

Nobody knows how many people with undiagnosed dyslexia work in the fire service, with many firefighters struggling under mounting paperwork. The good news is that attitudes to the disability are changing, helped by new legislation

Dyslexia Attitudes proob

Do you want the chance to fill in lots of forms and write reports at work? Then firefighting could be just the job ...

It's an unlikely job advert and one we're not likely to see. But filling in forms and writing reports is very much part of the job these days, even for frontline firefighters. However, this should not deter people with dyslexia from applying if they have the strengths and qualities needed to fight fires and respond to other emergencies. And the law is on their side.

Firefighters are no longer exempt from the Disability Discrimination Act, there to ensure all candidates get a fair chance in the recruitment process, and "reasonable adjustments" once appointed. It also means fire brigades need no longer miss out on talented would be recruits.

Take Andrea Johnson, accomplished horse-woman and former class 1 lorry driver. She tried to get into the West Midlands fire service nearly a decade ago. "I kept failing the written test because I needed more time," says Andrea, now 36. This was before the DDA covered firefighters, but Andrea didn't give up her ambition. Now, aged 36, she is thriving on Blue Watch at Tamworth station, after Staffordshire Fire and Rescue selected her for training from stiff competition earlier this year.

Dyslexia is considered to be a disability, and candidates are encouraged to disclose it at the start of the recruitment process, along with a report detailing its effects. Employers will then make "reasonable adjustments" at the relevant stages of the selection process, such as extra time for written tests.

Dyslexia is often known as the "hidden disability". Andrea left school without qualifications and was not formally diagnosed until many years later. In her late twenties she took herself off to night school to get help

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with literacy. A tutor thought she might have dyslexia, she took some tests and learned she had above average intelligence and was also dyslexic. She heard Staffordshire was recruiting, disclosed her condition when she applied and hasn't looked back.

Important to speak out

There were "reasonable adjustments" in the selection process and also on the training course, where Andrea was given extra time in tests and sometimes answered questions orally instead of writing them down. She loves her job and is getting more confident in writing up reports. She believes it's important to speak out to encourage others who may have the condition not to be deterred from applying. She is also keen to encourage any serving firefighters who may be struggling with form-filling and report writing to get tested for dyslexia so they can benefit from support if it is confirmed.

No-one knows how many undiagnosed dyslexics there are in the fire service. Firefighter has spoken to a number of FBU members who have the condition when researching this article, and it can affect all ranks.

We found a lot of support for the DDA and a belief that the condition no longer carries the stigma it did with some in the past, though disclosing is not always easy.

Academics and psychologists have identified that having dyslexia certainly doesn't mean a person has low intelligence. In fact, many dyslexics are adept at disguising the

dyslexia problem?

extent of their condition and devise coping strategies that would astound most people.

Lack of a diagnosis can cause needless anxiety and lack of self-esteem and crass handling of disclosure by a line manager can make matters worse. However, even those who had had negative experiences would encourage others to get a diagnosis.

One retained firefighter with a decade's service would encourage other people to disclose, even though he hasn't felt particularly supported. "My advice is just get on with it, though now they've brought in these individual performance reviews it means there's far more paperwork just to show you are competent as a firefighter. My line manager knows about it

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DYSLEXIA: THE FACTS

What is dyslexia? Dyslexia is commonly understood to be a term covering a range of types of learning difficulty where someone of normal intelligence has persistent and significant problems with reading, writing, spelling.

What are the symptoms? Dyslexic symptoms include poor reading, spelling and handwriting but can also cover wider problems with concentration and co-ordination.

Who is affected? Up to six million Britons are believed to have dyslexia. 4% of the population is severely dyslexic and a further 6% have limited problems.

Source: BBC

now, but no-one's come to me suggesting I get extra time, as I have to write it all out first before I put it into a computer. It would certainly help, particularly as I'm only in one day a week. The station commander knows about it and has made sympathetic noises, but it's got to be done so I just get on with it."

Another firefighter benefited from his dyslexia diagnosis when he had extra time while going for promotion. "I came out as a dyslexic quite blatantly because it was the only way I was going to get any help when I was invited to go for promotion. They made reasonable adjustments for me and I got extra time. If you can't go to your line manager, go to human resources. That's what I did. Things are getting better – employers now say we have a duty of care, and more people realise dyslexic certainly doesn't mean stupid."

High-flying career

A glance at Pete Goulden's track record shows that dyslexia is no bar to a high-flying career. The Burton-on-Trent firefighter, who is also FBU health and safety rep for the West Midlands (Region 7), is currently on secondment to a government department. Pete, a specialist in New Dimension equipment, is carrying out risk assessments and creating safe systems of work for the Department of Communities and Local Government. Pete's dyslexia wasn't picked up when he was at school in the seventies, where teachers thought he was "a bit stupid." He was a retained firefighter, and his dyslexia was discovered when he was trying to apply for wholetime jobs in his late twenties. This was before the DDA, but Pete was encouraged and supported by the station officer at Cannock. "I was fortunate that someone was willing to help. To me, it's all about being honest with yourself.

His advice to fellow dyslexics? "Recognise you've got an issue and don't try to hide it. There are lots of tools out there that can help – I use a hand-held computer with Word that's no bigger than a mobile phone. It is possible to produce good documents without being able to spell well."

Pete, who has written articles on New Dimension for *Firefighter*, is not only a specialist but could also be an inspiration to others. Though few firefighters join the brigade with an ambition to write reports, he is living proof that dyslexia need not necessarily be a bar to doing it exceedingly well.

→ Dyslexia Action www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk
Email: info@dyslexiaaction.org.uk
Free courses for parents and adult learners start this autumn in centres around the country.
→ British Dyslexia Association, 98 London Road, Reading, RG1 5AU Helpline: 0118 966 8271
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