



Case Study: Mainstreaming equalities: the 'Operational Diversity' approach of Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority

Source: Kent Fire & Rescue Service

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Summary

Kent & Medway Fire & Rescue Authority (KMFRA) aims to ensure that its services are accessible to all. In addition, their provision will be free from prejudice and unlawful discrimination. It also aims to be sensitive to the needs of all local communities.

Their focus is on improving the way services are delivered through better understanding of individual and community needs. They have re-invigorated their approach to promoting equalities and called it 'Operational Diversity'. This has helped to impress equality into the minds of all staff by making a clear connection with their own roles.

Background to the authority

KMFRA is made up of 25 members. It has political and financial responsibility for providing a fire and rescue service for Kent & Medway via Kent Fire & Rescue Service (KFRS).

Services delivered by fire and rescue authorities differ from those of other local authorities. They are wholly concerned with risks within their service area. There are three perspectives – prevention, protection and response. The fire and rescue service is about keeping people safe in their homes and at work and rescuing them when accidents occur.

Much of KMFRA's work is focused on:

- reducing the number of times the public need to call out the fire service
- reducing injuries and losses
- reducing anti-social behaviour like arson and fire-setting incidents
- dealing with the day-to-day work of fires, road accidents and rescues.

As an emergency service, Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS) is required to use its resources to reduce demand, but attend when needed.

The area served by KFRS has a population of 1.6 million people living in approximately 684,000 households. There are densely-populated areas in the north Kent area, a number of medium-sized market towns and a smaller population spread across the county of rural areas both inland and along the coastline.

The context is therefore one of a population with a broad spectrum of social needs. Those of the populous north and east are likely to contrast with those of the rural south.

Who was involved?

Members of the Equality Standards Steering Group (ESSG) core membership, which includes representation from every branch and section of the organisation. The group is currently chaired by the director of people services.

Members of the Operational Diversity Working Group (ODWG) consisting of a cross-section of approximately 30 staff, mainly operational staff based in fire stations and in community safety teams.

Also included are stakeholders from the community that have shared and generated ideas for improved services.

The problems and how we tackled them

A change of leadership in, and renewed drive to progress through the levels of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG), exposed the need for a change of approach in mainstreaming equalities in KFRS.

Historically, equality and diversity issues were often seen by staff as the domain of human resources (HR) and as 'political correctness' or a 'box-ticking' exercise. It was not widely appreciated that:

- However, equality and diversity is ultimately about providing the best possible service to customers.
- By understanding the needs of as many different communities as possible, services can gain a better perspective of the difficulties some customers face.

The equalities agenda is about the continuing development of knowledge and skills about people. This knowledge and skill can be used to develop new ways and to reach vulnerable people. It can strengthen the response in emergency situations, particularly to those who need different approaches.

Equality and diversity was implicit in much of the work that was being done but generally this was not recognised by the people delivering services at the front end.

'Operational Diversity – It's How We Do Business' was developed to embed equality and diversity in the delivery of KFRS' services. The language used was carefully selected. Processes such as equality impact assessment were renamed 'people impact assessment'.

Internal focus groups revealed that staff at operational and non-operational levels alike were very committed to the principles of equality. However, there was an underlying feeling that staff would like more involvement and be able to put views across.

An Operational Diversity Work Group (ODWG) was set up. It consisted of a cross-section of staff – approximately 30 – and in particular fire-fighters based on station. The group helps create planned operational diversity activities and shape ongoing plans. The group also acts as a consultative group to all people impact assessments being developed. They have also been engaged in the impact assessments relating to operational delivery and community safety.

A leaflet has been developed for fire-fighters and other frontline staff called 'Working for Our Community – Our Approach to Operational Diversity.' The purpose of the leaflet is to summarise our single equality and diversity scheme in terms of performing their own roles.

To help fire stations and community safety teams in putting forward locally-based diversity activities, KFRS is using its intranet site. This includes the presentation of factual information about the profile of the Kent community across the six equality strands, related sub-groups and social groupings.

The service is calling this resource the 'A to Z of Kent Communities'. The information will represent a resource to be used in understanding differing community needs, particularly in relation to individual station grounds. The site will also be used to feed information back up to management.

In addition, it will share learning from individual stations for the benefit of others. Some of this information will emerge from impact assessments. The information will be crucial to anybody involved in formulation of service delivery and direct delivery of service.

Outcomes and impacts

KFRS has gathered many case studies of self-initiated station and community safety team-based projects. Most are focused on helping specific groups in the community while improving customer awareness. Recent examples include:

- working with a special needs school to introduce life and safety skills for severely disabled children
- staff and group members from a residential and day-care service for adults with learning disabilities visited a fire station to learn about the importance of smoke alarms and cooking safely
- a community safety team took fire safety messages to a group of physically and sensory-impaired people helping them to discover new capabilities and how to make best use of them.
- the launch of the HomeSafe Medway initiative which aims to help vulnerable people feel safer in their own homes.

HomeSafe Medway carries out security work and small repairs, fits minor equipment and adaptations for disabled, older and vulnerable or 'at risk' people. These include recent victims of crime, as well as those suffering from domestic violence.

A community safety team has worked extensively with a government-funded centre that takes in 16 to 18-year-old males as their first stop in this country. The team offer pictorial presentations and most of the slides used are very basic and simple while offering good safety advice. Some of these examples of good practice have been developed into practical tools to be shared by the wider workforce. These include:

- a book of useful phrases in different languages for firefighters to use on the job, backed up by teaching sessions on how to actually pronounce these phrases and understand likely responses
- an SMS text service for the deaf and a language-line used in control and community safety activities
- simple language guide and a pack of pictorial 'flash cards' to be used at incidents where individuals either do not speak English or have other communication difficulties
- crew identification cards in Braille
- a fire safety DVD for Gypsies and Travellers.

The 'flash cards' allow speakers with limited English to identify their language, enabling service users, through a freephone number, to use the telephone interpreting service to communicate effectively with fire crews.

The fire safety DVD was produced by local Travellers, who also participated in the film. Caravans are termed 'single structures' and therefore represent a high fire-risk group. Many people have contributed to KFRS's knowledge and understanding of the various communities in Kent. This has enabled KFRS to improve the services it provides to these communities. It also testifies to an increasing acceptance and positive attitude towards operational diversity.

In September 2008 KFRS was formally assessed at Level 3 of the ESLG.

Contact

Kay Banfield, HR Strategy and Policy Manager
Kent Fire and Rescue Service
The Godlands
Straw Mill Hill, Tovil
Maidstone ME15 6XB
telephone: 01622 698221
email: kay.banfield@kent.fire-uk.org