprehensive Equality Impact Assessment toolkit, guidance and template.
- Derbyshire FRS for its Handy Van Scheme.

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