



Event Name: South 'Equality in the Dock' by the Garnett Foundation at Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters

Date of Event: 8 July 2008

Attended By: Shanti Waas, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service

Introduction

This event was put together by Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service in partnership with the South East Fire Improvement Partnership (SEFIP) and Hampshire County Council. The event was open to all Fire & Rescue Services in the South East, local authorities, educational establishments and voluntary and community organisations in Hampshire.

The focus of this event was to address the barriers of attitude, access, and discrimination faced by people from minority ethnic backgrounds, women, disabled people, people from the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender communities, older and young people and due to their religious background or beliefs in all areas of employment. Importantly it also examined why it makes organisational sense to develop a diverse workforce and how this can be achieved.

It was felt that this was an opportune time to put this event on, as it followed closely behind the launch of the CLG National Equality and Diversity Strategy for the Fire & Rescue Service and the Regional Management Board's target for all FRAs to reach level 3 of the equality standard for local government as quickly as practicable. The evidence of the results of Fire and Rescue Services' attempts to improve its record on employing people from under represented groups is far from satisfactory compared to our aspirations. It was felt that an innovative approach to examining issues around equality in employment such as this presentation can help Fire & Rescue Services' look at the issue from a different angle and consider alternatives to how we have tackled these challenges in the past.

Objectives and format of the event

The main objectives of the event were to:

- target equality practitioners, elected members, senior managers and employees involved in social inclusion/cohesion activities
- get the issue of personal leadership/ responsibility and equality on the agenda and to influence the organisations to make a real difference
- understand the landscape, barriers and environment around equality issues
- provide networking opportunities and for sharing best practice

The event was presented as a play, with professional actors, in the form of a court room drama, where the employment track record of equality legislation over the last 20 years was 'put on trial'. The synopsis of the drama is that the defence argued that equality in employment has achieved the expectations of all those who believed in it, fought for it and needed it. The prosecution in contrast put forward the view that equality in employment was an unrealistic dream. The decision was left to the jury, who were the invited audience, to cast their vote through an audience response system. For interest the verdict in this instance was in favour of the defence by a very small margin.

The event was attended by 93 people representing three Fire Services from the region, Local Authorities in Hampshire, Southampton Solent University, Southampton City College, and local voluntary and community organisations.

Conclusion

On the basis of the positive feedback received and the number of people who came on the evening, the occasion can be justifiably described as very successful. The objectives set for the occasion were largely achieved. The 93 attendees reflected the diverse target audience of senior managers, middle managers, firefighters, community and voluntary sector representatives.

What people found particularly interesting about the play was that it examined the concept of equality as it applied to each of the strands of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age and religion or belief. Each equality strand was put 'in the dock', so to speak and in doing so moved the audience to consider equality from the perspective of a person or group representing each of the strands.

To give a flavour how the event was received by the audience, a summary of feedback comments are noted below:

- Most of the audience said that the play was superbly presented by a team of talented actors. They tackled the complex issues around equality with a sense of real purpose and clarity and weren't afraid to explore sensitive issues in depth
- A majority found the play to be interesting, thought provoking and powerful and raised a number of issues for them, and from what they learnt, would review some of their current strategies.
- Some felt that using the medium of drama would get more people on board around equality than the traditional form of training and would consider its use in their own training and development environment.
- Some felt that they would like more members of their staff to see the play
- Many asked whether this event was going to be repeated across the region

However, no event passes without some learning points for the organisers. Some attendees felt that more notice should have been given and that would have helped to attract more people. Again there were comments about the timing of the event. Quite a few may have preferred the event to be held during normal working hours (either in the morning or afternoon) to enable attendance by more staff across the region. We believe these are important points and would certainly need to consider them for any future regional events.

Author: Shanti Waas, Event Co-ordinator & HFRS Equality and Diversity Advisor

Date: 1 August 2008