



## Operational Diversity - It's how we do business

# What a difference a day makes!!!

On 7 May 2008 the South East Fire Improvement Partnership (SEFIP) put on a successful conference on equality and diversity in a conference entitled "It's how we do business".

150 people from all the 9 fire & rescue services in the region attended along with colleagues from services further afield and representatives from the Audit Commission. Guest speakers ranged from Chief Executives/Directors from Fire Services to Stonewall, Hampshire Police and the Audit Commission. We also heard about three case studies of exemplary work in the community:

Working with the deaf community – Isle of Wight  
Gypsy and Traveller community engagement – East Sussex  
Life skills and safety courses for special needs children – Kent

The presentations used on the day are now available at [www.sefip.gov.uk](http://www.sefip.gov.uk).

Words can't capture the energy that was generated by the event – it was truly one of those moments you recognise when the way we think moves on and a new phase is born.

## Emerging arguments

The emerging arguments were centred on the recognition that the main driver for equalities in the Fire & Rescue Service is in how we deliver our services to the community. We needed to challenge ourselves to get clarification as to why we are pursuing equality. This is in light of the increasing feeling that people have been "forced" to pursue equality goals rather than adopting them as part of their organisational change goals.

The moral/social justice argument is increasingly seen as a difficult one to sell to an organisation and our staff, and to measure for success. The social cohesion and business arguments have been growing in status as approaches to this complex issue. Local Government has for some time linked their equalities agenda to their organisation's business aims. Our focus on workforce composition has blinded us to the realisation that we need to focus on our core business first and continually develop our knowledge of the people we serve and build differences in response. That focus then strengthens the logic that you need a diverse workforce in order to keep generating new ideas and different world perspectives.

We also recognised that we already do so much good work in our communities and that many of our staff have the skills to work with people now – we just need to make the diversity debate make sense for them.

Overall, it was an excellent event – but the journey is only now beginning. We must all maintain focus on operational diversity and use the momentum the event has given us to truly move forward. Funding is available through the capacity building fund to support your FRA's journey – to find out how you can benefit, please contact one of the SEFIP team.

## 7 Key Points to remember

1. Diversity is fundamental to our operational practice.
2. Individual and community differences are understood, respected and integrated into our policy and practice at every level.
3. Impact assessment is the principle tool for moving forward – (Kent have renamed it as the People Impact Assessment rather than equalities impact assessment – simpler language helps!)
4. The key to equality and diversity schemes is in ensuring that not only do our staff understand the differing needs of the communities we serve but that they have the knowledge, skills and understanding to provide an effective service. It is key that all of our front line staff, those that interact with their local communities, understand what can be very diverse needs.
5. Systems and processes need to be embedded to make equalities an organisational language rather than being driven by a number of individuals.
6. By promoting equality, people are better able to perform to the best of their ability, and the most able rise through the organisation.
7. Communication with our workforce is vital and we need to have systems and values which support our individual staff.

## Contacts

James Finch: [james.finch@kent.fire-uk.org](mailto:james.finch@kent.fire-uk.org) 01622 698 453

Phil Dickens: [phil.dickens@kent.fire-uk.org](mailto:phil.dickens@kent.fire-uk.org) 01622 698 459

Emily Baker: [emily.baker@kent.fire-uk.org](mailto:emily.baker@kent.fire-uk.org) 01622 698 410