

WOMEN IN THE FIRE SERVICE

NETWORKING ACROSS IRELAND

Inclusivity, integration and improved gender balance in the Irish Fire Service were high on the agenda at this year's Chief Fire Officers' Association Annual Conference on Monaghan, which also saw the official launch of the Women's Fire Service Network in Ireland. Report by Grace Heneghan.

Currently just 2.5% of Ireland's firefighters are women, and it's an imbalance which the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) and the newly-established Women's Fire Service Network (WFSN) in this country are very keen to address.

The idea that women are not a good fit for the fire service, particularly the retained fire service, is unacceptable, according to Dave Carroll, CFOA Chairperson. And Inclusivity, integration and improved gender balance in the Irish Fire Service were high on the agenda at this year's Chief Fire Officers' Association Annual Conference on Monaghan, which also saw the official launch of the Women's Fire Service Network in Ireland. Report by Grace Heneghan.

Carroll, Tipperary's Chief Fire Officer, told conference delegates that one of the first hurdles to overcome is to understand the barriers faced by women entering the fire service. There are two entry streams into the fire service, operational level and graduate level and with just under 10% of women now working in the Irish fire services, females are still under-

represented.

Carroll confirmed that the CFOA is in the final stages of commissioning research into this area from a third level institute, and said they will work on any recommendations from that research. "This should provide some very clear signposts for the work of the WFSN, and also for all of us working in the sector," he noted.

CHANGING THE PERCEPTION

At the moment just 25 in every 1,000 firefighters in Ireland are female. While the percentage of female fire service employees in Ireland is currently at 7.2%, the largest percentage of female personnel are senior officer grade at 16%.

CFOA Vice Chairperson and Kildare's Chief Fire Officer Celina Barrett said: "However these numbers drop significantly when it comes to retained firefighters where just 1.6% are women, with a 4% female population in the full-time fire service.

"There's no physical barrier to women joining the Irish fire



London Fire Brigade Commission Dany Cotton (standing second from right) pictured with Celina Barrett, Kildare's Chief Fire Officer and other colleagues at the launch of the Women's Fire Service Network at this year's CFOA Conference in Monaghan.

service and it is a very rewarding career in so many ways, yet the numbers who join remain small. And we must look closely at why more young women and girls do not see the fire service as a viable career and work to change their perceptions," Kildare's fire chief noted.

ADVANCING THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Before officially launching the Women's Fire Service Network (WFSN), London Fire Brigade Commissioner Dany Cotton addressed the very theme of 'Advancing the Role of Women in the Fire Service' during her keynote address on the first day of the two-day conference on 8 May in Monaghan.

Both Dany Cotton and Celina Barrett spoke to 'Emergency Services Ireland' afterwards about the importance of having this network in place for women, and the plans to roll out it across Ireland.

First established in the UK in 1994 as 'Networking Women in the Fire Service', it has now grown in stature and membership to the point where it runs a very successful and well-attended annual training development weekend every June at the Fire Service College in Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire.

"Women are given an invaluable opportunity to do things they normally wouldn't be able to do in their own workplace – for example, being in charge of a BA team, driving a fire engine, taking command of an RTC scene within a safe environment, and trying out something different. So, if mistakes are made the news doesn't go back to their workplace, and people are not criticised for being a woman."

The network has since enabled women across the UK fire services to get together and share their experiences. As Cotton explained: "Back in the 1990s a lot of women were isolated in their workplaces and needed to have that link with other women whom they could contact and discuss their problems and share the good times with. Then about four or five years ago, the network became known as 'Women in the Fire Service UK'."

Cotton, who is London Fire Brigade's first female Commissioner and one of the most senior fire officers in Europe, attended the first major national conference organised by the network in 1996 at the UK Fire Service College.

"This was an amazing experience to see so many operational women from around the country at one event, and it was empowering and phenomenal to have 350 women there."

And the networking weekend has become so popular that applications for this year's training and development weekend in June sold out within six weeks; with over 200 women from retained and full-time fire services across the UK having signed up.

MOVING UP THE LADDER

Dany Cotton first joined the fire service in 1988 at Wimbledon Fire Station, and was just one of 30 female firefighters to share a workplace with 9,000 men when she moved to London Fire Brigade in the mid-1990s.

"Times have certainly changed since then," said the woman who has worked her way up the ladder during the years to the top-ranking position within London Fire Brigade.

Having first joined the network in 1996, Cotton became part of the committee and was elected vice-chairperson in 2000. Since then she's either been the chairperson or the vice-

AIMS OF WOMEN'S FIRE SERVICE NETWORK:

The following aims of the WFSN reflect many of the objectives of the fire service as it moves to ensure a culture of inclusivity, integration and diversity:

- Encourage fire services to actively promote diversity and gender equality.
- Improve health and wellbeing for all within the fire services.
- Make the fire service a more visible and attractive work option for women.
- Share knowledge and experience to progress women in the fire service and encourage the next generation of firefighters.



Pictured at the launch of the Women's Fire Service Network (WFSN) at this year's CFOA Conference in Monaghan were (l-r): Meath Chief Fire Officer Sheila Broderick, London Fire Brigade Commission Dany Cotton and Kildare's Chief Fire Officer Celina Barrett.

chairperson of WFS Network, and is finally stepping down this summer, "leaving behind a fabulous legacy", having done so much work to help set up an established organisation that is well respected and well supported.

It currently has 400 individual members (who signed up in the early years and continue to pay an annual subscription fee every year) while 90 per cent of fire and rescues services pay an annual subscription, thereby automatically making their female firefighters members, Cotton explained.

EMPOWERING EVENTS

So, back to the Irish branch of the network where chief fire officers Sheila Broderick from Meath and Celina Barrett from Kildare (the only two female fire chiefs in Ireland) have wanted to establish the network in Ireland for some time.

They both attended an event organised by the International Association of Fire and Rescue Services, and Barrett then first met Dany in Washington at an international meeting of women in the fire service.

“There’s no physical barrier to women joining the Irish fire service and it is a very rewarding career in so many ways....and we must look closely at why more young women and girls do not see the fire service as a viable career and work to change their perceptions,” – Celina Barrett, Kildare’s Chief Fire Officer.



“I was interested in establishing a network so I went along to see what I could learn from others at the event. And then Sheila attended a meeting in Vienna, so we established a number of contacts and gathered a lot of information at that stage,” said Barrett, who was one of the first female firefighters to join Dublin Fire Brigade in 1994, before her move to Kildare.

As part of initial stages in promoting ‘Women in the Fire Service’ a number of female firefighters and fire officers gathered in Athlone, Co. Westmeath in March, with the support and endorsement of the Chief Fire Officers’ Association, to see if women within the Irish fire services wanted the network.

“It was the most positive day. It was unreal and amazing to walk into a room to see 50 women wearing their fire service uniforms. It’s very empowering and such a great feeling,” Barrett recalled with pride.

“Since we invited everyone from firefighter to chief fire officer, and also the women who work in our control centres, the level of support was across all ranks. They all sat in groups and discussed issues – there was such a commonality amongst them all. It doesn’t matter what your background is or how you came into the fire service. We share so much together and it was great that this was reflected, since everyone’s experiences are the same.”

Dany Cotton agreed that it’s always crucial to get endorsement and support from the Chief Fire Officers’ Associations, so that the message is shared across all the fire services. “Fire chiefs have the power to encourage and support people attending these events and to give

them time off in order to do so,” she added.

THE UNIFORMED APPROACH

The issue of uniform has been one of the biggest bug-bears, which seems the easiest thing to solve but when you’re not hearing that, it’s difficult to understand it, according to Barrett.

Cotton also noted that the issue of the uniform continues to be on the agenda of every group meeting for women. “I had a conversation with a supplier at this CFOA conference about the safety aspect of having the correctly-fitted PPE on uniforms for women.



Pictured at the CFOA Annual Conference at The Hillgrove Hotel (l-r): Celina Barrett, Kildare Chief Fire Officer and CFOA Vice Chairperson; Cllr Colm Carthy, Vice-Chairman of Monaghan County Council; Dermot Brannigan, Monaghan’s Chief Fire Officer and CFOA Conference Secretary; Heather Humphreys TD, Minister for Business, Enterprise, and Innovation; Dave Carroll, Tipperary Chief Fire Officer & CFOA Chairperson; and Eamon O’Sullivan, Chief Executive, Monaghan County Council.

FIRE SERVICE

"And it took a long time to establish this with the manufacturers who were prepared to spend the money and investment to have correct female-form mannequins, on which to test BA and PPE kits."

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback from female firefighters following the launch of the Irish network at the CFOA Conference seems to have been overwhelmingly positive. "Dany and her colleague from London Fire Brigade, Keely, joined our meeting earlier to share their experiences. We'll certainly incorporate some of their learning programmes into what we aim to do in Ireland."

They both agreed that the issues facing female firefighters in Ireland and the UK are fundamentally the same, such as facilities in fire stations, uniforms, maternity policies, the menopause, adoption and support policies, and returning to work post-pregnancy.

"The value of the network is to share best practice across all the stations once the template is set up. And so it's down to us as fire officers to make those changes on behalf of female firefighters so they don't have to go through difficult times," said London Fire Brigade's Commissioner.

"We have made great strides in this respect and one of the interesting examples in London has been where a female firefighter took London Fire Brigade to the Employment Tribunal about issues with hair length. She had been penalised and treated poorly by fire officers because of not having short hair.

"The tribunal came out in her favour and ruled that an individual should not be penalised and it shouldn't be about identity. So, now men and women can grow their hair if they so wish. And a lot of the work done around maternity policies has also improved paternity and parental care policies. Most issues highlighted by women will benefit men also, which is positive and it's about women being more proactive in seeking to change and improve things for everyone."

She said that it's easy to sit back and do nothing, or else be proactive to make change happen and lead the way. "It's about what we do to support and develop the next generation. We have rolled out teams to do school visits, who are very proactive in explaining the role of the

CAMPAIGNING TO GET MORE WOMEN ON BOARD

A promotional campaign to attract more women into the fire service was rolled out at the Central Fire Station in Newbridge, Co. Kildare in mid-April. The 'Women in the Fire Service' campaign was steered by Kildare's Chief Fire Officer Celina Barrett, with support from each fire authority and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, which oversees fire services in Ireland.

And Barrett said that this year standardised material will also be developed in order to link in with Transition Year students. "It seems that the fire service is not on their career horizon; whether or not they're going down the engineering route, they don't seem to consider the fire service as a career choice. We need to do a lot of work on the front."

Photos courtesy of www.EmergencyTimes.com



Kildare students Robyn Kelly and Brigid Jacob with Portumna Retained Station Officer Ann Tuohy and Kildare's Chief Fire Officer Celina Barrett.



Pictured (l-r): Sub-Officer Anthea Browne, Cashel; FF Christina O'Mahoney, Tipperary Town; FF Sineád Galvin, Killarney; D/M Chenelle Mullally, Tramore; FF Anne Marie Langford, Waterford City; Kildare's CFO Celina Barrett; FF Maria Clarke, Dublin; Jenny Cooper, DFB's former fire prevention officer; and Retained S/O Ann Tuohy, Portumna.

firefighter and also counteracting the perception that firefighting is only for men.

"We're also working with a company that publishes books entitled 'My Mummy Is A Soldier', 'My Mummy Is An Engineer' etc and they will also produce an edition entitled 'My Mummy is a Firefighter', available to all schools and libraries. The aim is to young people a balanced view about jobs for both men and women and to target all the gender stereotypes."

FIRST OFFICIAL NETWORK EVENT

Following the meeting in March and the campaign in April, it's evident that the majority of women in the fire service now want a network, and the Kildare fire chief said the aim is to build on that.

"We're organising an event at the end of the year, which will be out very first official network event. It will be structured and centred round the theme of health and wellbeing, within the context of the fire service (an issue that's now very prevalent across all sectors)."

The dates and venue are yet to be confirmed for this first official network event. "In the meantime, any women in the fire service who may wish to join the network can join our Facebook Page and we encourage them to share information on that platform, until the website is up and running."

Celina Barrett will be doing some work

on developing a new website for the network with Tipperary's Chief Fire Officer Dave Carroll. "We're now working on the aims and objectives of the network. We know what we want to achieve in terms of recruitment and retention, education and communication."

Meanwhile, check out the UK website www.wfs.org.uk for further information on its history, its structure and governance, membership levels and how the network operates.

ACME SYSTEMS LTD.

**Best Wishes from
Unit 4, Feltrim Business Park, Swords,
Co. Dublin**

Tel : 01 8900660 Fax: 01 8900840

**NATIONWIDE SALES, SERVICING & REPAIRS OF ALL
MAKES BALLERS & SHREDDERS**

BALERS

CARDBOARD & PLASTIC
"IT'S A VALUABLE COMMODITY2
TAEK A FREE TRIAL OF A BALER & START
SAVING MONEY TODAY!

ACCESSORIES

We provide all the consumables & accessories required for all makes of Balers, We also carry spare parts for BRAMIDAN, Orwak, LSM, HSM, Compak, Moovmor, Miltek & Gradeall Machines.

SERVICING

ARE YOU HEALTH & SAFETY COMPLIANT?

We can help to make sure you are. We will service your Machine & ensure that it is in its best working order. We will provide you with written Certification. We have a Nationwide Team of Service Engineers.

LO-CALL 1850 92 44 95