



Improving Equality and Diversity in the Fire and Rescue Service in the South East

Introduction

Within the South East region, Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) are an integral part of IESE, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (RIEP). Forming one of the 13 sub-partnerships which make up the RIEP, the South East Fire Improvement Partnership (SEFIP) works to deliver a coordinated and sector-led approach to improvement initiatives amongst FRS in the region, encouraging collaboration and self-directed support among constituent authorities of the South East Fire and Rescue Services' Regional Management Board (RMB).

Nationally, equality and diversity is a key issue for the Fire and Rescue Service. The National Equality and Diversity Strategy 2008/18 sets out the FRS' commitment to ensuring that diversity and equality are fully integrated into all aspects of the Service. It sets out the actions required on leadership, service delivery, employment practice, evaluation and dissemination of good practice, and accountability to achieve this vision.

What we did

The RMB recognised that there was an opportunity to use SEFIP as a vehicle to bring about collective improvement in the equality and diversity agenda for fire and rescue services. Initially, they took the bold step of setting a collective target of moving all FRSs to level three of the equality standard for local government as quickly as practicable and charged SEFIP with developing the mechanisms to achieve this. SEFIP then:

- Put a strong business case for improving equality and diversity performance to IESE and drew down funding to support improvement;
- Developed with the Improvement and Development Agency a diagnostic assessment of all FRSs in the region against the equality standard which gave everyone a genuine benchmark of their current performance;



- Held the successful event 'Operational Diversity – It's how we do business' on 7 May 2008 at Brighton Race Course. This became a turning point in the region for thinking about equality and diversity as an issue, and focused on moving beyond chasing targets to making sure we deliver a service that meets the needs of the diverse communities we serve;
- Following the diagnostic assessments, arranged individual support sessions for each FRS and collaborative support sessions for each type of FRS in the region¹;
- Gave each Elected Member of the RMB access to Member Peer Challenge days concentrating on Equality and diversity issues;
- Negotiated a call-off contract with two providers at lower cost than the standard offer for accreditation for each FRS for meeting level 3 of the equality standard.

Outcomes to date

To date, Kent and Hampshire Fire and Rescue Services have been accredited at level 3. East Sussex and Surrey are undergoing their assessments now, with the results due in March 2009. Isle of Wight will follow soon after.

When the project is complete and all FRSs are at level 3, we anticipate we will have saved the investment cost provided by IESE.

¹In the South East there are 5 Combined Fire Authorities, 3 fire authorities which are a department of the county council and one which is a department of the unitary authority.

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