

# UNION MODERNISATION FUND

**BERR**

Department for Business  
Enterprise & Regulatory Reform

**RETAINED FIREFIGHTERS  
UNION – LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES  
EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY**



# Retained Firefighters Union – Local Representatives Empowerment Strategy

## Background

In the past, it has been a challenge for the Retained Firefighters Union (RFU) representatives to support and advise members and take part in local consultation and negotiations, because of the pressures on their time and availability. The Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) project, the Local Representatives Empowerment Strategy, was focused on empowering local officials so they could use their limited time to better effect to represent members and to get involved in local consultation and collective bargaining.

## Why this project?

The aim was to consider the application of available technology to support the union reps, who often have responsibility for significant geographical areas throughout the UK, yet were limited by lack of access to the most up-to-date information to support their work. By harnessing the power of technologies such as internet, database applications and web-based protocols, the UMF project would provide reps with the tools to carry out their work effectively, for the benefit of all concerned. In addition, the project would meet the modernisation agenda, particularly reforming industrial relations following the national strikes by the FBU in 2002/3, and the independent review undertaken by Sir George Bain. Project Manager Derek Chadbon explained:

*'The union lacked the resources to promote a wider involvement of union officials, which meant that their already over-stretched national officials were increasingly required to manage local matters that ought to have been dealt with by local officials – if they existed. The statements by Sir George Bain's independent review and by the Government indicated that full participation of retained personnel in the reform of the fire and rescue service is needed to end their second class status. The UMF project will enable local officials to participate and represent the interests of members. We see it as a pilot to test out the viability of local officials' empowerment strategy. That proven, it is expected that a shift in resources from national to local level will enable the project to be broadened to all local reps.'*

## Objectives

The project objectives included:

- maximising the information and reference material available to local reps;
- reducing the reliance on HQ staff;
- providing support for local reps to undertake their role in the limited time available to them;

- enabling the RFU to participate in reformed industrial relations in 56 fire and rescue services;
- overcoming the time and commitment conflicts, which mean retained firefighters have very little opportunity to participate in industrial relations;
- providing for rapid communications between RFU local reps, members and national officials;
- informing the process of modernising the fire and rescue service through better communications and participation of retained firefighters, who crew 60 per cent of fire engines in the UK.
- implementing a web-based portal for disseminating best practice, support and information;
- implementing a nation-wide database of union resources (information, legislation and so forth);
- training and development to support union reps in terms of technical capabilities and knowledge transfer.

### Software, hardware and internet communications

During the project, the available technology was identified and applied to overcome many of the difficulties union staff experienced with the paper-based system. Web-based protocols, the internet and associated database management systems were used to give union reps the most up-to-date information in support of their work, with all union publications posted on a secure, dedicated web location.

*'Regional reps were provided with laptops, a key tool to support their work in meeting local member needs, and also a highway for communication between RFU Headquarters and reps, with RFU Headquarters acting as a 'hub' in disseminating relevant and timely information. This approach has had a positive effect on working practices within the RFU, as regional reps are now sure of receiving the most relevant material in a consistent manner.'*

## Methodology

The project was a joint initiative between the RFU and the Ashcroft International Business School (AIBS) of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), and its governance rested with a newly established Project Board, which included representatives from both the RFU and AIBS. At the outset, the Board worked with RFU representatives to develop a communications strategy to continually inform the wider union membership of progress. ARU provided invaluable support during the project in terms not only of day-to-day project management but also technical guidance and support through the hardware and software purchase process, governance and quality assurance, technical expertise in intranet and internet-based technology, and the development, delivery and management of training initiatives to support knowledge transfer.

The project involved:

- developing software for use by union reps to support operational activities;
- purchasing laptop computers for union reps;
- developing an internet-based communication infrastructure;

### Nation-wide database

At the earliest stages of the project, it was highlighted that a key issue for management staff based at RFU Headquarters in Attleborough was the outdated database systems and technical infrastructure supporting the dissemination of information, management of member information and general management of a national

organisation. Therefore, a new bespoke database system was developed to improve the management of all aspects of union activity related to storing and managing information, including managing financial and personnel records of all members and transactions within the remit of the RFU.

Throughout the course of the project, the database system has provided support to RFU management staff and regional reps through functions such as document management, information management and retrieval and, where applicable, knowledge management and transfer.

### **Technical infrastructure**

A key stage was a review of the technical infrastructure available within RFU Headquarters, not only a central hub for the dissemination of union communications, but also the repository for all information associated with RFU activities. An initial analysis indicated that server storage and functionality represented a risk to the ongoing and future activities within the RFU's modernisation ambitions. To limit this risk and provide a platform for the RFU to continually develop its technological capacity, a recommendation was made to purchase a new server to support the transfer and storage of strategic and operational data.

### **Training and development**

Considerable effort was made to provide regional reps and union management staff based at RFU Headquarters with the necessary training and development to maximise the impact of new technology on existing working practices.

### **Training for regional reps**

Training events took place throughout the project, where regional reps at all levels of expertise had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the laptops and to receive training in the use of a range of software

applications, including Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Microsoft Outlook and Internet Explorer. A range of training materials was developed alongside the training, which participants can use as reference material in support of their own personal development.

Since RFU regional reps are based UK wide, the logistics around attending training events can be problematic. Consequently, it was decided that all relevant teaching and learning material used in the classroom-based training should also be included on a dedicated area of the RFU website. This area, The Learning Zone, was populated with instructional material as well as thought provoking exercises in both technical disciplines and management activities.

### **Management training**

Additional training was provided to support union management staff in aspects of database and document management, as well as development programmes focusing on current management aspects.

Because of the logistical difficulties of regional reps getting together in one place for prolonged or multiple learning events, management training activities were limited to the members of management staff based at the Attleborough Headquarters.

Anglia Ruskin University academic staff introduced a variety of management disciplines, including project management, negotiation skills, and time management. These areas were focused upon in direct response to the needs identified by RFU senior management before the project started.

To support the wider dissemination of management training to the regional reps, these elements of training were developed for delivery through the Learning Zone. This provision has received positive feedback across the regional reps, as tools, techniques and skills offered in the Learning Zone can be applied both to the union-

based work of the regional rep as well as the demands of their primary place of employment. To support the integration of the new database system into the management function within RFU Headquarters, a series of training events, delivered by technical specialists, supported both the administrative function and the management in using the new database. The training focused on the technical aspects of database functionality, including knowledge management, document management, and financial management.

## Best practice

A number of areas were identified in particular as best practice.

### Training needs analysis

To ensure that the training matched the need, a training needs analysis was developed as a questionnaire and disseminated to all regional representatives to assess their level of expertise. Analysis of the results showed that a significant proportion of respondents described themselves as novices in terms of software expertise and familiarity. A few felt they were at an intermediate level, whilst very few believed themselves to be experts. This information meant that a package of training could be developed to engage and meet the needs of all participants, regardless of expertise, with appropriate content, pace of delivery, subject areas and training environment.

Additional factors identified through the analysis of the questionnaire included the proximity of a rep to a suitable training centre, their availability, technical experience and familiarity with training environments.

### Blended learning

Offering a variety of learning formats came to be seen as crucial. The Learning Zone represents one of the key components of the project, as Derek Chadbon explained:

*'Although attendance at training sessions was excellent, the logistical difficulties in providing ongoing support meant we needed an alternative approach to the delivery of training material. Commonplace within the higher education sector is the notion of self-directed learning, coupled with the application of technology platforms. This gives the learner the possibility of learning at times that are most convenient and may therefore add real value when contrasted with the difficulties of attending formalised events. Throughout the project, there were opportunities to expand the online learning environment to include training material covering disciplines drawn from areas of general management. From this experience, future training developments will involve an approach based on the provision of training through an integrative approach which may involve a variety of media, including classroom-based, online environments, video streams and video conferencing.'*

## Lessons learned

There have been a number of lessons learned that would have a beneficial impact upon any similar project in the future. These include:

### Independent due diligence

One of the key lessons was the use of independent advice on the purchase and procurement of all hardware, software and related peripheral equipment. Delegating authority for this activity within the project meant that decisions on the purchase of equipment could be purely objective. In this way, it was possible to identify equipment that provided not only the desired functionality but also value for money.

The due diligence report produced as a guide to purchase and procurement was an integral piece of project reference material throughout the project.

### **Communications strategy**

Although significant geographical distance exists between the two partner organisations (RFU and Anglia Ruskin University), a key lesson learned during the earlier stages of the project was the importance of regular meetings during which stakeholders could meet face to face. This method of communication was considered an important aspect, facilitating a greater understanding and collegiality among representative of both partners.

### **Financial management**

Having a single point of contact for the financial management of the project was a clear and distinct advantage in the management of project finances. A project team member with sole responsibility for managing finances enabled queries, data analysis, purchases and procurement to be implemented consistently and effectively.

### **Project scope**

In response to the logistical difficulties in bringing together reps from across the UK, training was necessarily limited to a number of focused training events. However, this lesson was responsible in part for the introduction of web-based teaching and learning activities, which have proved to be an effective means of delivering training material to disparate groups.

### **Effective succession planning**

One of the key lessons that would be taken into future projects is the need for effective succession planning to ensure transfer of knowledge during the project lifecycle. The retirement of Derek Chadbon (Former General Secretary RFU) was unforeseen at the time the project was submitted to

BERR. Although there was no risk to the project, the potential for information loss and knowledge depletion is something that would need to be planned for in future project proposals.

### **Technical training activities**

Throughout the project, the creation of training material was managed through a formalised process of enquiry and development. This approach enabled the delivery of training activities to meet the needs of individual learners effectively, on the basis of their prior experience of software and hardware. Collecting feedback from training event participants enabled a number of learning opportunities, through which training materials could be reviewed and refined.

## **Conclusion**

Following the retirement of Derek Chadbon, John Barton, RFU National General Secretary, assumed the role of Joint Project Manager. He sums up:

*'This project was built around the limitations of RFU reps compared to other union officials, many of whom were fortunate enough to enjoy a full-time union post. There were significant barriers to our reps undertaking their trade union duties. Foremost were the conflicting demands of trying to juggle the responsibilities of having to maintain primary employment, provide emergency cover, meet family commitments and then undertake TU duties. Additionally, RFU reps could not always be released from their primary employment to carry out union duties. The benefit of the training input has provided a wealth of evidence on the success of the process. Our reps are now quite obviously more competent and noticeably more*

*confident; the interchange between our HQ and reps in the field has seen dramatic change post training. Witnessing the first cautious steps taken by those who attended the training events and who were noticeably conscious of their limited skills, it is clear that the success of the project can be measured by how our reps are now able to correspond and discharge their duties more effectively. The project has added value to the RFU and has provided the springboard from which to move forward in areas we could not have imagined before. The benefits will last for a very long time and the experience gained in managing the project is now embedded in all the work we do.'*

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