

**BME Community Services's Response to
the Proposed Action Plan for West Sussex
Fire and Rescue Service**

October 2010

BME Community Services (BMECS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Proposed Action Plan for West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service.

BMECS is a registered charitable company, established in 2006 to address the gaps and needs in services for individuals, families and groups from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, including refugees and asylum seekers in West Sussex.

Our mission is to be a “Support service for BAME groups, individuals and families; encouraging integration, community cohesion, reducing social exclusion and tackling inequalities in West Sussex and beyond.”

Amongst our main aims include:

- Promote equality of opportunity and celebrate the value of the diverse communities in our area.
- Promote fair access to opportunities and services that responds to BAME communities needs in West Sussex.

BMECS is committed to equality and diversity which is in the heart of its values, work etc. BMECS will continue to promote equality of opportunity and good race relations between persons of different racial groups, eliminate unlawful discrimination and to provide culturally sensitive services that meet the needs of the diverse communities of West Sussex. BMECS will continue to represent the issues of the West Sussex BAME Communities with the following in mind.

- **Promoting accessibility**

BMECS will continue to increase BAME communities’ ability to access support services and ensure through second tier organisations that services are culturally accessible.

- **Valuing cultural diversity**

BMECS will continue to raise awareness of BAME culture amongst the public and voluntary and community sector partners. It will support community representatives to advocate on behalf of their communities so that policy development and decision making takes account of the distinctive needs of these community.

- **Promoting participation**

BMECS will continue to encourage participation and engagement of BAME communities in local decision-making.

- **Promoting equality of opportunity**

BMECS will continue to promote equality for all and advocate for BAME communities to be treated fairly with dignity and respect and be given equal opportunity to improve the quality of their lives.

- **Promoting inclusive communities**

BMECS will continue to increase awareness of BAME cultures, building understanding between BAME and mainstream communities.

- **Reducing disadvantage and exclusion**

BMECS will continue to develop and deliver programmes and models as tools to enable local partners to identify and tackle exclusion.

- **Promoting better community cohesion and integration**

BMECS will continue to work with communities and partners to ensure BAME communities are active and well integrated into mainstream society.

- **Promoting good practice**

BMECS will continue to encourage public and voluntary sector partners to show commitment to equality and diversity by adopting and implementing models of good practices that are implemented successfully.

- **Promoting better partnership working**

BMECS will continue to encourage and support partnerships initiatives that have positive impact on the wellbeing of BAME communities

BMEC understand the role of the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service is constantly changing as new techniques and equipment are introduced. In addition to responding to emergencies, the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service works closely with the West Sussex diverse communities:

- To prevent fire and accidents from happening;
- To advise people on being safe in their home and in the event of a fire.
- To actively seek to understand and to value diverse individuals and groups.
- To educate the community

BMECS is mindful that in order to achieve all the above, *“all Fire and Rescue Services are required to assess risks to their local communities and develop and Integrated Risk Management Plan to demonstrate how they will reduce risks through a combination of prevention, protection, and emergency response”*. This requirement has led to the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service to *“use its Risk Management Planning to develop and annual Action Plan”*.

We are reassured that the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service has been reforming the service *“to reduce community risks by putting emphasis on preventing fires and emergencies”* which led to better emergency response and the reduction of the number of incidents and the people being killed or seriously injured.

We are reassured that the current proposals take into consideration very important elements that focus on:

- Revising the emergency response capacity to match the varying levels of risks across the county
- Investing in increased staff training to make firefighters even safer and better at what they do
- Increasing community education work to reduce fires and emergencies
- Streamlining some of the essential support roles and internal working procedures to find necessary efficiency savings

BMECS would like the fire and Rescue Service in West Sussex to take note of the suggestions it is making on the Proposed Action Plan, Making West Sussex A Safer Place to Live, Work and Visit. As these reforms are taking place, BMECS would like to be reassured that the Fire and Rescue Service in West Sussex understand:

- How vital its role is in protecting the community
- That any change should consider the effect that it might have on protecting the community, particularly when some Retained Fire Stations are going to be closed.
- That most of West Sussex is rural with an increased elderly, hard to reach and migrant populations that need to be protected either through emergency response or prevention.

BMECS is concerned that the expected financial constraints, as a result of the government review on public finance, are likely to make difficult to implement the proposed Action Plan. For instance:

- The planned training for staff is likely to be limited
- Emergency response capacity might be also limited
- The target response time might not be met as some retained stations are closed
- Resources might become scarce to increase community safety activities
- Frontline services might be difficult to maintain
- Less recruitment, which means less diverse workforce

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the **Proposals on the Action Plan for the Fire and Rescue Service in West Sussex**. We urge the Service and West Sussex County Council not to consider the proposal in isolation, but adopt a broader approach of looking of these changes. Protecting the most vulnerable should always be considered as these changes are taking place.

Although, this consultation is more about the proposed Action Plan, it is very important that the Fire and Rescue Service in West Sussex does not neglect its statutory duties. The Fire and Rescue Service in West Sussex must ensure that all communities are protected regardless of their status, race, gender, age, ability, religion or belief and sexual orientation or where they live.

We do hope that the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service will make a decision that is just, humane and transparent in the public interest. We anticipate that West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service will fulfil its equality duties in their decisions.

BMECS will continue to work with its partners in West Sussex, including the Fire and Rescue Service, to serve all communities. We will continue to play a major role in ensuring that all communities in West Sussex and the UK are well serviced by the Fire and Rescue Service regardless of race, ethnic origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief.

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