



Chairman of the Hampshire Fire and Rescue
Authority

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MC/cs/RMB/Equality&Diversity

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Ms Talia Watson
National Framework Team
Communities & Local Government
Zone J/10
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU
19 September 2003

Dear Ms Watson

Fire & Rescue Service Equality & Diversity Strategy Consultation

The opportunity has been taken to comment upon the draft Strategy for Equality and Diversity by the South East Regional Management Board and therefore reflects views which are common across the nine fire and rescue services in the region. These have been captured under generic headings.

Definition of operational roles – It is proposed that the definition of operational roles should be widened. Many fire and rescue authorities employ community safety and other specialist roles, some of which are undertaken by women. The post holders whether they wear a uniform or not are delivering a service directly into the community. They have become an integral part of what the public see as representatives of the service. A definition of operational roles which excludes these posts fails to recognise the contribution these specialist have in delivering against the wider responsibilities that fire and rescue services now have. However it is also recognised that it is pure firefighting roles which are under represented and could be monitored through a sub category of operational roles.

Targets – The Strategy appears to give emphasis on targets relating to staff profiles with less focus on the operational diversity challenges. Much of the legislative framework around equality and diversity is designed to promote recognition that individuals have needs and differences in the way they live their lives. Whilst the Strategy does identify that a clear understanding of these differences will enable individual FRS to improve services to a diverse community, the importance of this should be sufficiently balanced against the employment and recruitment issues.

In addition during a period where individual services are increasingly under pressure to be more efficient in the delivery of services the opportunity to increase the diversity of the workforce may be restricted. This may be further exacerbated where staff wastage may slow in response to changes brought about by age legislation and successful reasonable adjustments which retain individuals in employment as opposed to ill health retirement. Slower progress in increasing the diversity of the workforce does not signal a lack of progress in operational service delivery where service improvement can be evidenced. It is concluded that targets should be based upon local population and what is realistically achievable incrementally year on year and taking local factors into account.

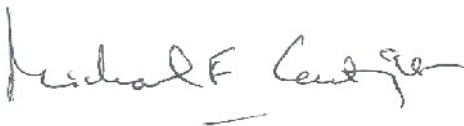
Equality Standard – The Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG) establishes a framework for improvement across all equality strands in everything that a service does. The link with the ESLG is evident within the Strategy however; the emphasis on service delivery should be stronger. Similarly the ESLG framework provides a method against which authorities can set targets and achieve outcomes appropriate to local need. The processes put in place by the ESLG will enable authorities to evidence their progress and mainstream equality through performance management. The Strategy identifies the ESLG as the common benchmark across the fire service. In which case reporting and action planning processes should correlate with that expected of the ESLG or other legislation and therefore do not need to be duplicated within the strategy.

Additionally, as a Region we have set an objective of achieving Level 3 of the ESLG by December 2008; a key feature of which concerns monitoring, particularly in relation to service delivery. We believe that achievement of this aspect of the ESLG would be greatly simplified by inclusion of relevant fields in the planned Incident Recording System (IRS) and we are disappointed to see that this is not mentioned in the strategy or indeed details of the IRS. Implementation of centrally driven initiatives would be greatly assisted by a more joined-up approach from the Government Department.

Guidance – Guidance on community engagement and involvement models and approaches would be useful. This is a critical area of performance for services who wish to make a claim at level 3 of the ESLG beyond.

Whilst overall the strategy is welcomed it is unclear how county based authorities will be able to meet the demands of the strategy whilst linked to the approach, structures and most importantly the performance of a county council. Performance against the ESLG cannot be officially reported on a local authority department basis (i.e. County Council based FRS). However, performance against the strategy will be assessed by the Audit Commission, which will use ESLG performance as a determinant in the overall score.

Yours sincerely



Cllr M Cartwright

Chairman - South East Fire & Rescue Services' Regional Management Board