



Report of the Assessor for the
Qualifying Examinations for Promotion
to the Ranks of
Leading Firefighter and Sub-Officer

Part II: Practical Tests 2000 and 2001

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FOR PROMOTION TO THE RANKS OF
LEADING FIREFIGHTER AND SUB OFFICER:
PART II - PRACTICAL TESTS 2000 AND 2001

PREFACE

This report on the Practical Tests is produced every two years, to inform candidates and those responsible for running the examinations of current issues and developments. Recurring problems and weaknesses are also identified to assist future candidates in preparing for the process.

In my previous report, I pointed out that the fundamental structure of the Practical Tests had not been altered to any significant degree during the previous two years, but that there had been a number of procedural changes in response to identified needs. These changes were introduced in the light of experience gained by Local Examination Boards to reflect best practice and to maintain the currency and relevance of the standards being applied.

The report also referred to the ongoing review of personal and organisational development, and its likely implications for the future of the statutory promotion examinations. Despite indications at that stage of increasing clarity about the likely outcome, there were still a number of unresolved uncertainties, particularly regarding the timescales involved. Those uncertainties appear to have created a degree of confusion in some Boards about the relevance or otherwise of the existing system and this has become even more pronounced in the interim period.

It is difficult to assess accurately the effect, if any, that this uncertainty has had on the performance of candidates in the tests. Regrettably, what is fairly obvious is the fact that the comprehensive guidance and extensive support available to candidates has not always been fully utilised, given the continued poor performance in certain areas.

Whilst significant improvements continue to be made in both the conduct of the Tests and the quality of individual performances, there are a number of long-standing, recurring weaknesses that have still not been addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the changes that are taking place or are proposed in the development of competence based training, there is still widespread enthusiasm for this element of the statutory examinations. This enthusiasm is particularly pronounced amongst the examiners, who believe that the tests are making a very tangible contribution to the Service by setting a minimum acceptable standard for candidates to meet before consideration is given to them progressing to operational command.

The genuine commitment of all those involved with the Tests is reflected in the increasingly high standards that are being achieved in many places. These improvements in standards are undoubtedly also a reflection of the revised operational incident scenarios that were introduced during this period in the Section B Tests. The new scenarios, and the associated guidance, were developed by a small working group of Senior Examiners, who invested considerable time, effort and expertise in the task. The quality of their work is obvious, and has clearly made a very substantial contribution to the value of the Tests. It is also very much to the credit of all Local Boards that the changes were implemented so effectively, and with minimal disruption. Although some Senior Examiners expressed concerns about the limited number of scenarios, the consensus appeared to be that the standardisation has been of real benefit. During the period to which this report relates, there has been clear evidence of a more consistent approach, with noticeably less variation in standards between Boards. Increased collaboration between Brigades and a trend towards joint venues have also contributed in some degree to this improvement. The vast majority of Senior Examiners are quite clearly committed to reviewing, refining and improving the Tests, and many have taken a lot of trouble to do so.

PREPARATION

The most consistent feature of every previous report on the Practical Tests has been the problem of inadequate preparation by some candidates. Regrettably, this has continued despite the significant pre-examination support provided to candidates by many Brigades. Results achieved by candidates suggest that those who have taken advantage of this type of support tend to achieve significantly better standards than their colleagues from the same brigades who have not. An attempt will be made in the coming year to validate and quantify this anecdotal evidence.

Potential candidates are reminded every year of the importance of being properly prepared, and of the value of utilising the comprehensive guidance that is issued by the FSEB. As the Tests become increasingly refined there are even more pronounced differences in the performance of well-prepared candidates and those who have not taken the trouble to familiarise themselves with the guidance. It is extremely unlikely that any candidate will fare well in the Tests if they do not fully understand the way in which they are being assessed, and the criteria against which they are measured. Despite this, there is clear evidence to suggest that many candidates still rely heavily on their practical experience, however limited, rather than on adequate preparation.

As always, there have been numerous candidates throughout the country who delivered outstanding performances in all areas of the Tests. Their obvious commitment and ability gives every reason to be confident in the future of the Service.

APPEARANCE AND BEARING

In the previous report, reference was made to the growing trend of many Brigades moving away from the traditional style of uniform. This trend has continued, with many Brigades opting for a less formal working rig that is common to all ranks. Variations in uniform styles form part of a much wider agenda for change in the Service, which includes a gradual move away from squad drill and other practices that are considered to be 'militaristic'. In some Boards that has prompted minor changes to the conduct of the Tests, including, for example, the way in which candidates report to the examiners. Appearance and bearing are of course still assessed as part of the process and despite these changes the standard remains consistently high. It is evident that, with very few exceptions, firefighters still believe the manner in which they conduct themselves is important.

In the Section A and B tests, candidates must be seen to have command of the crews, be 'in-charge', and heard above the noise around them when giving instructions to crew members otherwise they will not be able to establish control. The perception of candidates that they were expected to excessively shout, undertake exaggerated marching from one point to another and stand to attention whenever stationary, was clarified when a directive was issued that this had never been a requirement of the FSEB and must have been introduced within brigades.

Some Boards with centralised venues now have several different styles of uniform within the same centre, but this does not appear to create any particular difficulties in terms of the Practical Tests.

DRILLS

The long-awaited Manual of Training was finally issued, but unfortunately not in sufficient time to be incorporated into the 2001 Practical Tests. This created some minor confusion in certain areas, highlighting once again the crucial link between these important reference publications and the statutory promotion examinations.

Concerns has been expressed on previous occasions over the apparent inability of some candidates to monitor and control the performance of personnel undertaking simple training evolutions. The various components of these Tests represent a range of the activities that would be routinely undertaken by crew and watch commanders during a normal duty shift. As such, they should be well within the ability and experience of anyone presenting themselves for this examination. Despite this, there are still candidates who are either unable to control the crew(s) or to demonstrate convincingly to the examiners their ability to do so.

DE-BRIEFING

Attention was drawn in previous reports to the universally poor quality of de-briefing of crews carried out by candidates in both the Section A and Section B Tests. With very few exceptions this has continued to be poorly done, and thus contributed little or nothing to the process.

The importance of de-briefing to the overall process of integrated personal development is already well understood, and has been extensively documented in recent years. Clear guidance on this vital aspect of performance management was issued in a Fire Service Circular as early as 1997, but appears not to have been widely adopted if the Practical Tests are considered to be an accurate representation of common practice within Brigades. If they are **not** representative, it is difficult to understand why candidates behave so differently in these circumstances.

De-briefing is a key element of training for competence that relates directly to the Practical Test situation. A basic principle of that de-briefing process is the need for it to be fully interactive, involving and engaging those who participated in the drill or simulation. It is still disappointingly commonplace for the de-brief to consist of a simple monologue, with the candidate reciting a chronological list of the actions undertaken by the crew, and with few if any real learning points identified. Even in the slightly better examples the candidate may invite questions or comments from the crews, but this is generally done as an afterthought, at a stage when few of them are likely to contribute anything of value.

This is an area of such widespread significance to the implementation of a performance management culture in the Service that it is worthy of very serious consideration.

FIREGROUND PROCEDURE

The quality of the photographs and drawings provided to the candidate in the Section B Tests has again improved significantly from previous years. The primary purpose of the photographs is of course to provide the candidate with the clearest possible information and to assist him/her in briefing the crews. They also ensure that the examiners and the role players' perceptions of the scenario are consistent with the candidate's, thereby reducing the possibility of misinterpretation.

When producing the photographs, the objective is to reduce the scope for individual interpretation of the nature and extent of the situation. For example, computer generated smoke and/or flames on a photograph help to ensure that the same scenario is visualised by the candidate, the crews and the examiners. It also gives each candidate an equal chance, by standardising the degree of difficulty being faced. Clarity is vital to these tests, and the more tightly defined the circumstances the easier it is to assess the candidate fairly against common criteria.

It is important to recognise that the value of even the clearest photograph can be dramatically reduced if the scenario is set up in a different way, with additional elements included or essential elements omitted. For example, the accidental inclusion of a pressurised gas cylinder in an appropriate scenario could dramatically increase the degree of complexity for the candidate, placing him/her at a relative disadvantage to others. Considerable care need to be taken to remove inappropriate props from the location, particularly in larger venues when multiple scenarios are being run.

Occasionally, examiners have queried FSEB policy on the use of aide-memoir, notebooks etc by candidates when dealing with the operational scenario. As a broad principle, anything that would normally be available to a candidate responding to an incident on a first-line appliance can be utilised for the Practical Test. The Senior Examiner should agree in advance of the Tests what is acceptable in this regard, to avoid any possibility of differing interpretation by examiners.

THE ROLE OF THE SENIOR EXAMINER

The role of the Senior Examiner is crucial to the successful operation of the Practical Tests. His/her presence throughout the process is particularly valuable, so that any queries can be dealt with immediately, or disagreements resolved. If for some reason the Senior Examiner cannot be present, a properly briefed deputy should be nominated to be on site at all times. It is unfair to both examiners and candidates if the Senior Examiner, or the nominee, is not immediately available to check the fairness of the assessments being made and to deal with issues arising.

The quality and style of briefing by Senior Examiners, particularly of candidates, has continued to improve. There is a much more widespread recognition that people are more likely to perform well in a supportive environment than in an unnecessarily formal one. A clear, friendly introduction to the process, indicating in simple terms what the tests consist of and how they will be assessed, is of particular benefit to candidates. In general, the briefings for examiners are also effective and appropriately structured, emphasising the key elements of their role and clarifying the process. On occasion, however, the briefings for role players and support staff are less well co-ordinated, sometimes creating slight confusion over the extent of their involvement in the operational scenario. In the most extreme cases this can even lead to the candidate being given misleading information.

ROUGH MARK SHEETS

In response to suggestions from Senior Examiners, a number of changes have been incorporated in the rough mark sheets in recent years. In the main, these appear to have been well received, and to have contributed to an improvement in the quality of the information available for feedback to candidates. The majority of examiners are now making comprehensive, clear notes to support their marking, for use in the feedback process and to assist with subsequent reviews. The importance of this latter point is, however, not always fully recognised; even where a candidate performs well in

a particular Section it may subsequently be necessary to review the overall marks, which can be extremely difficult if the notes are inadequate.

Any comments made on the rough mark sheet of course be justifiable, and contain sufficient detail to inform any subsequent discussion.

INDEPENDENCE OF EXAMINERS

It is an important basic principle of the Tests that a candidate should not be examined by two examiners from his/her own Brigade. Recognising the logistical and practical difficulties that this requirement can create, the guidance allows for the principle to be varied in exceptional circumstances. The rule of mixed examiners should, however, only be relaxed in EXCEPTIONAL circumstances, not merely because it is convenient to do so. Where circumstances dictate that two examiners have to be used from the home Brigade, the Senior Examiner should monitor the assessment of these Tests to ensure the impartiality to the process, and for this to be seen to be the case.

SENIOR EXAMINERS REPORTS

There is a requirement for Senior Examiners to submit a report on the Practical Tests to the FSEB. If the reports are compiled in accordance with the guidance in the Handbook for Senior Examiners, they are immensely valuable in evaluating the overall outcomes of the Tests. Unfortunately, the quality of reports submitted by local Boards is extremely variable and Senior Examiners are asked to pay particular attention to the guidance when preparing their reports.

SUMMARY

Despite these minor criticisms, this has once again been an extremely positive and constructive period for the Practical Tests and the continuing commitment to them by so many of those involved is extremely gratifying.

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