

**Fitting-in would like to make the following observations and suggestions in regard to the draft Equality and Diversity Strategy (EDS) document.**



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## **Introduction**

The approach taken by fitting-in to The Equality and Diversity Report (C&LG, 2007a) has been to identify some key areas and then comment on them. We hope these comments are of assistance and we are more than prepared to give verbal evidence or reply to queries.

The comments we make relate to our area of expertise; FRS formal and informal cultures and how these influence change management and equality. In particular Fitting-in is responsible for identifying how FRS culture operates (see Baigent, forthcoming; Baigent, 2003; Baigent, 2002; Baigent, 2001).

All of our comments are research based and support a belief that only when FRS employees do the right thing, in the right way, for the *right reasons* will the necessary cultural change occur to allow any equality and diversity report to work.

## **Main suggestion**

Underlying our comments is a belief that, rather than a plan for the next ten years, this document should be seen as a model for the next two years. Therefore our main recommendations are:

- This report serves for just two years.
- An action research project is established to:
  - research and report back on the national response/implementation.
  - draft a ten year plan for equality and diversity.

Our argument is based on the following three points.

1. After decades of debate, research and Ministerial requirements, few if any FRS's have been able to guarantee the recruitment, retention, promotion and safety of women and other minority groups in the FRS.
2. That previous attempts to implement equality agendas have made little if any inroads into informal cultural beliefs.
3. Therefore it may be better to adopt a two stage approach rather than expect that one plan will achieve what so many other plans have failed to do.

What follows are our further comments on specific areas within the report.

## **Accountability**

We suggest that:

- The report will be more likely to capture the intended audience if the 'accountability' sections appear at the start.
- The Audit Commission monitor all 'accountability' elements of this report.
- The Audit Commission develop a national performance assessment model to judge the performance of FRS in regard to equality and diversity.

## **Targets**

On page 6 the report suggests that “*The existing targets are plainly not achievable.*” This statement should be re-considered for the following reasons:

- To the innocent reader this statement suggests that such a target was never achievable.
- This view accepts that the targets have not been met but does not identify why they have not been met.
- There is a body of evidence that suggests that the Minister’s targets are “*not achievable*” because many in the FRS failed to take them seriously.
- The reality may be that the “*not achievable*” argument has become a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ due to collective resistance and using this language in the report may justify this behaviour.

## **Level of recruitment targets**

We have considerable concern about the suggestion that targets for the recruitment of women should be between 12 and 18%. We suggest the recruitment target should be 50% for the following reasons:

- There is little if any research to support an argument that women are less capable than men of being firefighters.
- A less than 50% target may actually be discriminatory.
- For a number of years FRS’s have argued that low recruitment levels have made it difficult to increase the numbers of women firefighters. If low levels of recruitment continue, then asking FRS to target a 50/50 recruitment of men and women should not be as difficult as it would first appear.
  - For example if a FRS required 10 new firefighters then they should be able to find 5 suitable women.
  - If recruitment were even lower, say three firefighters, it would be very difficult to identify how many women represented 12-18%.

## **Bullying and harassment comments**

There is a constant reiteration throughout the report that bullying and harassment is unacceptable. Perhaps this needs to be said just the once and in such a way as to avoid any misunderstanding.

## **Dealing with discrimination**

The section on page 20 under the heading “Our Vision for 2018” argues for effective, fair and swift action to deal with discrimination. We support this but suggest the following:

- All claims of harassment/discrimination/bullying should be reported to the Audit Commission and CLG.
- C&LG should comment on the non-disclosure agreements women have to sign when a harassment claim is settled out of court. These agreements go against the ethos of the equality and diversity plan, because inevitably the women’s silence prevents her providing evidence against the alleged harasser.

## Promoting Inclusion

There have been a number of direct interventions to stop men in the fire service from harassing women. Amongst these are:

- Education/training packages designed to teach firefighters about their difficult behaviour.
- Recruitment strategies to filter out potential harassers.
- Sacking as a deterrent.
- An ongoing appeal for firefighters to improve their behaviour towards their colleagues.

These efforts have been expensive and comparative data over 10 years suggests that they are not working (Baigent, 2008; Baigent, 1996). New firefighters seem to fit in with existing behaviour and existing behaviour does not change.

Interventions in an attempt to change the informal culture has been like trying to warm up a sea of masculine power; once the heat is taken off then it is reclaimed by the cold authority of male domination. It is clear that men are hearing the message but:

- Many of them are ignoring it.
- There is evidence to suggest that rather than change men's behaviour the training is improving their ability to avoid detection.

Rather than the expense of each FRS individually designing their implementation policy C&LG should consider designing a national implementation framework that includes training programmes for all staff. Such a framework could be part of the suggested action research project.

## Harassment

Although there have been some very high profile cases, research suggests that most women firefighters experience discrimination as a series of small occurrences (individually almost insignificant) that firemen pass off as humour (Baigent, 2008). Identifying the problems associated with fire service humour within this report may be of considerable benefit.

## Core Values

FRS core values underwrite the equality and diversity report and other documents (Prichard, 2006; C&LG, 2007b). The clear intention of these core values are to:

- Promote cultural change.
- Colonise the formal and informal cultures around a modernised FRS.

Such an arrangement is in line with current thinking on change management (Burke, 2002; Cartwright, 2002). However, all experts in this area recognise that 'change' can only be effective if the core values are successfully communicated to and accepted by employees.

Fitting-in has carried out research asking a range of FRS employees to list FRS core values. *There was not one correct answer* (Baigent, forthcoming). This result suggests that there is a serious problem for any proposal that relies on these values as a vehicle for change.

## Dignity and Respect

Research (in a number of FRS's) suggests that many firefighters deflect challenges about their (bullying) behaviour towards women with an argument that they are being bullied by senior managers (Baigent, forthcoming). Overcoming these firefighter's views is essential to changing their behaviour.

## Institutional Resistance

Our closing comments provide some evidence of just how difficult it will be to implement equality and diversity in the FRS. First we provide some evidence of how institutionalised sexism is in the FRS. Then we suggest how informal cultures achieve this. Finally we suggest a way forward:

One clear example of institutional resistance throughout the FRS is provided in the extract below. This has been copied from page 45 of the framework documentation currently open for discussion from C&LG (2007b).

*“4.29 The Chief Fire and Rescue Advisers Unit (CFRAU) will **be fully established during 2007/8 following the appointment of the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser ...***

*4.31 The Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser will provide broader challenges to specific areas where necessary, particularly on equality and diversity. **He** will also seek to ensure that the government is able to engage influentially in debate ...”*  
[our emphasis].

The use of exclusive language to suggest that the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser will be a “He” may well be passed off as representing the reality at this moment in time. However the earlier paragraph indicates that this post was still to be appointed.

The extent to which this ‘mistake’ is recognised and commented on by other contributors will also provide some indication as to how ingrained sexism is in the FRS.

Research (Baigent, 2008) indicates that over 50% of women who join the FRS are harassed and there is a likelihood that recent research by government will support this view. This suggests that:

- People may join the FRS fully prepared to embrace equality and diversity; nonetheless informal cultural pressures are still capable of changing that point of view.
- Despite all the effort and focus there has been little if any change over a decade (Baigent, 1996; Baigent, 2008).
- This is because each generation of firefighters act as if they are holding *their* culture in trust for the next generation.

## Implementing change – a new ethos

It is often argued that firefighters give 110% in their operational role and it is this ethos that needs to be harnessed for the equality and diversity policy to work. To do this there may be benefit in recognising the following:

- The FRS has at least two cultures operating (the formal and the informal).

- Some managers need to have a greater understanding of why and how this cultural division occurs if they are to overcome the resistance to equality and diversity schemes.
- Those who attempt to order the FRS to change may reinforce and empower the informal cultures by pushing individuals together to resist.

### **Final point**

Our last point is that equality and diversity will only occur when everyone in the FRS joins together to achieve the vision behind this document. Only when FRS employees do the right thing, in the right way, for the *right reasons* will the necessary cultural change occur. A framework for how this might be achieved is provided by research carried out by Fitting-in with one leading FRS. This research evolved into an action research project involving the Fire Authority, managers and the FBU working together with Fitting-in. The results provide a potential new ethos that can help the FRS to change (Baigent and O'Connor 2007a; Baigent and O'Connor 2007b; Baigent, O'Connor and others 2008).

Fitting-in thank you for this opportunity to present our suggestions

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