

# **Social Justice and Regeneration Committee**

**SJR(2)-02-07(p.4)**

**Date: 1 February 2007**

**Time: 9.00 - 12.00**

**Venue: Senedd, Cardiff Bay**

**Fire and Rescue Services in Wales - from the Commission for Racial Equality Wales office**

## **General**

Under the race Relations Act section 71 since 2002 the three Fire and Rescue Services in Wales have had a duty to give due regard to the promotion of race equality, to prepare race equality schemes according to a three year cycle and conduct ethnic monitoring of their employment practices reporting publicly on the data annually.

In common with most public bodies in Wales, the services did not manage to prepare effective race equality schemes in the first round 2002 to 2005 and there continued to be problems in respect of their collection of ethnic origin data on their employees, mainly in terms of how the data sets could be cross referred to provide proper analysis of potential problems rather than, as with most other agencies, a basic failure to collect the information in the first place.

CRE Wales discussed these issues with the three Services and secured their agreement to improved race equality schemes which focused on a limited number of priority actions that would produce measurable improvements by May 2008. The schemes required parallel action by WAG and ODPM in terms of improving reporting systems on domestic fires and other matters.

In conjunction with the improved schemes, the three Services were committed to deliver improvements in their employment ethnic monitoring to enable them to replace ODPM requirements that were not compatible with equality legislation.

## **Results of work by the Services**

### **Employment Monitoring**

Data was provided to the Commission on employment monitoring by each Service as part of a wider scrutiny exercise by CRE Wales on the employment duty.

There are still some gaps in the material collected or in the ways in which one data set can be cross referenced to another. All three Services have plans in place for improving their data sets and for

more effective computerised systems to aid better analysis.

All three Services are involved in joint work with WAG and DCLG to ensure that selection systems are non-discriminatory prior to the introduction on new selection procedures and tests in 2007.

Mid and West is engaged in a 'Cultural Audit' exercise to provide full baseline information on the experience of its staff across a wide range of equality strands and issues prior to preparing an organizational development programme later this year.

The Services remain among the best in Wales in terms of collecting staff data (both in respect of areas covered and the level of response by employees) but the overall picture remains one of very low ethnic minority participation in the Services' employment.

While the number of ethnic minority staff in South Wales has doubled between 2002 and 2006, it remained only a small fraction of what might be expected given the ethnic minority proportion in the local population.

As numbers are very small, it is difficult to use them for statistical analysis but it is apparent from South Wales figures that ethnic minority staff are substantially over represented in grievance and disciplinary statistics

- Progress challenge 2007-8:
- 4 deliver effective outreach actions to encourage more ethnic minority applicants
- 4 consolidate the development in employment monitoring and analysis so that fully working systems are in place before the race equality scheme revision in May 2008

## **Schemes**

Only one Service (South Wales – available on its web site) has provided the CRE with a full annual report on progress under the Scheme.

The North Wales Scheme was only formally adopted by the Authority on 24 January 2007.

Mid and West provided a letter noting some actions in respect of partnership working with other Services and work with WAG to develop positive action initiatives.

The key commitment in the three Schemes was the collection and analysis of data on the ethnicity of those in homes where there have been fires, progress in this area requiring revised reporting procedures across Wales and England. It is anticipated that the new forms will be in place in 2007.

- Progress challenge 2007-8:
- 4 ensure the new forms properly capture the required ethnic data and that this is used by the three Services to better direct fire prevention work and lay the basis for target setting in the revised Schemes from May 2008

## Context within which to secure improvements

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales which came into effect in March 2005 has generated the development of Risk Reduction Plans by all three Services.

These plans show a variable response to equality issues but nevertheless provide a strong context in which the sort of activities required by the race equality duties and the newer disability and gender duties can be most effectively focused and managed.

It is disappointing that the equality proposals set out in the National Framework were not pursued with appropriate vigour at the start.

Developments at the Westminster and Welsh Assembly Government level on recruitment issues and risk management along with the integration of the Services into the Wales Programme for Improvement provide a better context in which performance improvements on equality can be secured. A prime condition for success in this area, however, will be to delivery of an appropriate priority on equality issues within the WPI process and in turn a proper relationship between WPI, the Wales Audit Office and the equality Commissions and the duties they regulate.

The focus in the Risk Management Plans on home safety issues requires a consequential focus on better understanding of the relationship between ethnicity, risk of fire, responsiveness to fire prevention messages and devices etc. This is directly referred to in a section of the South Wales RMP and noted in the North Wales RMP.

A priority for the Commission as a regulator is to secure a proper relationship between equality plans and the core sets of commitments and programmes that a public body is guided by and upon which its performance is and can be scrutinised.

- Progress challenge 2007-8:
- 4 develop a stronger relationship between the Wales Programme for Improvement, risk management approaches in the Service and the implementation and scrutiny of race and other equality schemes.