



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

Part II: Practical Tests 2002 and 2003

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INTRODUCTION

A published 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 candidates in preparing for the process.

2003 was an unusual year by any standards, with the long running industrial action affecting every aspect of the Service in some way. It is to the very real credit of everyone involved with the tests that they were able to proceed with relatively minimal evidence of disruption in the majority of cases. It is important to recognise, however, that this successful outcome could not have been achieved without enormous additional effort on the part of the Senior Examiners and organising staff in the local boards. Another reassuring aspect was the degree of enthusiasm and commitment shown by most of the candidates, and the obvious effort they had invested in preparing for the tests, despite the additional pressures imposed upon them by the ongoing dispute.

A regular feature of my previous reports has been the impact on the Practical Tests of the ongoing review of personal and organisational development, and its likely implications for the future of the statutory promotion examinations. It is now clear that the Practical Tests will not continue beyond 2004, following the planned full implementation of the IPDS system in 2003/04. I have highlighted previously the degree of confusion that these changes appear to have engendered in some Boards about the relevance or otherwise of the existing system. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the effects of this have been even more pronounced in 2003.

It is however, extremely difficult, given recent developments nationally and in individual brigades, to assess accurately the effect that this continuing uncertainty has had on the performance of candidates in the tests.

PREPARATION

Adequate preparation by candidates is an essential prerequisite for success in any formal examination process, and the Practical Tests are no exception. Unfortunately, the weaknesses arising from poor preparation have featured heavily in every published report on the tests. However, although similar problems were experienced again during this period, it is important to recognise also that a great many candidates were extremely well prepared. Considering the additional pressures and disruption associated with the lengthy period of industrial action, this was of very real credit to the candidates themselves, to their colleagues who supported them and to all of the people involved with the administration and organisation of the tests. Despite the inevitable tensions created by the long running dispute, there were surprisingly few occasions when the crews involved in the drill ground elements of the tests showed any reluctance to participate. In fact, on the vast majority of occasions they did so with considerable enthusiasm and professionalism. There were, of course, a limited number of regrettable exceptions to this trend, where crews were unhelpful and occasionally even obstructive, making the candidate's task unnecessarily difficult.

In the vast majority of cases the quality of a candidate's performance was clearly dictated by the degree of preparation involved. The guidance issued by the FSEB to candidates has been refined every year in the light of experience and taking into account comments received from Local Examination Boards: it sets out clearly and comprehensively the criteria against which candidates are assessed, and the ways in which they should demonstrate their competence. Amendments are widely disseminated to everyone involved with the Practical Tests. Despite this, many candidates appear not to be fully aware of this information. Failure to familiarise themselves with the guidance issued, and placing an undue reliance on personal experience, is highly unlikely to produce a successful outcome. However, the vast majority of candidates who fail to obtain a pass in this part of the examination invariably do so due to a failure in only one of the three sections of the test. This suggests that a little more preparation and effort by those candidates might have resulted in the achievement of the pass result being sought.

SECTION A - DRILLS

During this period it was discovered that one local examination board, which consisted of a single brigade, had decided not to implement a large number of the standard drills specified by the FSEB from those identified in the Fire Service Manual – Training and had indicated to candidates the fire drill that would be considered for the purpose of the test. As this created an unfair balance to what was being required by other Local Examination Boards, the FSEB decided that before each year's practical tests, the Senior Examiner of each Local Examination Board would select and identify to candidates the five drills that would be considered for the purpose of the test.

It was also discovered that when applying the Sub-Officers' composite drill test, the requirement that the different elements of the drill should be undertaken simultaneously by crew members had not been fully understood. This has necessitated certain amendments to the guidance issued to ensure that this is more readily apparent.

Pass rates in this section of the test have remained high and the general standard displayed continues to be good. However, the general weaknesses of failed candidates relate mainly to a lack of ability to command and control crew members, inadequate observation of safety issues, and a failure by many to use the debriefing of crew members as a training aid.

SECTION B – OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES

The tests used for this section of the test enable an assessment of a candidate's ability when placed in charge at an incident.

Gradual improvement in the standards displayed by candidates during this period has continued. General reasons for the failure of candidates have been difficult to identify, but the most repeated weaknesses identified have been inadequate safety considerations for crew members, inadequacies in exercising the required level of command, and a failure to relate the risk assessment process to the subsequent system of work applied. An incomplete understanding of the purpose of the debrief of crew members continues to be a flaw that requires attention.

DE-BRIEFING

One of the recurring features of recent reports has been the consistently poor quality of debriefing by candidates of crews. There are of course some notable exceptions to this rule but the overall standard of debriefing is regrettably still extremely poor, with the majority of candidates paying little more than lip service to this crucial task. Considering the widespread use of debriefing by brigades, particularly in the operational and training environments, it is difficult to understand why this should be the case. Inability, or unwillingness, to learn from experience is a fundamental weakness that can have catastrophic consequences; the implications for the introduction of IPDS are clear, and should be viewed seriously by brigades. After all, it appears highly unlikely that the generally poor performance in this aspect of the tests is not reflected elsewhere.

SECTION C – INSTRUCTION OF OTHERS

This section of the test involves the candidate in presenting an instructional talk that the candidate has prepared.

The subject of the presentation depends on the level of the examination and the selection of that subject by the Senior Examiner from three subjects nominated for this purpose and previously identified to the candidate.

Again, during this period, the standard has continued to improve and it is considered that a failure to pass this section of the test is usually due to candidates and/or their presentations being inadequately prepared.

USE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Predictably, given the developments in information technology within brigades, the use of PowerPoint is becoming increasingly common and, with the inevitable spectacular exception, does not appear to have created any significant problems. The general quality of PowerPoint presentations tends to be very high, although some examiners have indicated that they find it more difficult to assess against the relevant criteria than with a conventional presentation.

DANGEROUS PRACTICES

Several Boards reported examples of 'dangerous practice,' which were drawn to the attention of candidates and their brigades. The nature of these 'dangerous practices' varied considerably, although there were some examples of extremely basic safety errors which must be a cause for concern .

APPEALS PROCEDURE

This is the second year in which the formal appeal process has operated. As in the first year, the justifications given for appealing against failure in the tests varied considerably, as did the overall quality of evidence provided to support or challenge the reasons for the appeals. In the most extreme cases, the only justification given by candidates was essentially that they felt they should have passed! The reasons given to support this view included previous success in the same element of the tests, supportive comments from line managers, and the success of other candidates whose performance was believed to be the same as, or poorer than, the appellant. It is important to stress that any appeal should be based on tangible issues, rather than perception or hearsay. Also, it is a requirement of the FSEB that the candidate must pass all three elements of the tests on the same occasion; previous success in any particular area **cannot** be taken into account by the Examiners.

In contrast, some candidates set out very clearly, and without ambiguity, the reasons why they considered that they should have achieved a pass, attaching relevant evidence in support of their appeal.

It is of course important in either case for these to be underpinned by clear, unequivocal recommendations from Senior Examiners. Once again, some appeals were upheld, and retests recommended, purely because the information available to the Appeals Panel was insufficiently accurate or comprehensive to support any other action.

ROUGH MARK SHEETS

The absolute importance of clear, comprehensive comments on the rough mark sheets has been consistently emphasised to examiners, to provide an unambiguous indication of the reasons for the gradings awarded. This is obviously of value for routine debriefing of candidates, but has particular importance in the case of an appeal. The need to record performance accurately is widely recognised throughout the Service nowadays, and this is reflected in the majority of rough mark sheets completed by examiners. There is still, however, some room for improvement in certain areas.

Although the Practical Tests have a finite life remaining, this is nevertheless an issue of relevance to everyone involved with assessment in the Service and particularly to those charged with implementing the Integrated Personal Development System.

SUMMARY

Despite its relative brevity, this report seems to contain rather more criticism than usual, which may well be a reflection of the wide ranging changes currently affecting the Service, and the uncertainty and lack of clarity that is associated with many of the most fundamental of these issues. Despite these concerns, however, I still derived considerable satisfaction from my visits to the Local Boards, and learned a great deal from them.

In summing up this report I can only reiterate my comments from previous years. Even in the midst of a highly publicised, often acrimonious industrial dispute, I was reassured, as I always am by the enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism that is so evident throughout the Local Boards. In fact the Fire Services that I have witnessed during my visits in this period seemed to bear very little relationship to the negative portrayal of this organisation that received so much media coverage, and attracted so much criticism.

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