

Campaigner is all fired up

HEARING-impaired Duncan White is a fireman on a mission – to promote the cause of disabled people working in the fire and rescue services

Duncan a flexible duty station manager with Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service. He joined Somerset Fire Brigade in 1987 and has served in varying operational and training roles having been promoted to his current position as a group support officer in 2004.

Duncan became aware that his hearing was deteriorating in 2002 – pre-Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) – and was faced with the uncertainty of his future within the service. ‘At that time, you were expected to retire if you suffered a disability of any sort, including deafness,’ Duncan explains. ‘I wasn’t ready to retire: I loved being a fire-fighter too much.’

Through his individual research and medical examinations he was diagnosed with otosclerosis and noise-induced hearing loss, most probably caused by his line of work. Hearing aids were prescribed in 2003 and Duncan was able to carry on his career.

Having gathered information about the DDA, Duncan set about forming the National Disabled Fire Association (of which he is chairman) in 2003 with the aim of ensuring that all personnel within the fire and rescue service

‘family’ were able to call upon help and advice relating disability.

Recalling the isolation and concerns that he himself had experienced, Duncan resolved to turn his experience towards supporting others within the fire service who may be living with or affected by disability. With colleagues Barbara North and Andy Oaker from Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, and supported by Michelle Valentine from Disability Forward, the vision of a national network was born – the NDFA.

The association’s aims are to:

- Ensure that UK Fire and Rescue Service (UK FRS) employees, living with and affected by disability are managed and supported appropriately to meet their own needs and those of the UK FRS;
- Support the UK FRS in the promotion of effective and sustainable equality outcomes for disabled citizens in the community at large;
- Work with the UK FRS to promote positive relations with disabled people in the community.

The establishment of the NDFA has been a slow and often frustrating process, but progress is being made and a number of significant milestones having been achieved, such as: n Consultation day took place with stakeholders in 2007;



Duncan White: a fireman with damaged hearing whose tireless work has helped form the National Disabled Fire Association

- Business case written;
- Constitution drafted;
- Regular meetings with Communities and Local Government (CLG) and Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA);
- Charity status achieved in early 2008;
- Pump-priming funding made available from CLG.

The NDFA continue to work with all fire and rescue service stakeholders and currently sit on numerous equality and diversity forums. Plans for 2008 include:

- Inaugural NDFA conference;
- Launch of NDFA website;
- Framework for long-term funding of NDFA.

Since helping to start up the NDFA, Duncan has fought tirelessly for equality in the work environment for people with disabilities.

Some financial assistance had been given by the Disability Rights Commission to help establish a network, but sustainable financial backing is still needed. Dedicated personnel and volunteers to administer and evolve the network are in short supply: Duncan and his colleagues have very full ‘day jobs’ and it is just not feasible to incorporate this work as an add-on.

In March 2008, the NDFA was formally recognised and registered as a charity by the Charity Commission.

Working with partners such as CFOA, the CLG and the LGA (Local Government Association), it is hoped that the network can be formally launched sometime this year, with a conference open to all fire and rescue Service personnel living with and affected by disability.

- Visit www.ndfa.info for more info.

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The Editor

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