

Northern Ireland Fire Brigade - enhancing performance through people development

The Fire Authority for Northern Ireland is a non-departmental public body whose sponsoring department is the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Authority's main function is to secure the services of the Fire Brigade which in turn is required to: meet efficiently all normal requirements as regards fire fighting and protecting life and property in case of fire; enforce all relevant fire precaution legislation; ensure appropriate arrangements are in place to provide advice in respect of fire prevention; arrange efficient training for staff and ensure an efficient system is in place for members of the public to call the Brigade.

The Northern Ireland Fire Brigade serves the entire population of Northern Ireland (1.69 million) covering an area of over 5,500 sq. miles. This includes all the categories of Fire Risk areas identified by the Home Office, ranging from high density, industrial areas to remote rural areas.

The Brigade's current establishment is made up as follows: 919 wholetime firefighters; 980 retained firefighters;

12 volunteer firefighters; 59 control room staff and 208 support staff.

The White Paper 'Our Fire and Rescue Service' forms part of the Government's modernisation agenda founded on the key principle that public services should be provided in the best and most effective ways possible. The White Paper identifies the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) as the principal tool that will help the Fire and Rescue

Service contribute to this modernisation agenda by allowing the service to move from a position where it was working to arbitrary standards to one where it has created its own standards and priorities, based on assessed risk. The IPDS provides a performance management system capable of meeting current and future expectations of the service through the development of its people to recognised National Occupational Standards (NOS).

The modernisation agenda and the acceptance of the IPDS as the cornerstone of this agenda, compels the Fire and Rescue Service to review the way it develops the people who will deliver its service. IPDS has been introduced nationally. It will mean a move away from traditional development programmes to a system that is vocationally driven, concentrating on role specific competencies.

The mainstay of IPDS is the realisation of a competent workforce through developing skills, knowledge and understanding and applying them in the workplace. It is designed to be fair, transparent and transferable across the UK Fire Services and has NVQs built-in that acknowledge competence in the various fire service roles. The need for a safe and competent workforce has led to the establishment of NOS for all the fire service roles. IPDS embraces the full range of fire service activity and is intended to enable fire service staff to attain and subsequently maintain the level of competence required to meet

the demands of their role. This year's trainees were the first to embark on the new IPDS within the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade.

In order to support this initiative the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade has made a commitment that all new trainees will undertake the Level 3 NVQ in Emergency Fire Services - Operations in the Community. The new trainee course is fully aligned to the NVQ and the underpinning knowledge required is covered within the course. Experienced firefighters have now been trained as work-based assessors to assess the competence of the new trainees when they move to their Watch. Internal verifiers, the work-based assessors' line manager, will be located within each fire station to quality assure the assessment process.

For these new trainees the NVQ will recognise transferable skills, internal and external to the service and create transparency in terms of expected performance requirements. The NVQ will also support a culture of coaching

and mentoring through assessment planning, encouraging them to take ownership of their own performance and development while providing a framework for recording achievement of their competence.

QCA has seconded Jenny Kerr to the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade as the first IPDS Development Manager. Jenny heads up a dedicated IPDS team, which has been established to assist with the implementation of IPDS and providing advice on developing people through personal development plans, assessment processes and quality assurance procedures.

IPDS is applicable to everyone in the organisation regardless of role. It has been introduced to ensure that all employees receive the best possible development to help them fulfil their role as effectively and safely as possible. The IPDS will ensure that the Fire Brigade's performance is enhanced through the development of its greatest asset - its people.

