

Alison's story



Alison Kibblewhite is Head of Risk Reduction for South Wales Fire & Rescue Service and was one of the first female firefighters when she joined the Service in 1995. Alison worked in a nine-to-five job for a high street bank for nine years having been encouraged into traditional 'female jobs' at school, before stumbling upon the fire service by accident. She says it's the best decision she ever made.

"I hadn't even considered it previously but when my brother applied, they told him they were particularly interested in recruiting women. I have always kept myself fit with running and circuits so my brother got me an application form. I filled it in but never dreamt I would get anywhere with it."

Alison was delighted when she got through selection, although there were barriers to overcome. There was no female specific kit, no female shower area and there was a lot of apprehension from colleagues.

"The senior managers were worried about how the firefighters would react when I got to my first station after 17 weeks of training. They laid down a lot of rules as to what they could and couldn't do. This made colleagues on the watch very wary of me. One firefighter was even told by his wife that he needed to transfer!"

It only took a few days for them to get over their fears about having a woman on the watch and they became quite protective. When we were practising drills or at incidents they would try to help me if they thought something was too heavy or difficult but I stood my ground and told them I could do it and once I had proved I could, this quickly stopped. I was no longer 'the woman' just a team member who could do exactly the same job as them."

With just 2.4% of firefighters in South Wales Fire and Rescue Service being female, Alison is keen to attract more women to join and train to become firefighters.

To women who are interested in applying, she advises: "Don't think you have to be the strongest and the fittest person to join the service. We always work as part of a team and a lot of the skills are about techniques that you learn as you practice more. If you enjoy helping people and want to make a difference to someone's life, then this is the perfect role. You are

often dealing with the worst day of someone's life and you can make it better-that is so rewarding.

Going to incidents is around 5% of your time. The rest of your working time is spent training, visiting high risk premises for familiarisation, practising drills and delivering fire safety in the community, in schools or at community groups. You get to go into many interesting and exciting places that members of the public never get to access. I've been on nuclear submarines, been in prisons, naval warships and behind the scenes at the Principality Stadium."

Alison is very supportive of the #Thisisme campaign: "I believe the fire and rescue service should be more reflective of society. There are great opportunities for girls and women to work in a rewarding career that provides a very varied work life as part of an amazing team. Women should never say they can't do something. We all have different skills and experiences that we can bring to this role and I would like to see more girls and women encouraged to think of becoming a firefighter as an option for a lifelong career. "

For more information on joining the fire service visit: <http://www.southwales-fire.gov.uk/English/careers/Pages/Together.aspx>