

REPORT TO THE SOUTH EAST FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES' REGIONAL MANAGEMENT BOARD

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY UPDATE

8 OCTOBER 2008

KEY ISSUE/DECISION

The Regional Management Board (RMB) is asked to note the progress made in relation to meeting the equality standard for local government across the region. It is also asked to approve amending its aspirational target for all Fire & Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in the region to achieve level 3 of the equality standard for local government by December 2008 in line with the advice received by the Regional Associate from the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the actions taken across the region towards meeting the Board's aspiration of all FRAs meeting level 3 of the equality standard for local government across the region as soon as practicable. Members' attention is drawn to the following key outcomes:

- i. All FRAs have received a diagnostic assessment and follow-up support from the IDeA and have produced plans to meet any identified gaps;
- ii. An important issue that has arisen is the relationship between FRAs that are part of a County Council and their ability to progress towards the standard at a faster rate than the County;
- iii. There is excellent leadership of the diversity agenda at both Member and Chief Officer level. However, more support may be required from external agencies to continue to embed equality at the heart of the service delivered by FRAs to the public.

CONSULTATION

Consultation has taken place with the constituent Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in the South East Region to develop the report. Advice has also been taken from the Regional Associate at the IDeA.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

- i. Note the presentation from the IDeA;
- ii. Note the intention to develop a new contract of support for equality & diversity issues with an appropriate supplier, in consultation with the SEFIP stakeholder group and Chief Fire Officers; and
- iii. Approve the revised target in relation to meeting level 3 of the equality standard for local government as set out in the report at paragraphs 13 & 14.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Equality and diversity is a key priority for the Regional Management Board as expressed in the Business Plan 2008/11.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

INTRODUCTION

1. As part of the 2007/10 business plan, the Board set an aspirational target for all FRAs in the region to meet level 3 of the equality standard for local government by December 2008. The South East Fire Improvement Partnership (SEFIP) commissioned a series of diagnostic assessments to assess where each FRA was in relation to the standard. This was followed by a series of support events designed to assist all FRAs to move towards level 3.
2. The purpose of this report is to summarise the support that has been provided and to suggest a framework of further support. Funding from SEFIP can be made available to support FRAs in meeting this priority for the Board.
3. In many ways, the fact that the Board has driven this agenda across the region is in itself a case study of good practice which other RMBs might wish to learn from. Therefore, consideration will be given to how this project can best be shared with colleagues and Members around the country. A detailed case study on how the RMB approached this project is available at <http://www.sefip.gov.uk/viewDocument.jsp?document=558>

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

Outcomes of Diagnostic Assessment

4. Each FRA in the region produced a self-assessment, which was then challenged by an independent assessor. This has given each a clear understanding of where it is in relation to the requirements of level 3 of the equality standard. Additionally, good practice examples were generated from each FRA and shared at the successful operational diversity event held at Brighton Race Course on 7 May 2008. Some further examples of good practice are highlighted in **appendices 1 to 4** to this report. More examples will be brought to Members in future updates on this topic.
5. As part of the agenda for this meeting, Members will receive a presentation from the assessor on the outcomes of the diagnostic assessment, and his opinion of what the key issues have been. From this an action plan will be developed. However, for county fire services, one of the key issues has been the priority afforded to E&D by its parent authority. The regional associate has been very helpful in approaching top-tier authorities and seeking to address some of the challenges the assessments of FRAs have unearthed for county councils.

Outcomes of Additional Support

6. Action plans were created for each FRA with the assistance of the peer assessor. Additionally a programme of collaborative support was put in place. For example, a series of events for all combined fire authorities was held, looking at equality impact assessment processes. A separate session for the FRAs which are part of a county or unitary structure was also held.
7. An event was held on 16 September for procurement practitioners to increase understanding of how equality issues impact on procurement practices, which was successful and well-attended.

Outcomes of Peer Mentoring Programme

8. Each Member of the Board has had at least one face to face session with an accredited peer mentor, and informal feedback received by the Board's programme manager from a selection of Members has shown that the sessions have been productive. Although the outcomes of each meeting remain confidential between that Member and the peer mentor, some common themes have been identified:
 - Members understand their leadership role in relation to equality & diversity. However, leadership could be improved by increasing the level of awareness of actual detail of what the FRA is currently doing. CFOs will want to consider how this would impact on their own briefing mechanisms for their Members, as this is outside the jurisdiction of the RMB;
 - The ease of finding each FRA's equality action plan or single equality scheme on its website is used by the peer mentor as a proxy measure of the relative importance given to the subject. Some were easier to find than others, and some are given higher prominence than others too. A key recommendation has been to use these as a means upon which to base progress, and to ensure that they can be located easily on websites;
 - There is a feeling amongst all that the Chairs need to get together more often to be able to informally discuss matters of mutual interest.
9. Peer mentoring can be a very useful tool and a further programme will be built into any new support contract.

Future support arrangements for E&D for Fire & Rescue Authorities in the Region

10. The Improvement Partnership's contract with the IDeA expires after this meeting, where the peer assessor will present his headline findings arising from the assessments. SEFIP is minded to develop revised contracts for support with an appropriate provider. Support, both at a collaborative level and also for each authority, might include:
 - Equality Impact Assessment Processes
 - Member mentoring
 - Chief officer and officer mentoring
 - Performance management advice in relation to E&D
 - Embedding E&D into organisations
 - Progress with E&D action plans with a view to moving to Level 3 and beyond

Accreditation arrangements

11. SEFIP commissioned two peer challenge sessions to allow the two FRAs in the region identified as currently performing at level 3 of the standard to undergo the accreditation process. This requires each FRA to produce a self-assessment of the progress it has made since the first assessment, which is then challenged for robustness. At the time of writing, Kent & Medway Fire & Rescue Authority has undergone its assessment and is awaiting the outcome. Hampshire Fire & Rescue Authority is programmed to have its assessment in early November.

12. SEFIP will tender this arrangement for any further FRAs that wish to go for accreditation after November 2008 when the second of the two assessments programmed will be completed. It is hoped that it would be possible to negotiate a similar arrangement and, in this instance, the likelihood is that SEFIP would bear the majority of this fee on behalf of FRAs. It is, therefore, very important that each FRA advises SEFIP of when it plans to go for accreditation. An alternative scheme (Equality Mark) is also available which will also be assessed as part of any tender.

Amending the target

13. The Board was right to set an aspirational target to reach level 3 by December 2008 across the region. This has given real impetus to the project overall, and, without it, the progress seen to date may not have been achieved. However, it must be recognised that reaching level 3 remains for some FRAs challenging, and further support will be needed. The Board is, therefore, asked to approve revising the target to:
- At least two FRAs accredited at level 3 by December 2008
 - At least three FRAs accredited at level 3 by March 2009
 - At least five FRAs accredited at level 3 by December 2009
 - All FRAs accredited at level 3 by March 2011
14. These targets reflect the advice from the IDEa on the likely progress of each FRA towards the target. However, elsewhere on this agenda Members will note that a proposal to amend the equality standard for local government from a five level process to a three level process is currently being consulted upon. This will have an impact on the targets set. At the current time, however, the final target for all FRAs ties in with the Improvement & Efficiency South East target set out in the regional improvement strategy, and brings fire into line with that document.

IMPLICATIONS

15. Equality & diversity remains a key priority for the Board, as set out in its approved business plan for 2008/11. Equality & diversity also remains a national priority for the government in relation to fire & rescue authorities. To continue to support the agenda in the region, funding has already been earmarked from the 2008/09 allocation of improvement & efficiency funding. However, even at this early stage of the year, activity has already outstripped the initial allocation. The SEFIP stakeholder group will be seeking to use its approved claw-back arrangements to move under-spends against other project areas to fund E&D work. SEFIP will also be approaching IESE, specifically the chief officer group in charge of the performance improvement theme, to seek additional in-year funding for E&D for fire.

CONCLUSION

16. Members are asked to:
- i. Note the presentation from the IDEa;
 - ii. Note the intention to develop a new contract of support for equality & diversity issues with an appropriate supplier, in consultation with the SEFIP stakeholder group and Chief Fire Officers;
 - iii. Approve the revised target in relation to meeting level 3 of the equality standard for local government as set out in the report at paragraphs 13 & 14.