

**MEETING: 20 JULY 2009**

---

**SUBJECT: EXTERNAL AUDIT: EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY**

**REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER**

---

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This report provides Members with an overview of the results of the Audit Commission's recent audit covering the subject of equality and diversity. A copy of the report is attached as Appendix A for the further information of Members.
- 1.2 In addition, representatives of the Audit Commission will be attending the meeting of the Authority to present the findings of the report and to respond to any questions that Members may have.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 As part of the 2008/09 external audit process, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority was subject to a review of its equality and diversity policies and processes by the Audit Commission.
- 2.2 This work was undertaken in response to one of the main findings to emerge from the Audit Commission's 2008 Direction of Travel (DoT) assessments of fire and rescue services, namely that no service could be viewed as an exemplar of best practice in its approach to equality and diversity.
- 2.3 This was further reinforced by the fact that the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework requires, amongst a range of issues, that fire and rescue services demonstrate clearly that they understand the risks and diverse needs of the communities they serve and can respond accordingly to these.

## **3 AUDIT METHODOLOGY**

- 3.1 In acknowledgement of the close working relationship that exists between the four fire and rescue services in the North East with regard to this subject, the audit was undertaken within a regional framework that covered Tyne and Wear, Cleveland, and Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authorities.
- 3.2 The first stage of the audit involved an examination of key documents, including the findings from the successful level three review of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG). This was followed by workshops with a range of staff representatives, together with an observation of a regional positive action activity.
- 3.3 At the conclusion of this work a final report was compiled and issued to each Fire and Rescue Authority, encompassing both regional and individual authority findings.

***Creating the Safest Community***

## **4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

4.1 The audit did not identify any matters that were considered to be of notable risk and, overall, considered that the Authority is progressing well in the majority of areas. Furthermore, the following specific items of good practice within Tyne and Wear were noted:

- Clear commitment from Senior Managers in providing a service that serves all communities equally.
- Clear commitment to improving the diversity of the workforce, with a significant increase in applications by female and black and minority ethnic (BME) applicants as a result of the positive action programme.
- The achievement of level three of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG).
- The introduction of community advocates and involvement in a range of cultural activities has established better relationships with diverse and vulnerable groups and provided more tailored fire safety advice.
- The delivery of home safety fire checks is generally more targeted and this is yielding positive results.
- Front line staff have demonstrated a good understanding of equality and diversity and how it relates to their role.
- The current Strategic Plan and Integrated Risk Management Plan outline the reasons for the need to improve the diversity of the workforce, and the anticipated benefits to service delivery.

4.2 The audit also highlighted some areas that would compliment the commitment and work of the service. The recommendations include:

- More effective use of regional resources to share good practice and develop a more consistent approach to self assessment and to improve learning from further external assessment against the Equality Standard.
- Develop corporate websites to ensure that best practice is adopted, and consistent messages given on recruitment.
- Continue to monitor the quality of applicants attracted by positive action activity to assist in evaluating whether the initiative is targeting suitable applicants.
- Ensure that the potential role of all front line staff as ambassadors for the service is considered as part of the recruitment process and in engaging minority and vulnerable communities in wider community safety initiatives.

4.3 An action plan has been formulated to implement and monitor the recommendations outlined above.

## **5 RISK MANAGEMENT**

5.1 A risk assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the risk to the Authority has been minimised as far as practicable. The assessment has considered an appropriate balance between risk and control; the realisation of efficiencies; the most appropriate use of limited resources; and a comprehensive evaluation of the benefits. The risk to the authority has been assessed as medium utilising the standard risk matrix based on control measures being in place. The complete risk assessment is available on request from the Chief Fire Officer.

## **6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 There are no financial implications in respect of this specific report.

## **7 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 Equality and fairness implications are contained within the main body of this report.

## **8 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no Health and Safety implications in respect of this report.

## **9 RECOMMENDATIONS**

9.1 Members are recommended to:

- a) consider the contents of this report and;
- b) raise any issues they have with regard to the content of the report with the Chief Fire Officer or the Auditors.

---

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

The undermentioned Background Papers refer to the subject matter of the above report:

- Strategic Community Safety Plan 2009/2012
- Integrated Risk Management Plan 2009/2012
- Audit Commission Report: Equality and Diversity - Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority; May 2009

# Equality and Diversity

---

---

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority

---

Audit 2007/08

---

May 2009

---



---

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Audit approach</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Main conclusions</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Appendix 1 – Findings specific to Tyne and Wear</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Appendix 2 – Action Plan</b>	<b>10</b>

---

## **Status of our reports**

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
  - any third party.
-

# Introduction

- 1 Understanding and promoting equality and diversity are key tasks for fire and rescue services in England:
  - all Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRA) must abide by the requirements of equalities legislation which at present cover age, disability, gender, gender identity, religion and belief, race and sexual orientation;
  - the ability to protect the public through fire prevention, fire protection emergency response, and to engage with wider community safety activities in partnership with other agencies and the voluntary sector depends on understanding the diversity of communities in terms of both communities of place and communities of interest; and
  - a representative workforce makes the fire service more accessible to minority communities and inspires confidence. Fire safety messages are likely to be more effective if they take more account of differing needs, circumstances and risks.
- 2 The most progressive services have recognised that complying with legislative requirements is not sufficient, and that local ownership by those occupying leadership positions is required. There is now increasing awareness of equality and diversity is an integral part of the various ways in which the service relates to the whole community, rather than just being about internal recruitment and employment issues.

---

# Background

- 3 Our 2008 Direction of Travel assessments found that no fire service is an exemplar of best practice in its approach to equality and diversity. Just over half of fire services have improved their approach, and even this has been from a low base. Three per cent of fire-fighters come from black and minority ethnic communities and fewer still are women. This is against national targets of 7 per cent ethnic minority staff and 15 per cent women fire-fighters by 2009.
- 4 The Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Strategy: 2008 to 2018 recognises the challenges facing the service, and aims to deliver a step change. The vision is to 'create by 2018 a Service which can demonstrate that it serves all communities equally to the highest standards, building on a closer and more effective relationship with the public and creating a more diverse workforce which better reflects the local working population in each area'.
- 5 In addition, Fire comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) is being replaced by Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) from April 2009. CAA will provide the first independent assessment of the prospects for local areas and the quality of life for people living there. It will assess how well fire services work together with local councils, the police and other agencies to improve the quality of life in the local area. Fire services will be expected to demonstrate clearly that they:
  - understand the risks and diverse needs of the communities they serve;
  - are clear what this means for their priorities and their partners' priorities; and
  - use accurate local data and intelligence to plan, prepare and resource priorities.

# Audit approach

- 6 This audit was undertaken at Tyne and Wear, Cleveland, and Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authorities. The first stage of our work was an assessment of key documents including the findings from the external assessment and validation of each Authority's successful application for level three of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG).
- 7 The second stage involved a series of workshops with a range of representatives at each Authority and interviews, discussions and observation of the regional recruitment process and positive action activity.
- 8 Finally, we have produced this report for discussion with individual authorities. It includes a section on findings relevant to all three authorities and Appendix 1 containing issues specific to each Authority. The findings are set out in two relatively distinct areas of focus:
  - plans and actions aimed at meeting the needs of diverse communities; and
  - the recruitment of a workforce that better reflects the diversity of the area.
- 9 Action points identified, and the Authority's response, have been summarised in Appendix 2.



---

# Main conclusions

- 10** All three Authorities can demonstrate that senior managers are committed to providing service that serves all communities equally. To reinforce this commitment, our report suggests that there are opportunities to:
- improve the involvement and understanding of front line firefighters;
  - promote key messages through the use of websites; and
  - ensure that corporate documents fully reflect this commitment to equality and diversity over and above the need to meet statutory requirements.
- 11** There is also a clear commitment to improving the diversity of each authority's workforce. There has been a significant increase in applications by female and black and minority ethnic (BME) applicants as a result of a positive action programme delivered in partnership. However, the national fire fighter selection tests are very demanding and there are high attrition rates across all groups of applicants. Better targeting of recruitment and improved support are needed to ensure that a higher proportion of applicants are able to achieve the standards needed to be successful.

---

## Service delivery to diverse and vulnerable communities

- 12** All three Authorities can demonstrate that their senior managers are committed to providing a service that serves all communities equally. The recruitment of community advocates, an investment in community safety more generally and targeted involvement in a range of cultural activities has allowed each authority to establish better relationships with diverse and vulnerable groups and provide more tailored fire safety advice. The delivery of home safety fire checks is generally more targeted and this is yielding positive results.
- 13** Front line staff demonstrate a good understanding of equality and diversity and how it relates to their role but there was less understanding of the need for, and value of a more diverse workforce. Staff gave good examples of front line activity that was aimed at improving relationships with vulnerable communities and households. This is undermined to some extent by a lack of understanding about the positive action process and the wider changes to the fire service. All front line staff can, and should, have the ability to play a crucial role in attracting and retaining a more diverse workforce and their role is currently under developed. This has been recognised by senior managers and a wide range of activity and communication is under way to address this.

## Main conclusions

- 14** There has been a positive response to the findings of the external assessors following the successful achievement of level three of the Equalities Standard for Local Government in all three Authorities. There has been collaboration on a consistent approach to equality impact assessments but there is scope for the three services to work more closely together, to:
- share best practice and plan improvements in a more efficient manner; and
  - use regional resources to improve the quality and consistency of further external applications.
- 15** Website information covering recruitment and equality and diversity is inconsistent across the three authorities. At the time of our review, we identified:
- out of date documents,
  - differing levels of information, in various languages and formats; and
  - no clear community focus or information targeted at identified vulnerable communities.
- 16** This is clearly an area where greater collaboration would be cost-effective and appropriate.
- 17** The most recent iteration of the Strategic plan and Integrated Risk Management Plan make the link between the need to improve the diversity of the workforce, and the anticipated benefits to service delivery through having a workforce that is representative of the community. However, other strategic documents are less clear in this respect and would benefit from updating. Targets and policies are in place to meet legislative and national requirements and the aim of addressing the risks associated with vulnerable groups in society is set out but the rationale for having a more diverse workforce is not articulated in any key documents. This could undermine the work being done to ensure that the workforce contribute fully to the equality and diversity agenda.

### Recommendations

- R1** Use regional resources more effectively to share good practice and develop a more consistent approach to self assessment and to improve learning from further external assessment against the Equality Standard.
- R2** Develop corporate websites to ensure that best practice is adopted, and consistent messages given on recruitment. Where possible this should be undertaken at a regional level to ensure that development costs are minimised.
- R3** Ensure that revised corporate documents clearly identify the expected benefits that a workforce more reflective of the local community would achieve and relate this to the commitment to reduce the risk to those parts of the community made vulnerable by their situation.

**Recruitment of a diverse workforce**

- 18 There is clear commitment to improving the diversity of each authority's workforce and the three Authorities are working together to provide a single, consistent process for recruitment that is clearly providing better value for money. Positive action activities aim to increase the number of applicants from under represented groups in the workforce. These activities are appropriate and support applications from target groups. A range of assistance is in place to encourage and prepare people for the application process, and there has been a significant increase in applicants from target groups.
- 19 However, the national fire fighter selection tests are very demanding. Attrition rates are high across all categories of applicants, but significantly higher than average attrition rates at specific stages of the recruitment process are a significant issue. Written tests are the most significant issue for BME applicants and physical tests are problematic for a much higher proportion of female applicants. It is recognised that the fire service is a very popular career option with many applicants competing for each post but there are opportunities to reduce the higher attrition rates in target groups through better initial marketing and targeting of more suitable applicants.
- 20 Feedback and support sessions are held with unsuccessful applicants. This has encouraged repeat applications and has improved applicant awareness of what improvements are needed on an individual basis. The quality and consistency of support and the targeting of recruitment material and events has been recognised and is currently under review by the partnership.
- 21 Tyne and Wear and Cleveland FRAs currently receive more applicants than Durham and Darlington. Action has been taken to improve this, through changes to marketing and promotional material, but it is too early as yet to assess whether these have been successful.

**Recommendations**

- R4 Ensure that communication to applicants in target groups gives a realistic presentation of skills required and the likelihood of success. This should ensure that attrition rates more closely match those of all applications and that false expectations are not created.
- R5 Continue to monitor the quality of applicants attracted by positive action activity to assist in evaluating whether the initiative is targeting suitable applicants.

# Appendix 1 – Findings specific to Tyne and Wear

- 1 The following findings are specific to Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority.
- 2 Community advocates and community safety staff lead on effective community engagement. The safety works initiative has improved targeting of fire safety activity and there is anecdotal evidence that these events have improved community cohesion.
- 3 Front line staff have a good understanding of diversity and feel that they can play a positive role in community safety, cohesion, and act as ambassadors for the service in general. Specific activities have included:
  - awareness sessions on religious differences;
  - work with hard to reach groups and those identified as particularly vulnerable;
  - access to leaflets in different languages; and
  - deaf awareness training.
- 4 Many staff we spoke to would like to contribute more. Officers with potentially useful language skills were frustrated at not having these skills used despite offering their services. Fire-fighters also expressed concern that the recruitment process no longer automatically involves visits to stations and therefore an opportunity to involve front line staff is being missed.

## Recommendation

- R6** Ensure that the potential role of all front line staff as ambassadors for the service is considered as part of the recruitment process and in engaging minority and vulnerable communities in wider community safety initiatives.

## Appendix 2 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
7	R1 Use regional resources more effectively to share good practice and develop a more consistent approach to self assessment and to improve learning from further external assessment against the Equality Standard.	2	J Hindmarch	Yes	Significant collaboration already exists and a joint GAP analysis is nearing completion. TWFR is on course to declare ESLG level 4 by 30 April 2009.	Already actioned
7	R2 Develop corporate websites to ensure that best practice is adopted, and consistent messages given on recruitment. Where possible this should be undertaken at a regional level to ensure that development costs are minimised.	3	J Baines	Yes	Websites will be reviewed.	By 30 November 2009
7	R3 Ensure that revised corporate documents clearly identify the expected benefits that a workforce more reflective of the local community would achieve and relate this to the commitment to reduce the risk to those parts of the community made vulnerable by their situation.	3	J Brindle	Yes	This has already been addressed in recent documents eg IRMP2 and draft Strategic Community Safety Plan for 2009 to 2012.	Now complete
8	R4 Ensure that communication to applicants in target groups gives a realistic presentation of skills required and the likelihood of success. This should ensure that attrition rates more closely match those of all applications and that false expectations are not created.	2	J Baines	Yes	Strong positive action programmes are in place. Analysis of attrition rates is being used to shape the design and delivery of future programmes and follow up work.	Already in progress

## Appendix 2 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
8	R5 Monitor the quality of applicants attracted by positive action activity to assist in evaluating whether the initiative is targeting suitable applicants.	2	J Baines	Yes	See R4 above.	Already in progress
9	R6 Ensure that the potential role of all front line staff as ambassadors for the service is considered as part of the recruitment process and in engaging minority and vulnerable communities in wider community safety initiatives.	3	J Baines	Yes	Station visits have been planned to give all staff the opportunity to get involved in the recruitment process, and staff have been requested to volunteer. E&D is now a standing item on all team meetings and new e-learning packages are being developed.	Already in progress

---

# The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

---

## Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2009

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212, Fax: 0844 798 2945, Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

---