

Review of the Disability Equality Scheme 2008 - 2009

Our Commitment

Bedfordshire and Luton Fire and Rescue Service (BLFRS) have now completed a full review of this DES. We have attached at Appendix A details of stakeholders consulted and comments.

We have continued to build on our commitment to involve people with disabilities so to further develop our understanding of the needs of our community and our staff.

Our aim to encourage full participation and to engage with people with disabilities will continue to inform the development of future DES. We believe it is crucial to identify groups and individuals whose voices are not traditionally heard and work towards sustainable and meaningful engagement. In this we continue to consider the diversity of people with impairment and the barriers that people face.

We believe it is important to acknowledge here, and to demonstrate our commitment and understanding of the complexities associated with disability and how it interrelates with ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, and religion and belief.

An important area of work is our commitment and duty to assess the impact of our work on our community and our staff. There are a number of ways we do this.

Equality Impact Assessment

We have screened all Service policy for relevancy and prioritised by risk. We carry out Equality Impact Assessment on all new policies, extending this to all policies.

We have developed a database of current partnerships across the organisational. Our aim is to assess the impact of the work we carry out in partnership and to further deliver through partnership working our statutory equality duties.

Monitoring

We continue to monitor current staff and through recruitment processes profile those who apply for employment against the six strands.

Disability Survey

During the early part of 2007 staff took part in a disability audit where staff were invited to declare impairment. This in particular was to further progress disability equality; encouraging people to disclose impairment, to identify barriers to effective working and instances of reasonable adjustment.

The survey invited staff to register an interest in establishing a disability Focus Group. A disability focus group will be developed to carry out a number of tasks, one of which will be to quality assure equality impact assessments.

The information gained from the Disability Survey helped us put up to date information in place such as a baseline of information on which we can understand the progress of disabled people within the organisation.

It is important that we understand the movement of people with impairment in terms of employment, promotion and retention within the organisation if we are to advance disability equality.

We also encouraged staff to make us aware of any barriers they may face in their working environment, irrespective of whether they considered themselves to have a disability.

Two Ticks

During December 2007 through working closely with Job Centre Plus we achieved the Employers Two Tick Symbol award. We have recently been re-accredited with the Two Tick Symbol; a strong indication of our continued commitment and work in this area. For example, we have committed to interviewing people with impairment who, when applying for employment, demonstrate that they meet minimum job specifications. We hope that providing these opportunities will raise community confidence in us as a fair and equitable employer.

We have over the period of time since our first DES carried out much work towards the aims and objectives contained within our action plan. Further information about this work is detailed here and within the action plan.

Budget Setting

BLFRS is committed to embedding equality and diversity into the organisation. In order to achieve our commitment and secure success in our Strategic Aims and Objectives we have for many years committed ongoing resources for equality and diversity. Our continued goal is to encourage a culture where people feel safe to declare their disability so that we can make reasonable adjustment as necessary.

In our original DES we documented our successes and ongoing projects and set out in our action plan how we intended to further develop and embed equality and diversity. Following on from the Service commissioning two Disability Audits, findings were presented to the Functional Command Team securing funding for the projects to carry out work.

Capital Works Project

We have provided ramps to several of our buildings and a lift at our Headquarters both to assist people who may find it difficult to climb stairs. We have also provided 'enabled' toilets at our headquarters and other Service buildings throughout the county. Our Northern Area Office has been installed with a hearing link to the fire alarm.

Our Conference and Meeting Room at Service Head Quarters has been refurbished providing accessible accommodation for staff and partnership meetings it has also been fitted with a hearing loop.

We have now completed the building works and opened our new Community Fire Station in Dunstable. This station provides easy access for those with mobility issues and offers a lift and 'enabled' toilets. Access to the building includes a ramp, and the building itself has wide corridors and doors, which makes visiting the station barrier free for those with mobility issues. A hearing loop is available in the station's lecture auditorium and colour schemes and signage have been designed with those who have visual impairment in mind.

A number of projects are scheduled for the new financial year including the redevelopment of our Southern Area Office which will improve accessibility particularly to the ground floor. The appliance bay at Luton fire station is due for redevelopment for use as a community facility area with accessible features.

All building works are processed through the Service's procurement processes which provides for all purchasing through an 'approved' suppliers list. Suppliers are subjected to rigorous process ensuring all work carried out for us reflect the Services equality and diversity standards; and that partners reflect these standards within their own policies and procedures. It is important that all work carried out in partnership including procurement serves to deliver the general and specific duties.

Website Accessibility

During 2008 the new Service website went live. Currently the website is AA compliant with work currently being undertaken to achieve AAA compliancy by the end of the 2009.

As part of the ongoing work being carried out by the Service we intend to introduce an online application process for employment opportunities.

The development of the new website has also provided us with the opportunity to develop online questionnaires and analysis tools. This facility will further enable us to reach out into the community; providing more opportunities for the Service to engage and improve services in line with community group needs.

The Information Technology (IT) department carried out an internal consultation, through a sample survey, of the services it provides. This was carried out in order to improve the Services it provides to staff. IT aims to carry out twice a year a similar survey to ensure the continued improvement of services it provides. This in turn aids the Service in providing a continually improved service to the community.

Occupational Health Department

The Service provides for an Occupation Health Department who supports staff through provision of medical advice and guidance. An Occupational Physician is available through the Occupation Health Unit to provide advice on an individual case and needs basis.

The Occupational Health Unit provides all new employees with a pre-employment questionnaire; giving all new staff an opportunity to inform us about any impairment they may have. This helps us to make appropriate reasonable adjustment in the workplace; providing the best possible environment in which to help staff reach their full potential.

As part of the Occupation Health Unit's work to promote equality they provide regular 'awareness' raising campaign information about specific issues. For example recent campaigns have aimed to raise awareness about breast and prostate cancer.

The Service has worked closely with Holme Court School who is dedicated to helping children with learning disorders. The school has specialist expertise in Dyslexia and it is this and other related conditions that has been the focus of our work with the school. In particular we sought to overcome some of the difficulties experienced by some members of staff by working toward the development of screening processes and ways of making reasonable adjustment to overcome the difficulties associated with dyslexia and related conditions.

Staff who deliver training have been developed to recognise and work with people who have dyslexia and other related issues to help them overcome any barriers they may face as a result of this condition.

Currently the Occupational Health Unit is developing a procedure which

will support the Service in supporting staff with these and other disabilities in the workplace.

Development of Training Provision

The Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) provides for an effective framework for developing staff. Equality and Diversity training and development fits well in framework and provides a focus for employees.

During 2008 we sought to identify all equality and diversity development that staff receive though the range of training and development offered by the organisation. We are now in a position to identify gaps in equality and diversity related provision across the organisation and to build further provision into the training and development of our staff.

Currently, our two day induction course which is compulsory for all new members of the Service includes a Disability Module. Developed internally the module seeks to raise awareness and understanding about the barriers facing those with impairment. The main aim of this training is to move the focus away from peoples' impairment and to focus on society and the barriers it erects which effectively dis-able people.

The Service was involved in the development of a range of trans-national equality and diversity training packages. The ADDRESS Project involved working with European partners funded by the European social fund through the Leonardo da Vinci initiative. The training modules included packages for employees, managers and those who would undertake to train staff.

Leonard da Vinci projects are concerned with embedding diversity and lifelong learning. We have used our learning to further develop our 2 Day Induction Course for new members of staff and in particular the Disability Module. In addition to this we piloted a short Disability Awareness module recently with very positive results on one of our Fire Stations.

The purpose of providing Disability Awareness and Equality and Diversity training and development to our staff is to ensure that they are aware of the barriers people with impairment face and to provide the means for staff to develop the rights skills in order that they have the confidence to take action in removing those barriers.

Recruitment

Bedfordshire and Luton Fire and Rescue Service adopted, in line with best practice, the new National Fire-fighters Selection Tests Process. As part of this process; provision for reasonable adjustments has been

implemented. For example we make reasonable adjustments for those applying for employment who have declared they have dyslexia and dyspraxia.

As with those applying for operational role such as fire fighter, those applying for non operational posts we send out pre- employment questionnaires inviting potential candidates to inform us if they require any reasonable adjustment and whether they have any impairment they want us to take into consideration for the interview.

Customer Satisfaction

We actively seek the views of those who receive our services and publish policies to effectively deal with complaints.

We have recently carried out a large scale community engagement campaign for our Community Risk Management Plan. For further information please refer to our website.

There are a number of ways we encourage our community to tell us about the Services we provide. If you have a fire either in your home or where you work, you or your employer will receive an 'after your incident' questionnaire. The results of these questionnaires are collated and analysed quarterly and the information you provide is then fed back into our Service improvement plans.

Procurement

Our policies and strategy on procurement clearly set out that the Bedfordshire and Luton Fire and Rescue Service expect that all purchases take full account of ethical considerations and embrace equality and fairness requirements appropriate for a diverse workforce and community. To that end the Service is supported by its adoption of the National Procurement Strategy for Fire and Rescue Services, the work of the Eastern Regional Management Board and that of the Centre of Excellence.

Further, we are committed to delivering on our disability equality duty in this area of our work and partnerships. We have undertaken recently correspondence with all our procurement partners which details our commitment to equality and diversity and our expectations that our partners work towards those goals. We have requested our partners submit to us their commitment to these ends.

All procurement contracts are carried out in line with the following policies:

- ◇ National Procurement Strategy for Fire and Rescue Services 2005-2008

- ◇ Bedfordshire and Luton Procurement Strategy
- ◇ Procurement Procedures - V110101
- ◇ Procurement Policy – V0121

Cultural Audit – Staff Survey

We continually work to measure our achievements and as such carry out a Cultural Audit Staff – an equality and diversity questionnaire is sent to all staff on a 3 yearly basis. The results from this survey assist us in our planning and provides an additional advantage in terms of a benchmarking exercise which we can judge ourselves against other Services.

Consultation: Stakeholders

Affordable Warmth
Age Concern
Anchor Trust
Asperger Bedfordshire
Autism Bedfordshire
Bedford Borough Council
Bedfordshire Body Positive
Bedfordshire Care at Home
Bedfordshire Cheshire Home
Bedfordshire County Council
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Bedfordshire Supported Living Service – Kempston Project
Disability Rights Commission
Fire Brigades' Union
Job Centre Plus
Luton Borough Council
Macmillan Nursing Service
Maia Close Project
MIND
Retained Fire fighters Union
Sight Concern
South Bedfordshire District Council

Unison

Consultation with Stakeholders

During December 2006 through to February 2007 we engaged with stakeholders about our Disability Equality Scheme. We have documented those responses below. During the consultation period the draft Disability Equality Scheme was also available to staff via our intranet and accompanied by a general invitation for comment through our internal newsletter (Blue Bulletin).

The comments received from the consultation are divided in two, firstly the answers provided by stakeholders in response to set questions about our DES and secondly comments relating to the Disability Equality Duty General Duties.

Consultation Questionnaire Responses

You considered that our priorities were well thought out and clear and that our arrangements for delivering this scheme made sense. The arrangements to achieve our outcomes were considered realistic and practical in view of other constraints facing larger organisations such as us.

You considered that our intentions were clear as to what we wanted to achieve, and that the actions we would take were clear and well set out.

You identified some further actions which you considered would be helpful in achieving the outcomes we want to deliver for people with impairment, for instance a focus on mental health issues and promotional activities; to encourage a positive perception of disabled people and to facilitate a culture change. You were concerned that the focus should not just be about accessibility, making mention to other types of impairment such as mental health issues. You were also concerned to mention that outward facing work in the community should have the aim of breaking down the stigma and discrimination experienced by those with mental ill health which should be backed up with robust policy regarding recruitment, selection and retention. However, we were please to find that you considered that we had covered the essential areas equitably and considered that we had followed guidance carefully in order to develop equality in disability.

You considered also that we should equality impact assess existing policies and develop a system of prioritising policies for assessment in a timely way.

We asked you to consider, through our action plan points whether we would be able to measure our actions against the outcomes we wanted

to achieve. Here you commented on whether the plan could be further developed (SMART). However, overall you generally agreed that we would be able to accurately assess our actions against our identified outcomes.

It was generally considered that our DES and action plan would further promote disability equality and ensure that disabled people would be aware of their rights and that they would be encouraged to access services more readily. You also considered that other agencies across Bedfordshire would be aware of us tackling the issues facing those with impairment and that we have put procedures in place to cope with requirements. You further considered that our DES would ensure equal opportunities in employment for those with disabilities; remove barriers and encourage educational attitudes to disability.

We were pleased to see that you considered that the DES would make a difference and encourage a culture change, reduce stigma and discrimination. And, that it will ensure that disabled and non disabled people would be treated equitably.

Training staff is an important area of work for any organisation, and you considered that training was always needed. In particular attitudes toward disability and how to deal with disability was considered important. You believed we should carry out initial training for all tiers of the organisation in both raising awareness and demonstrating organisational commitment to equality objectives. You also told us about other items such as promotional work/ displays/ leaflets and sessions to raise awareness and promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. In addition, training around mental health issues was flagged as well as sensory awareness training as this particular group of people have a different response to emergency situations. Sensory impairment can significantly increase disorientation and dislocation in difficult environments for e.g. smoke filled rooms. Also you told us that disability training should include both physical and mental impairment. You enquired about whether we would be making an easy read version of the DES available?

Importantly, you have drawn our attention to the need for preventative measures and support for those who may be affected by their work, leading to stress, depression or other forms of mental ill health

A particular question that you raised was about how we engage with people who have hearing impairment; either deaf or hard of hearing people?

You considered that promotional work/ displays/ leaflets/ sessions to raise awareness. Importantly you mentioned the use of inclusive language here in our DES and in other areas of our work such as training and development and policy development.

A point was raised about monitoring; and that regular monitoring should be a feature of our practices, and that the commitment and practice should be throughout the whole organisation. You also considered that external partners should be invited to audit performance.

It was a very positive point for us that you considered that the Service had endeavoured to put in place policy and procedures that enables the Service to deliver equitably across its' client base in the community. Overall you considered the scheme and action plan to be good and that it addressed all the key issues.

Disability Equality Duty – The General Duties

There were a number of comments received specifically concerning the General Duties which we have summarised below.

Commitment

You considered that a commitment was given to the Disability Equality Scheme and action plan owing to the endorsement of both the chief Fire Office and the Chair of the combine Fire Authority and that the scheme showed a regard for the both the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Equality Duty.

Promote Equality

You believed that the organisation to be promoting equality, however you felt that specific actions to promote equality were not included in the scheme. The scheme indicated that we carry out equality impact assessment and this was assessed by our Corporate Equality Group who in turn reports to the Human Resources Scrutiny Group.

Eliminate Harassment.

You made mention of our complaints system dealing fairly, consistently and confidentially and that all complaints would be dealt in line with service policy and are open to scrutiny and audit was made.

Promote positive Attitudes towards disabled people

Your comments indicated some concern that there were no actions or evidence that we were promoting positive actions toward disabled people.

Encourage Participation

Overall you commented on ways that we will encourage participation including; those we intend to consult with and how that will shape our scheme, and that the Corporate Equality Group will ensure that consultation takes place and participants will be kept informed and the methods we intend to use, the yearly review will include stakeholders, and that a summary of equality impact assessments will be reported as part of the scheme's annual review.

Take Steps to Meet Disabled people's needs

As an organisation we have taken many steps to address people's needs and you have identified these in your consideration of our scheme. They included: future improves to ensure accessibility to fire stations including features such as a lift and enabled toilets, the two day induction for all new staff contains a disability awareness module, and that reasonable adjustments were made to the fire fighter selection process for people with dyslexia and dyspraxia, equality monitoring information covers all 6 strands at point of entry as an employee to help us identify disproportionate representation within our workforce, and that in our work we consider 5 categories of impairment, and that we conduct related staff surveys which informs training and development .

The 3 Year Action Plan

In your consideration of our action plan you considered the plan was measurable and had assigned ownership and that specific outcomes were timely. You considered the evaluation column would allow us to assess progress and mark key milestones, and that the plan covered all areas within the scheme itself. However you were concerned that that the plan lacked promotional actions which would promote positive attitudes and culture change. Additionally you were concerned to note that a timetable to complete equality impact assessment on existing policies had not been included.