



AFSA

Asian Fire Service Association

We are the change that
we are waiting for

Conference in Pictures
2009



www.afsa.co.uk

Conference Overview

The theme of the conference was Barack Obama's inspirational phrase: 'We are the change that we are waiting for'. This was the first national conference since the formation of AFSA as a national group. However, over the last three years the London AFSA group and their associated membership have established a reputation for supporting the delivery of equality and diversity within the British Fire and Rescue Service, and acting as a support group for staff. The theme of the conference provided an ideal opportunity for AFSA to showcase the work it had been involved in and also to set the agenda for the years ahead.

AFSA have set ambitious objectives for itself, its members and for national events such as the conference. This report outlines and charts the activities and learning undertaken at the 3rd Annual AFSA Conference 2009 and also provides a background to the formation of AFSA, its objectives and successes to date.

The Conference focused on the sharing of best practice, highlighting the benefits that AFSA can provide in terms of supporting its Individual and corporate

members, developing skills, experience and knowledge that individuals and Fire and Rescue Services can use to meet equality and diversity aims and objectives. In addition the conference brought external speakers to share experiences and to provide motivation and inspiration that we can do and that we do not need to wait for others.

AFSA, having increased its capacity over the last 12 months, developed from a Shadow Committee to a formal National Committee. Over the course of the last year AFSA has been able to add value to the work currently being undertaken in respect of equality and diversity within the Fire and rescue service and has gained commitment from all levels. It is important to note that the conference also reflected the members desire to celebrate the achievements of both individuals and the national AFSA Committee. Finally the AFSA committee wishes to acknowledge and commend the increased membership, both individual and corporate, whilst retaining its emphasis on developing this further over the next 12 month.

Following a year of successful activity, AFSA's 3rd Annual Conference truly celebrated the hard work and achievements of its committee and membership. It was noted how AFSA's reach and influence at a national level enabled a wealth of talented and committed individuals to join and contribute to its aims and objectives. Acknowledgement was given to the founder members (Manjit Singh, Parvinder Singh, Akwala Deol and Davinder Sodi) and current committee members without whom the conference would not have been made possible. The membership of AFSA continues to represent the vast span of religions and cultures from across the Asian diaspora. However, membership continues to be open to all those committed to advancing AFSA's aims and objectives. It extends an invitation to join to everyone who shares these beliefs, regardless of their background, culture, religious or other personal belief, including those with no belief.

AFSA reported on its charitable objectives, the support for which had generously funded a range of charitable activities. Over the last three years AFSA have made

significant donations to charitable causes, in particular to McMillan nurses and the Asian breast cancer awareness campaign (a charity that has been adopted as one of the main charities for AFSA). In addition, AFSA have also made donations to the Afghanistan Sikh Centre, the Asian school in Southall and donated fire engines to Pakistan and Tanzania as well as delivered training to firefighters in Tanzania. At this year's conference AFSA were able to raise £2,500 at the celebration dinner for a water wells project in India, McMillan Nurses, the Indonesian earthquake appeal and a local elderly home Apna Ghar. Further money has been raised post-conference by Billy Gill for the water wells project. We will keep members aware of progress on this exciting project.

Hosting the conference in Birmingham enabled many more from the UK to attend over the course of the conference and delegates reflected upon Birmingham being a welcoming, diverse and cultured City. The Venue was perfectly placed to host the conference, workshops and evening celebration.

If we could only bottle
what was in the room

AFSA Event
18th & 19th November
2009 - Birmingham

We could
SELL it!



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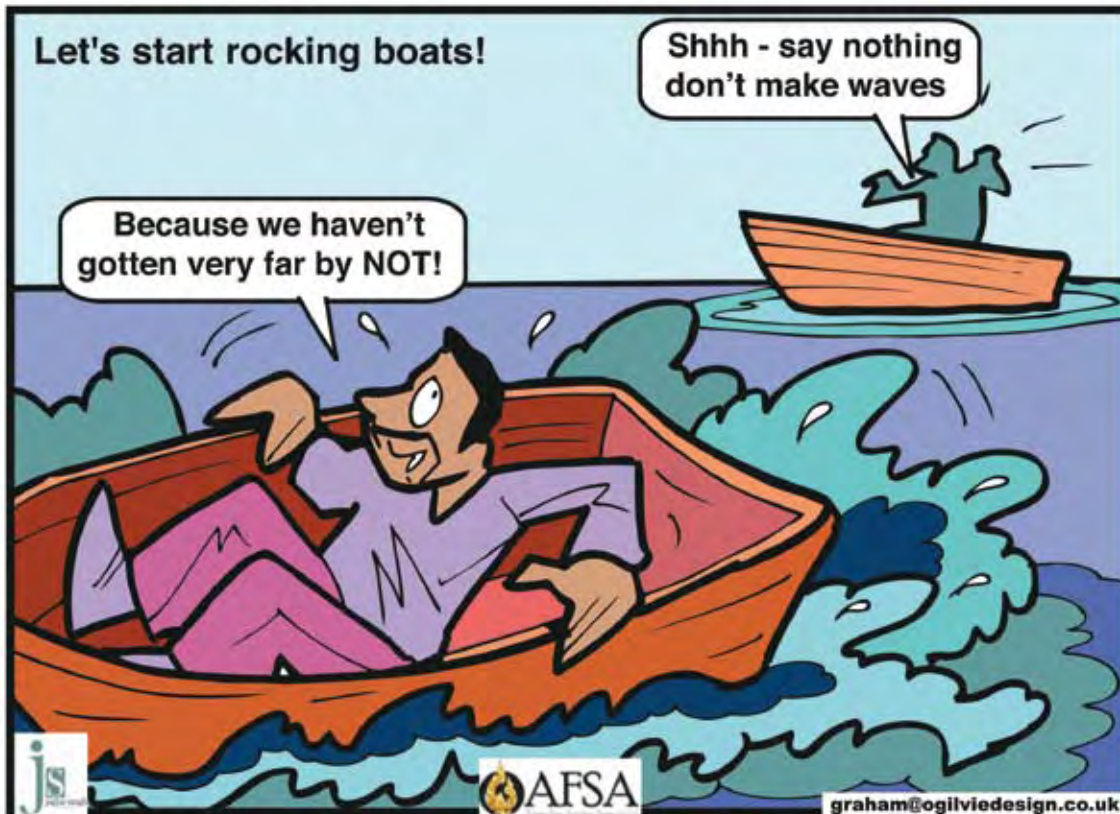
Themes from the Conference:

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1 AFSA – The Organisation, its People and its Objectives

AFSA contains a lot of knowledge and expertise about the communities and this should be harnessed and used to engage more widely with communities on behalf of the fire service.





Rocking the boat in a professional manner can be more constructive than trying to avoid making waves, and by challenging existing practice, it can help to remove potential barriers or problems. AFSA have strength in numbers and need to consider how and when to challenge constructively from a collective point of view rather than an individual view.

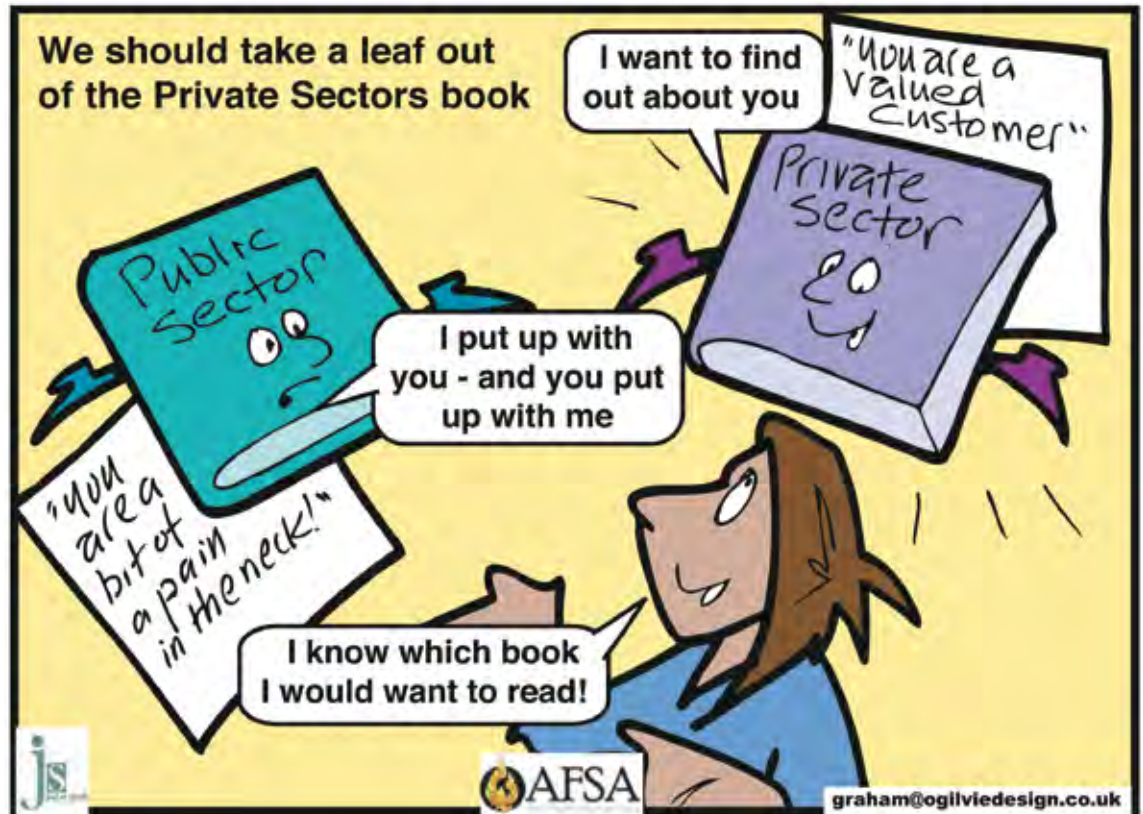
Set clear agendas, know what you intend to achieve, and be an advocate for the message.

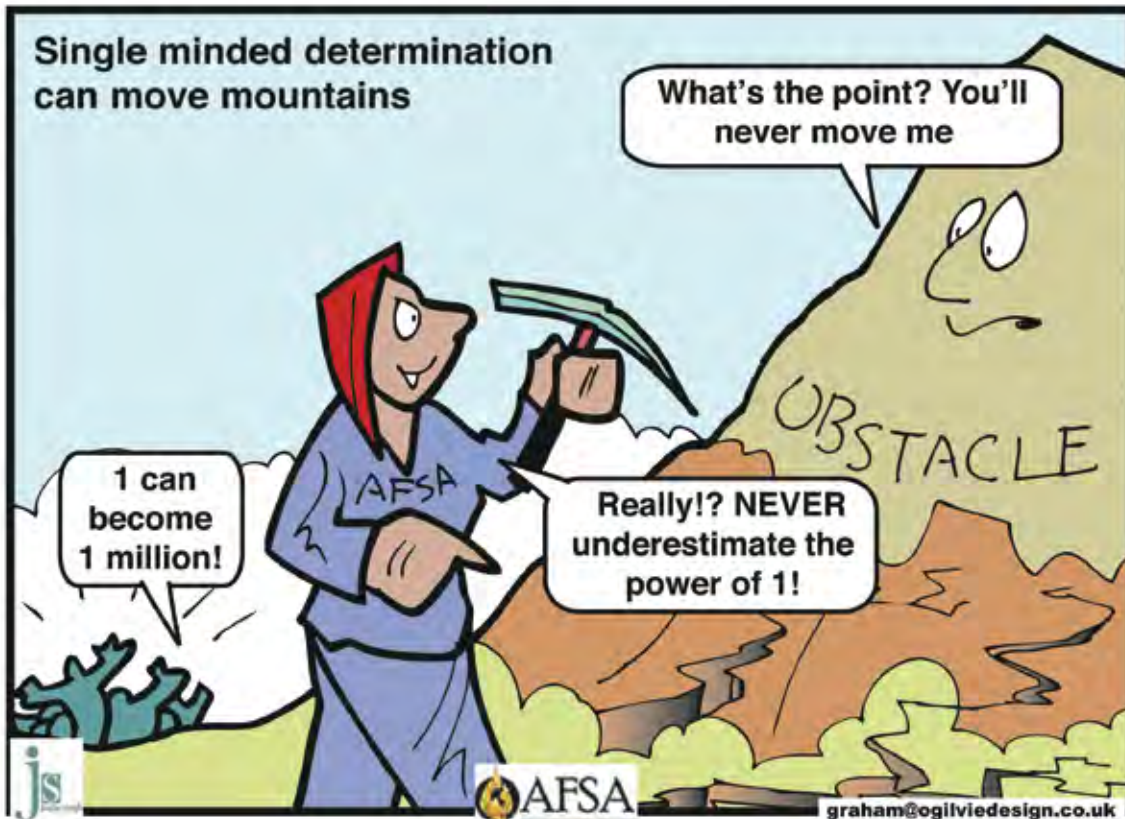


We should all strive to be the best we can be.



Keeping customers happy is the key to success in the private sector and the public sector could learn a lot from the private sector about customer care.





AFSA's pledge had many delegates convinced that they can help and support AFSA to be the change. All AFSA ask is that we all do our little bit and we respect every member for what they do.

AFSA intends to be very proactive. This will be a place where they can share their experiences, respond with actions, and help and support others. We intend to be a force for change and not a talking shop.



When everybody does 1 little bit . .

We are able to **BE** the **BIG VOICE** when we all use our positive energy

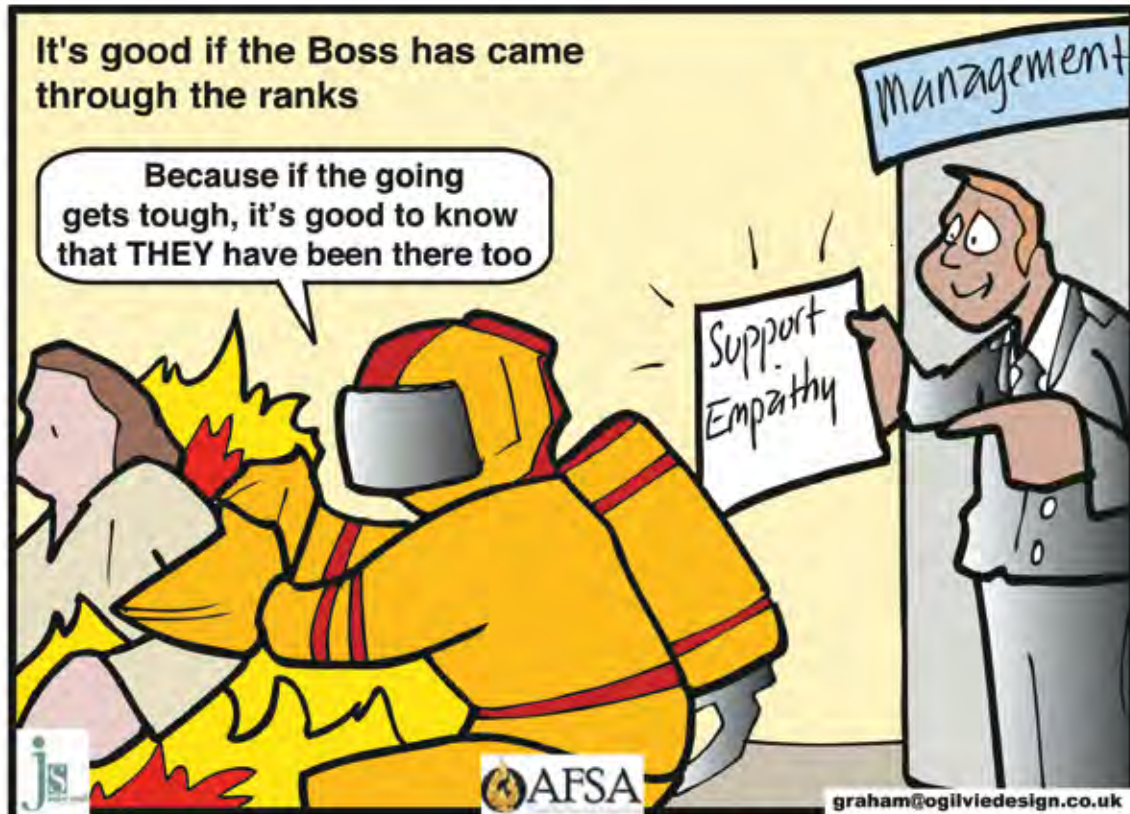


When the AFSA pledge was introduced, a delegate commented that if we all join up our little efforts we can be a big voice and bring about positive change.

Equality and diversity is not ever going to be easy, if it was, it would have been resolved by now. The path we choose will not be easy, it will have obstacles along the way, but together we as AFSA can remove them.

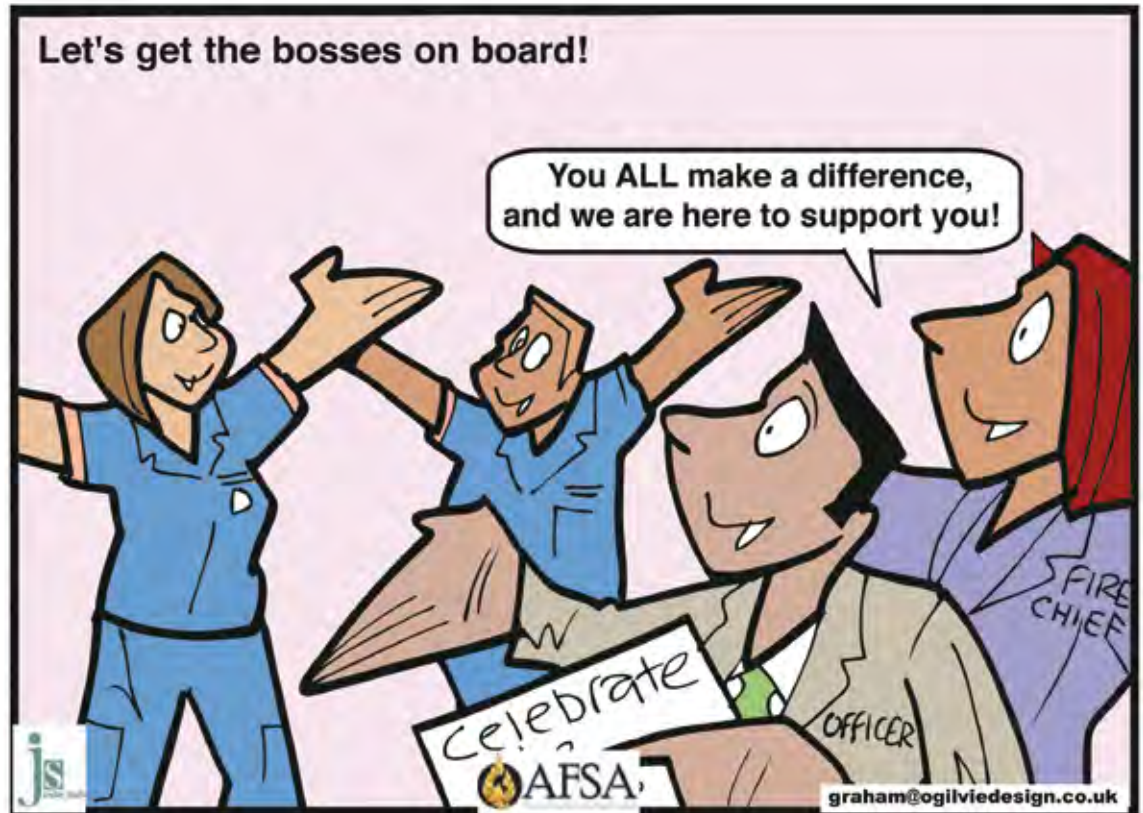


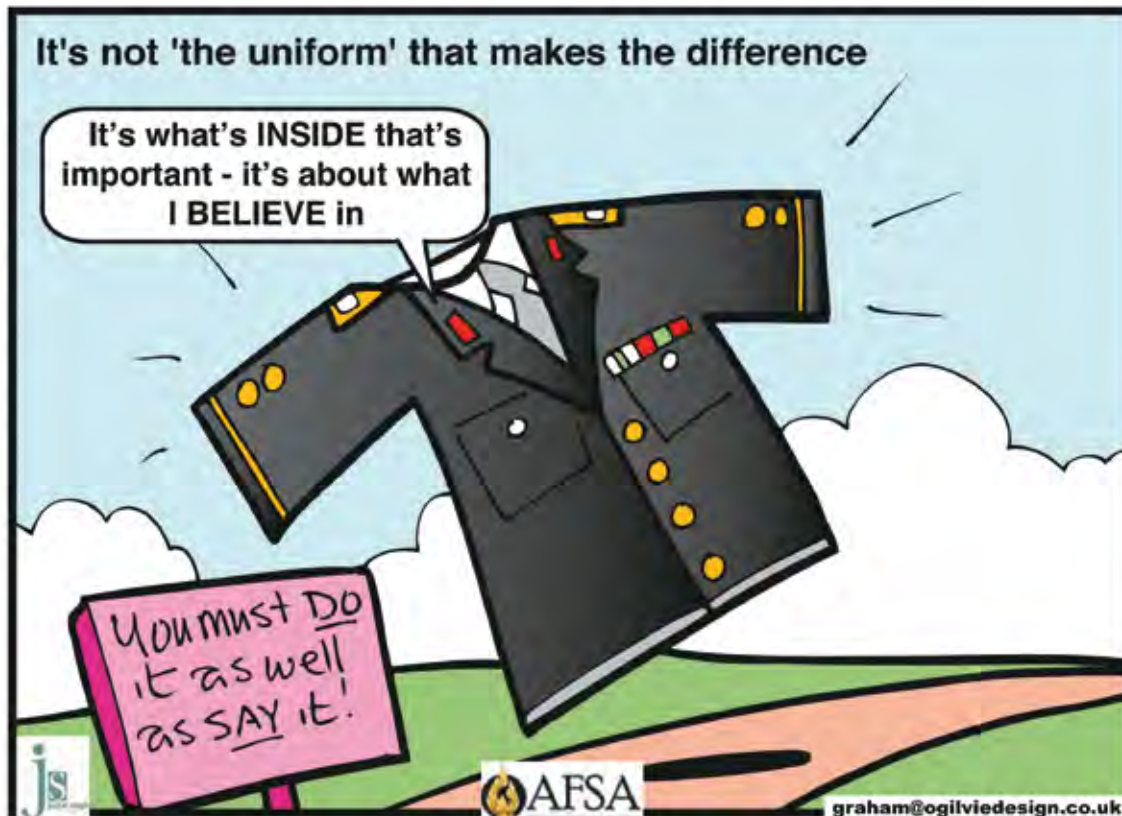
2 Management and Leadership



Some Delegates felt that having a boss who had come through the ranks was a positive aspect of the fire service as they would have some empathy with all roles in the service. They also felt that when the going gets tough they will have experience that can help and support the service to make the right decisions.

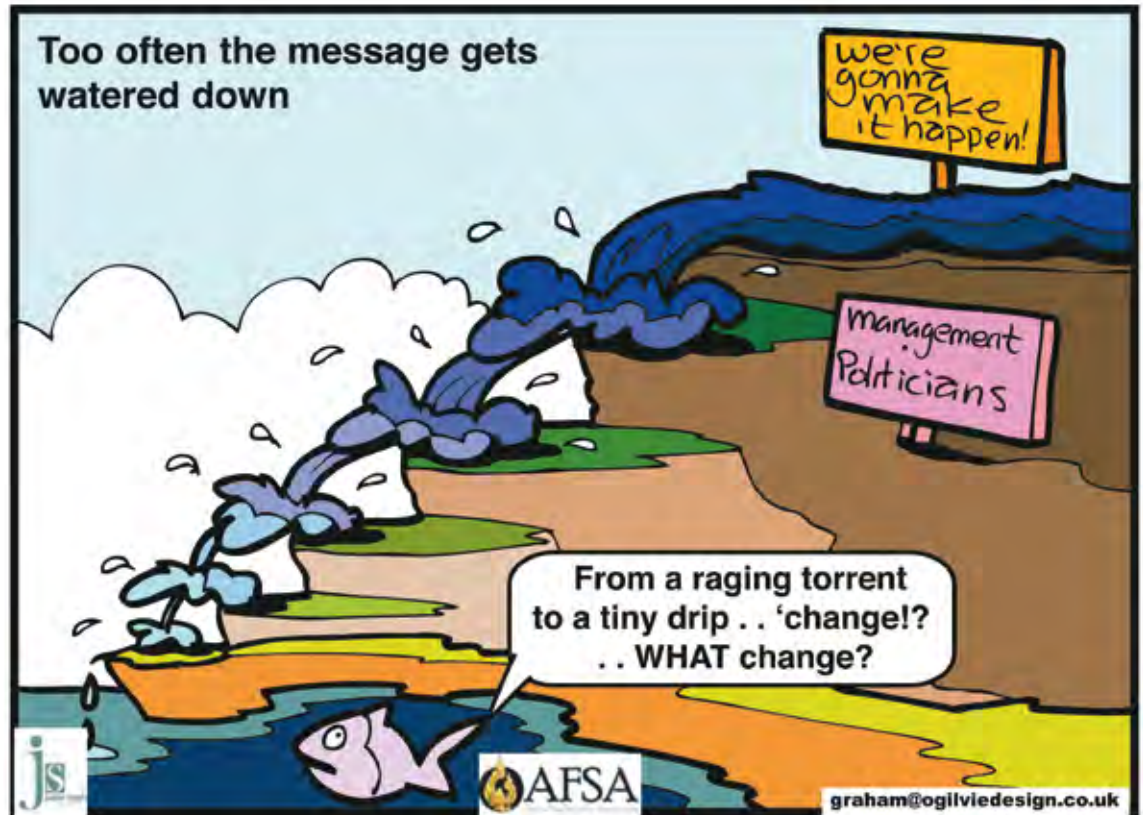
Strong leadership is the key to positive change. For success, the top leaders need to be on board and join in the celebration of success of E&D and also provide the support to the foot soldiers of E&D.





A discussion took place around how a uniform may be a barrier to some individuals or communities and why this is so. Also it was noted that even when communities had positive attitudes, it was the person on the inside of the uniform that made the difference and not the uniform.

The powerful messages and change we often hear about from CLG, Ministers and CFOs often get watered down by the time they get to the shop floor, and little impact is visible for what were portrayed as major change programmes.



With authority comes responsibility



One of the key messages for CFOA members was that we all have responsibilities and how we discharge those can have a positive or a negative effect. Chief fire officers need to be aware that the attitude that they display on E&D has a major impact on all, in and outside the service.

Good practice in equality and diversity begins with self awareness.



Let's BE the change agent



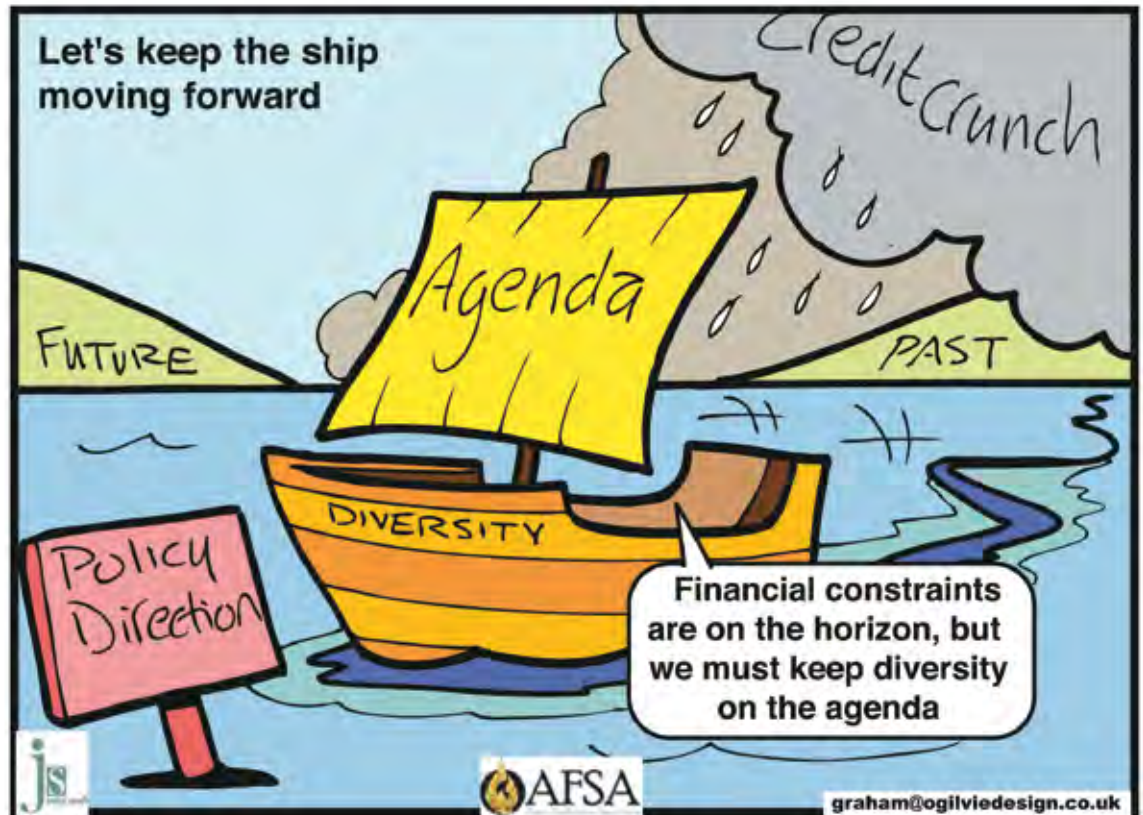
So a career in the Fire Service is seen as desirable as a 'Lab Coat' or 'Suit' career!



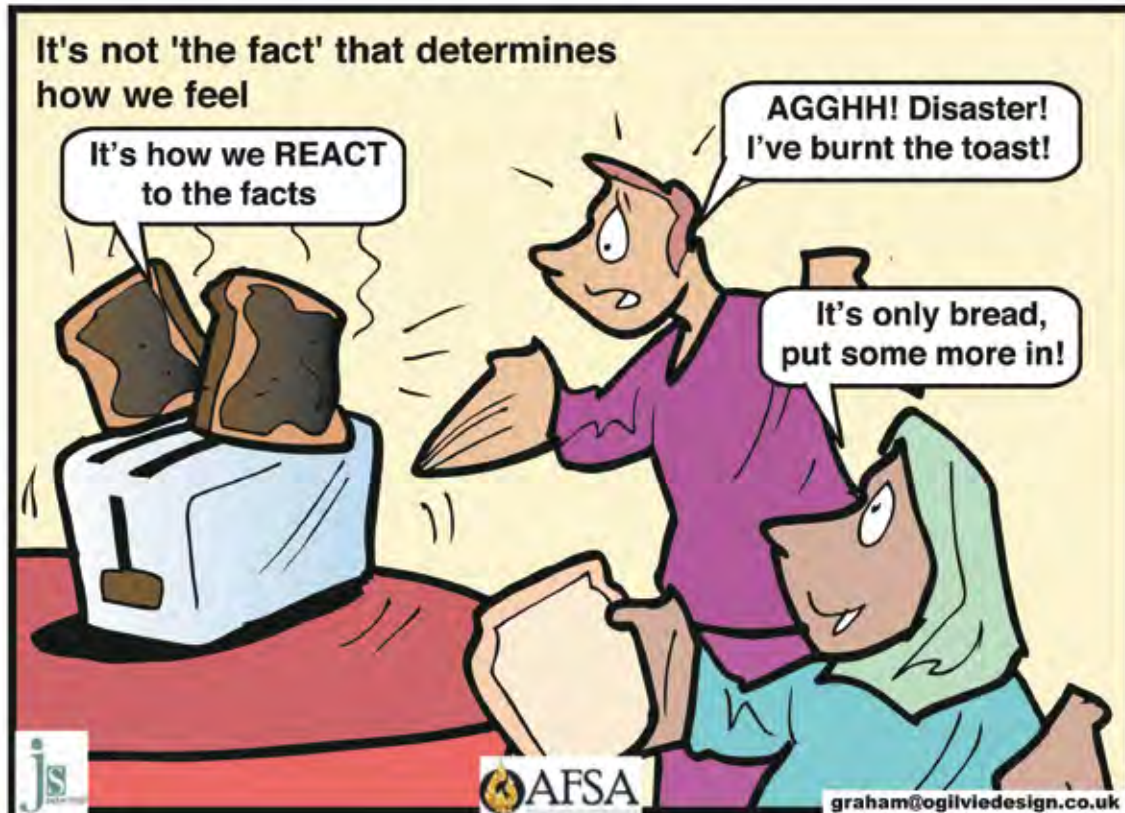
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We all make up the diverse workforce. We bring our different backgrounds, understanding and experiences to each situation and we can find the perfect solution by working together and embracing our differences.

Delegates agreed that many changes and challenges lie ahead of us and we need to stay focused on the E&D agenda.

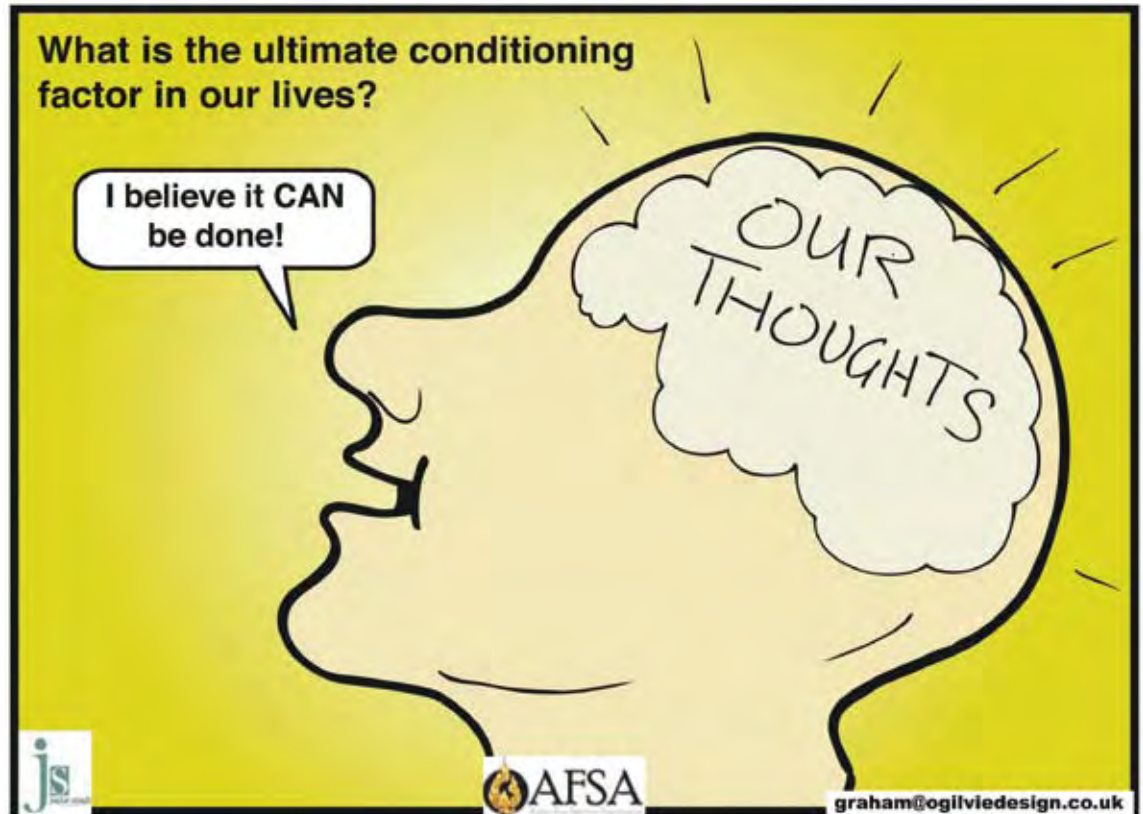


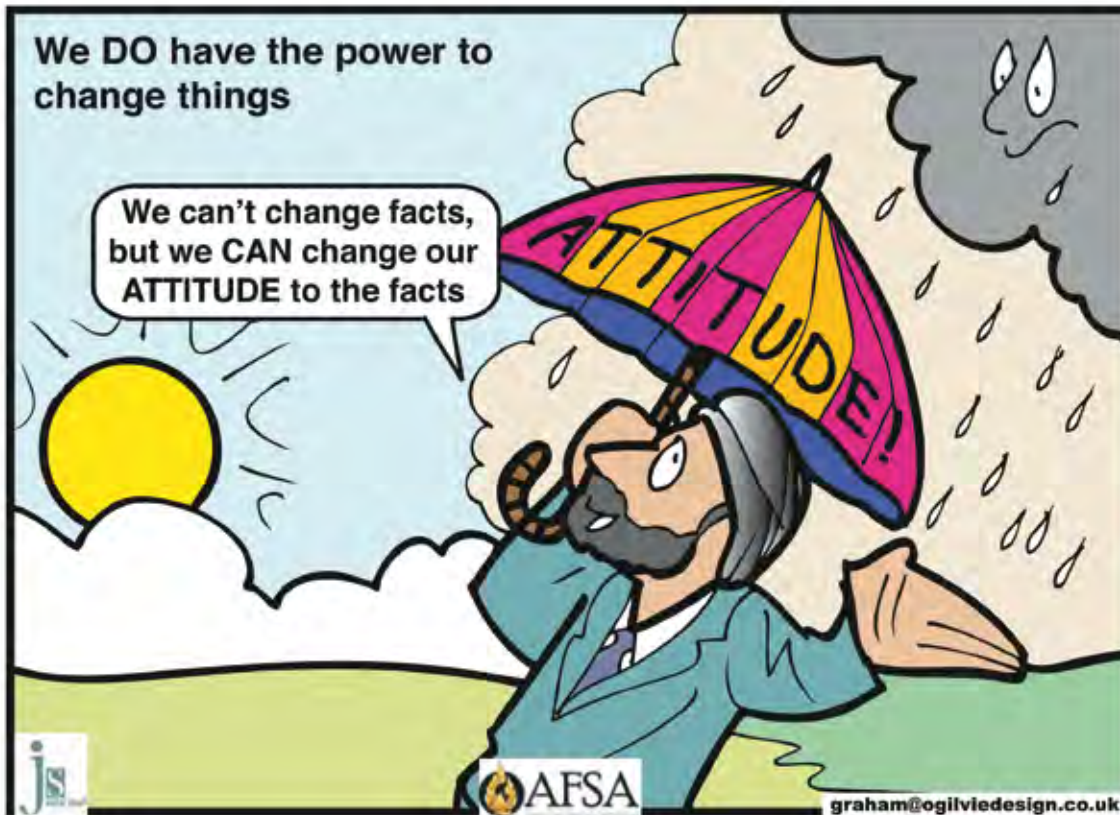
3 Responding to the Challenge



Simon from Advanced training, one of the keynote speakers, described the words responsibility and our 'response' to be 'able' to cope with challenging situations and to manage disappointments and failures.

Simon's workshop helped delegates to look at where our own values and beliefs came from, but also other peoples. The motivational workshop encouraged delegates to believe that they could do what ever they aspired to with a positive attitude and belief.





If you are able to understand why something is bothering you, you can change your thinking around it and this can ultimately change your behaviour and lead to a positive outcome. We all have the power to change what happens to us. We can not change facts but we can change our attitudes to the facts and change the future.

On our journey of diversity we will meet many challenges and many new barriers. It is a journey with a horizon and not an end place. The past journey though hasn't always been helpful...



4 Policy and Vision



There is commitment to make a change, but delegates asked, how can you convince the communities when they don't know what we do, and why diversity is important to the fire service.

Policies are only useful if you use them. They will not walk off the shelf. You need to use them to make them work.



Funds are ALWAYS available



All organisations have contingency funds and if the issue is important enough and a business case can be made then funding can be found.

We have no universal common understanding of what is meant by E&D. This allows for a wide range of interpretations, which leads to confusion. We should consider issues of leadership, management, the anti-discrimination approach, and ensuring we have a clear business case.





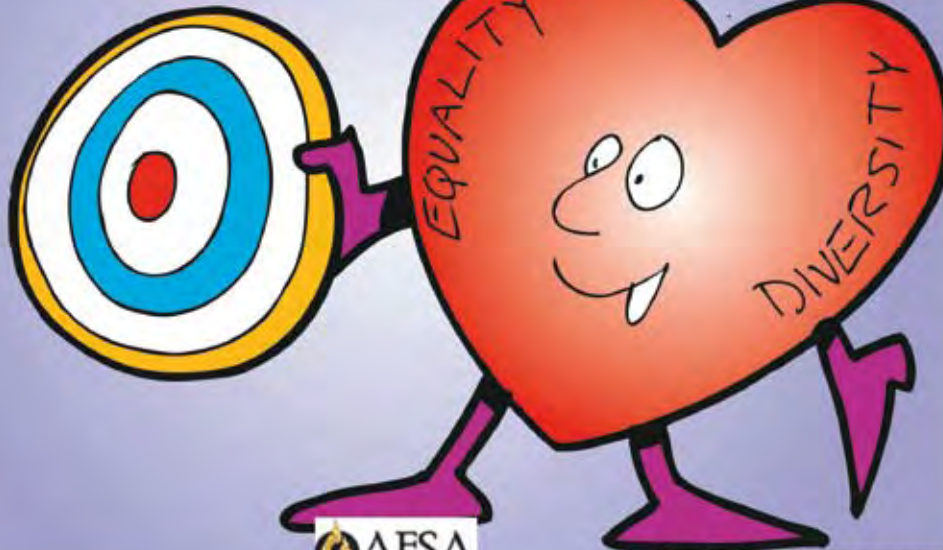
It appears that facial hair is one of the last barriers for the service to address on entry standards.

Customer care is key.
Ensure that needs
are identified and
ultimately met.



Targets are NOT the beating heart of the policy

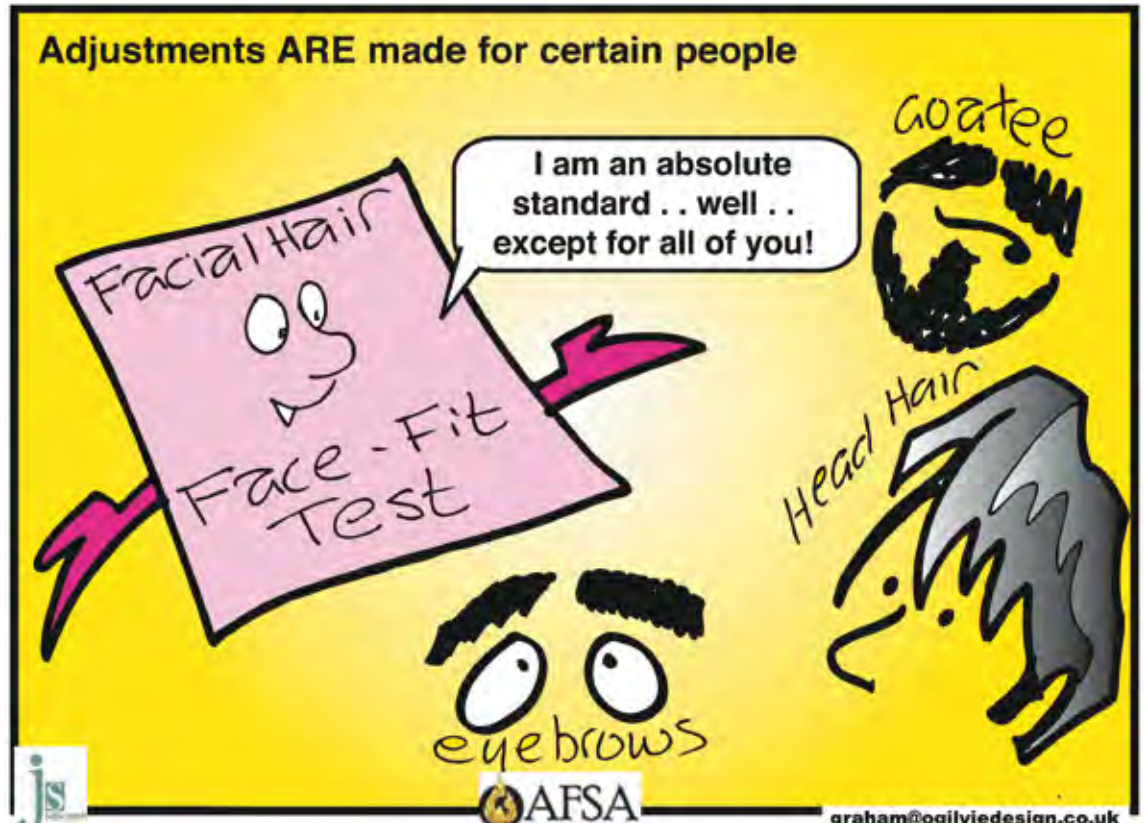
But it's a meaningful message of progress



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The minister in his address highlighted that the sole measure of success is not just the recruitment targets. They are a measure of performance but just one of many. The service needs to focus on delivering a high quality service to all communities and one way is by ensuring it reflects those communities in its workforce profiles.

When is an absolute standard not so absolute?



**There is no technical solution yet,
but we can't give up**

- Back plate
- Different sizes
- Different materials

MASK

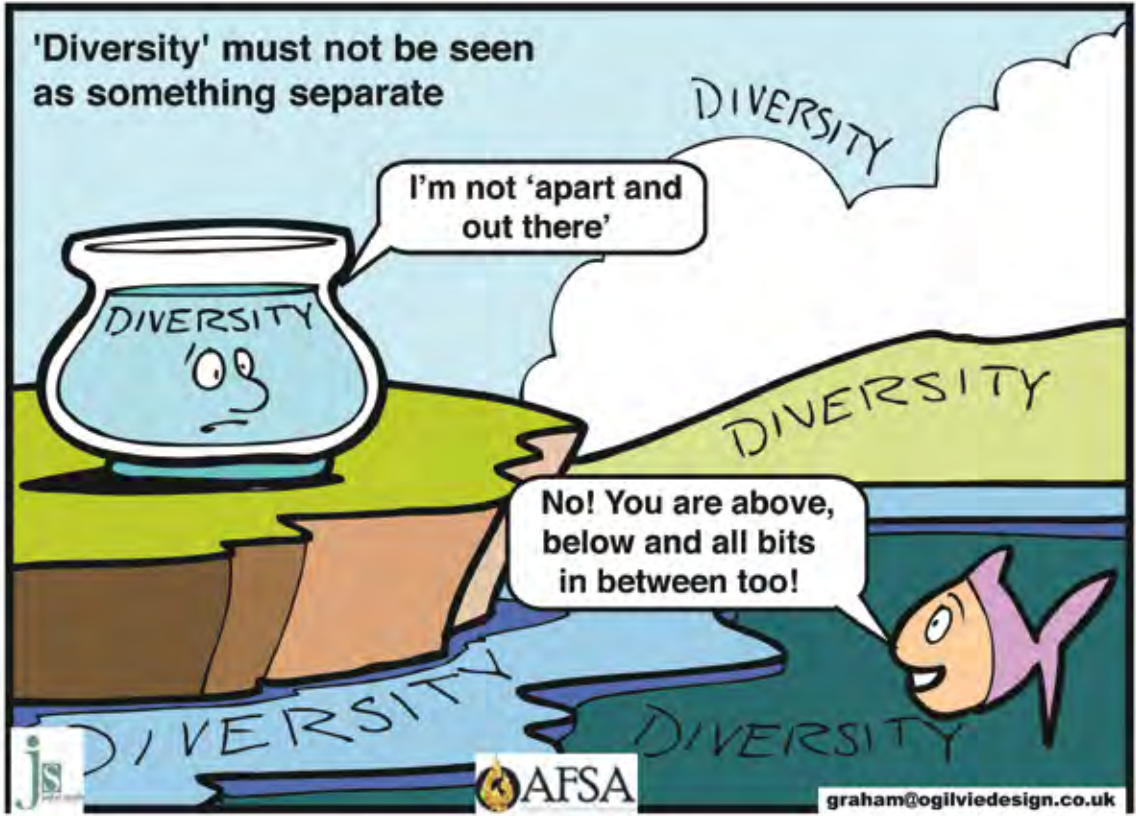


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Technical solutions for some barriers continue to need to be sought.

The current EU toe cap that only extends to a size 2 boot thus any person with smaller than size 2 feet cannot be fitted with boots that are legally compliant.





Diversity is not something that is separate from day to day business - it is an essential and integral to all we do. For diversity to work it must be mainstreamed into all we do.

The FRS has some excellent examples of partnership working

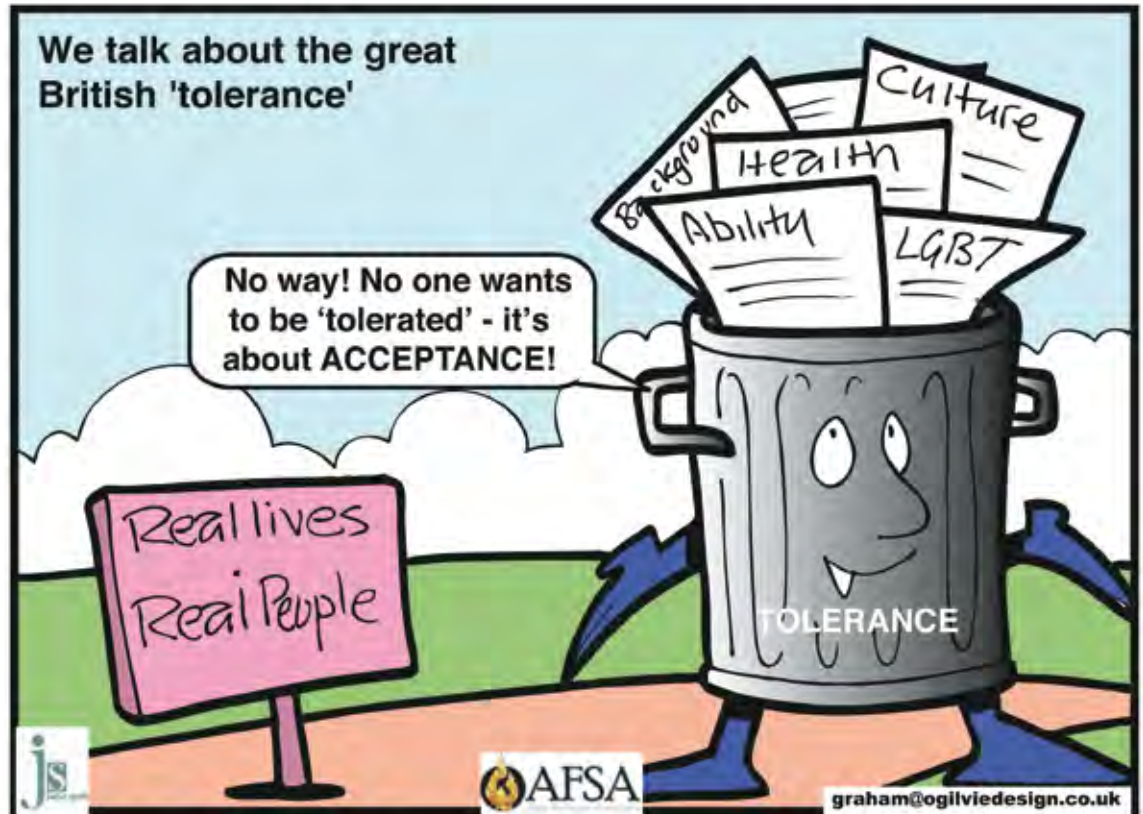


5 Focusing on the Real Issues



We need to ensure that we respect all communities and that we do not break the issue of Equality down to just race and gender.

The Fire Minister stated in his keynote speech that he did not want just to be tolerated because he was different. He, like most people, wanted to be accepted for who he was; black, Asian, Muslim and British. He said that tolerance is only skin deep and can be fickle, whereas acceptance goes deeper and is sustainable.





Language is very important but sometimes people can say the wrong thing with the right intention. This should be challenged in a constructive way and no one should be afraid to make mistakes or ask questions, because this is how we can learn and improve our knowledge

People who are willing to challenge discrimination are often isolated and seen as 'trouble makers'. There is strength in numbers and AFSA seeks to be the catalyst to help others challenge in a constructive and supportive way.





Membership of extremist parties is currently not banned by the fire service, although the Police have special exemptions. However expressing any extremist view is not appropriate behaviour for employees of any public service, and is not consistent with the core values.

We can some times get distracted from our main work with specific issues such as the BNP. We need to be sure that we stay working on the positive things we can change, whilst tackling those issues that will take time and more energy, and try to avoid being single issue advocates.





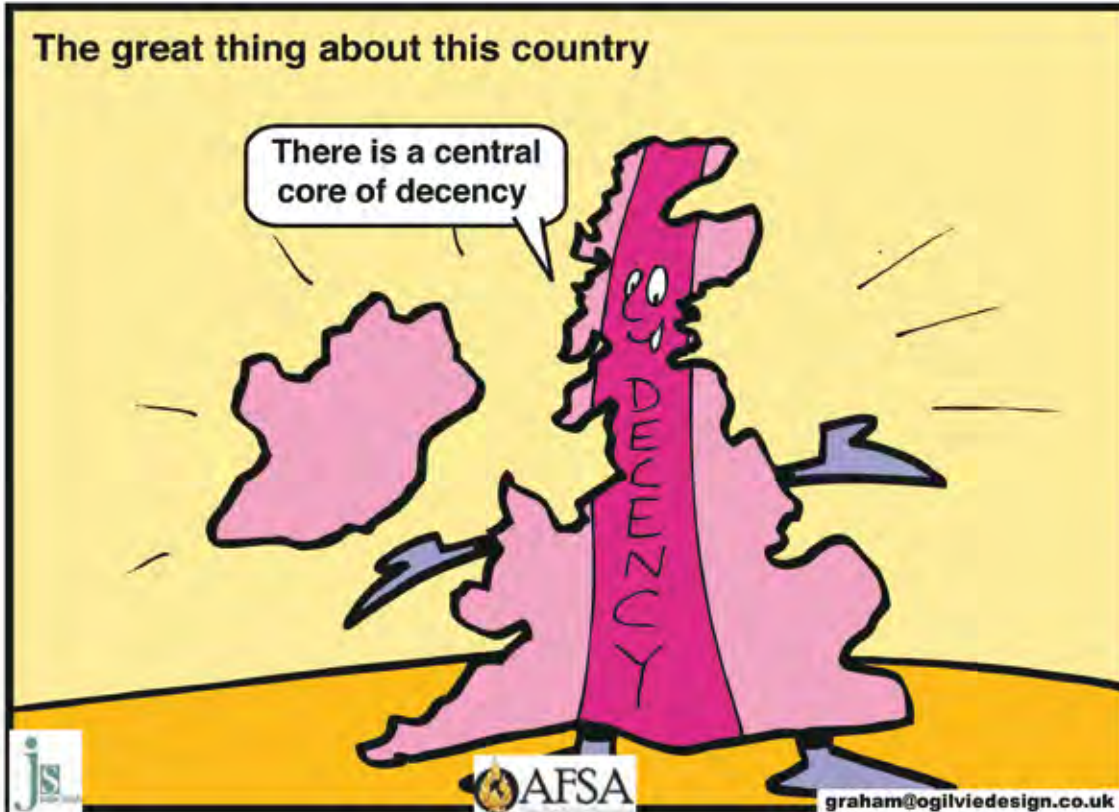
CFO Vijith Randeniya said that in his early days he had to move many times, and he moved from a clean, quiet station to one that was busy where he gained a strong all round operational experience. He wanted to be busy and not on a station that smelt of floor cleaner due to its lack of activity.

The fire minister told his story of Lenny Henry's response to Enoch Powell's comments. That all black people should go home and that they should be given a £2,000 grant. Lenny said it would only cost him £2.50 to go home to Dudley!!



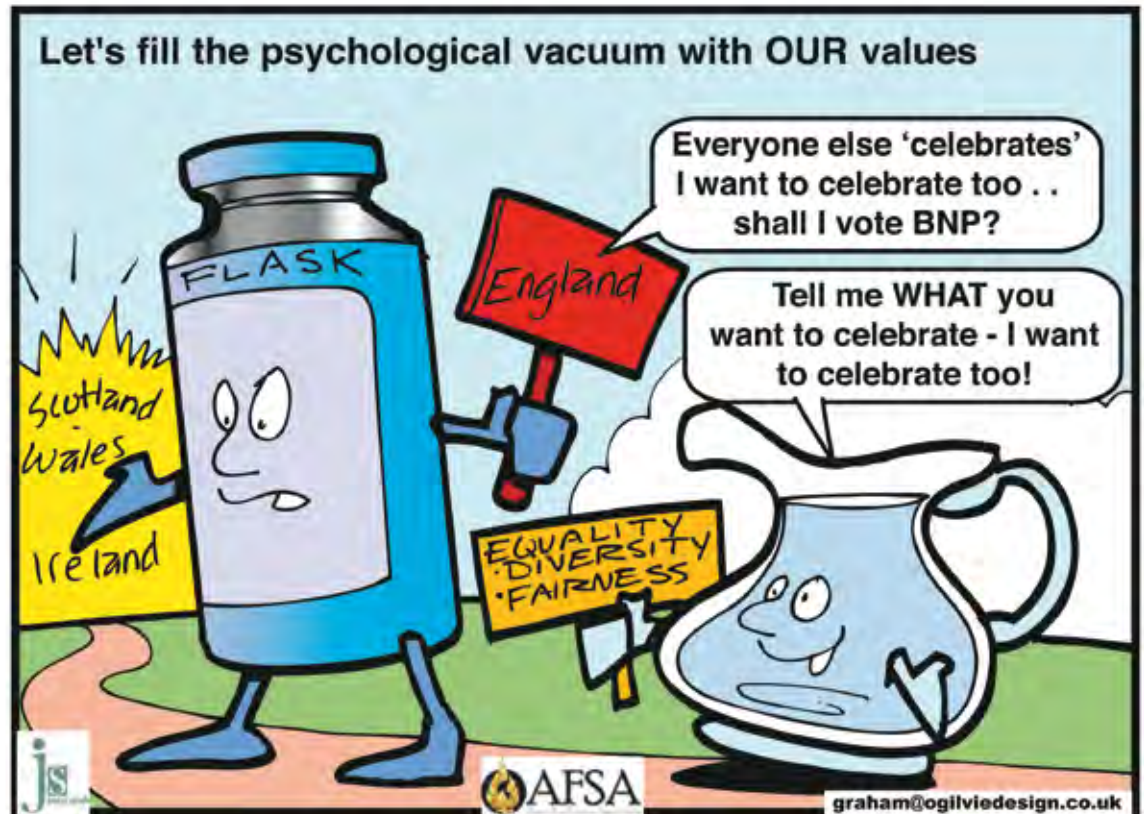
The great thing about this country

There is a central core of decency



The UK has a proud history of welcoming people from other countries. One of the core values of the UK is treating people with decency.

The minister recounted the time that a member of the public complained how he felt his uniqueness as being British was not respected, but when asked what he wanted to celebrate he could not answer but continued to complain that everyone else had an opportunity to celebrate something, but he did not.

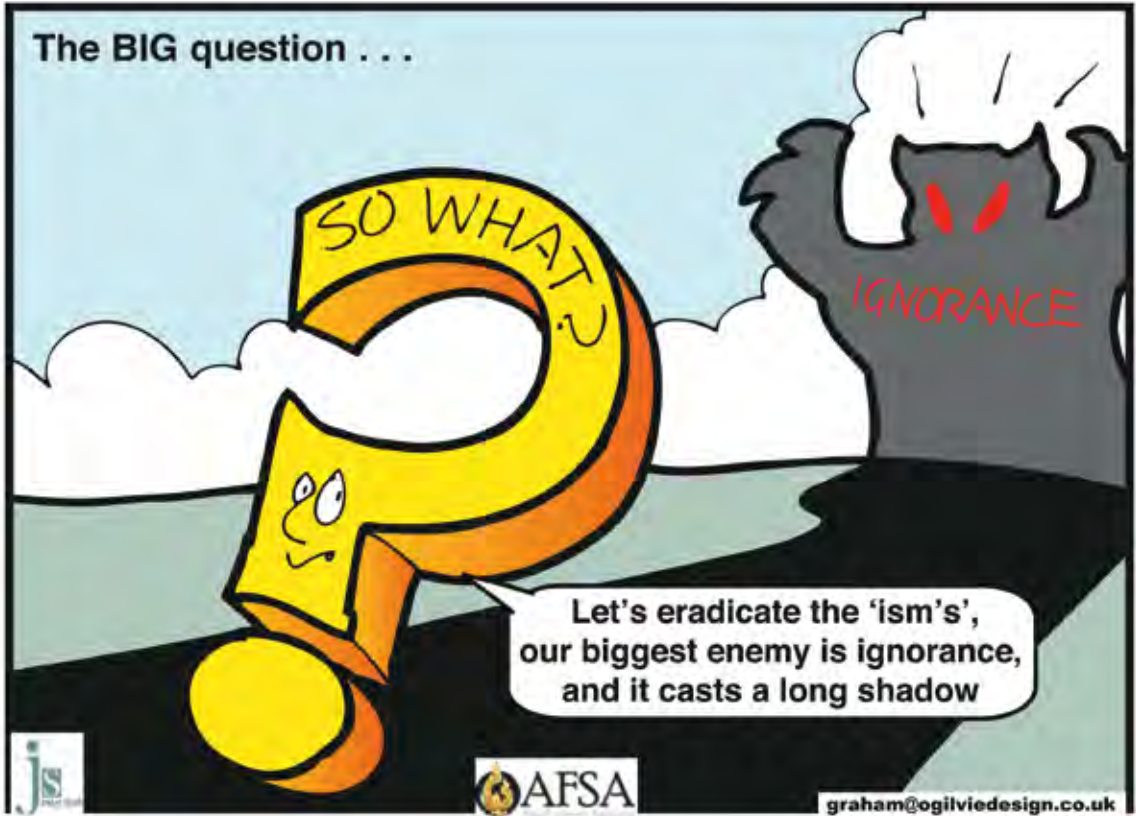




There is still some discrimination and prejudice in the fire service and also often inappropriate use of language. This is due to ignorance and can be overcome with training and support.

Celebrating diversity is not enough on its own. This needs to be supported with cultural change that embraces equality- the law and diversity – and difference into its policies and procedures.

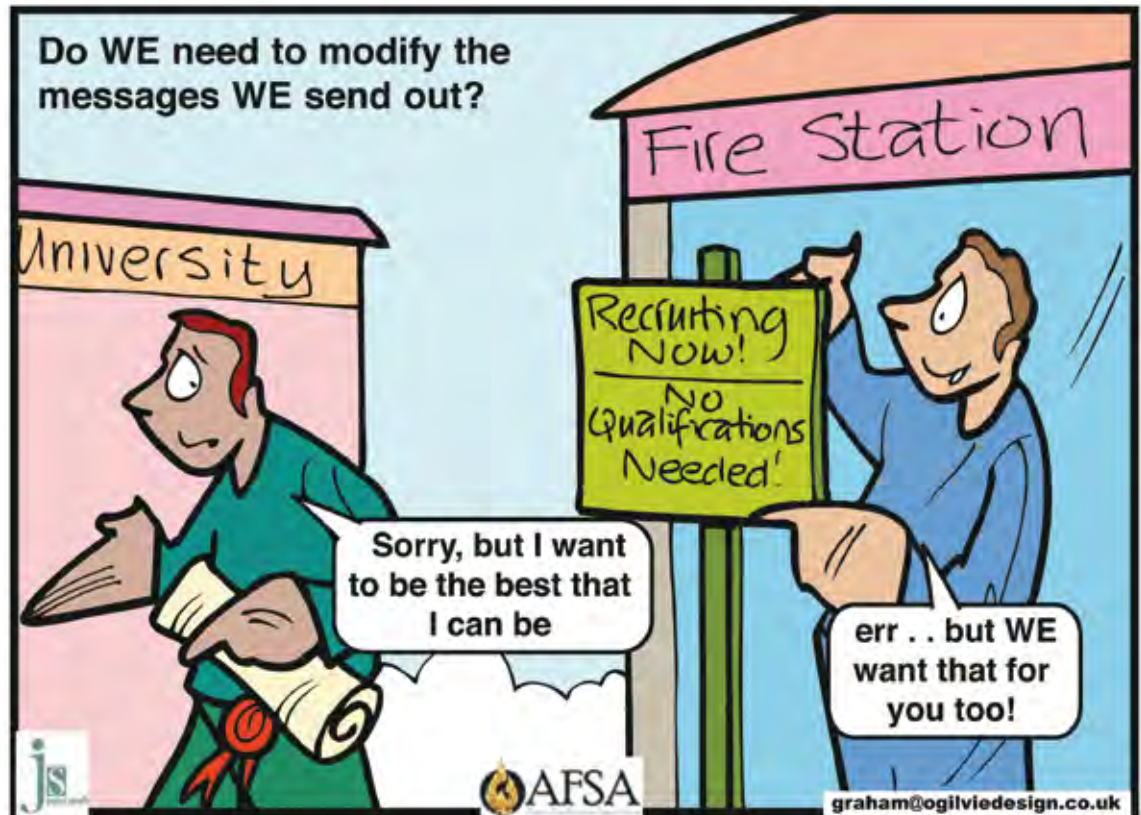




The Fire Minister advised all that the -ism's in our society and discrimination was down to ignorance. We all need to work harder to remove the -ism's and eradicate ignorance.

6 Recruitment

The experience of joining the fire service needs to be elevated as a career option. It can be as well paid as any other recognized profession.





When undertaking positive action within BME communities it is vital that there are adequate jobs of the appropriate level for people to apply for. As sometimes Services carry out positive action although they aren't recruiting. It can result in a poor experience for members of the community, who apply, and then feel this was just lip service.

A career in the fire service can be very productive, respected and well paid. This message needs to be made clear to the talent pool from the different groups who may have considered more prestigious careers.





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