



CFOA
Chief Fire Officers
Association



**Avon Fire & Rescue Service
Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge**

Final Report

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1. Introduction, context and purpose

Introduction

This report captures the outcomes and presents the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA's) Fire Peer Challenge at Avon Fire and Rescue Service (AFRS) in March 2015. Fire peer challenge is part of sector led improvement and took place from the 16 – 19 March 2015.

The report provides detailed information on the following key focus areas:

- Outcomes for citizens
- Leadership and Governance
- Organisational capacity
- Community Risk Management
- Prevention
- Protection
- Response
- Training & Development
- Call Management & Incident Support
- Health & Safety

The peer challenge was very comprehensive and consisted of a range of on-site activities including:

- Interviews and focus groups with a wide range of AFRS staff, partners and stakeholders
- Visits and focus groups including visits to two fire stations, training premises and the fire control centre
- Challenge and testing of specific processes and systems

During the time in AFRS the peer team were well looked after and everyone the team met were fully engaged with the process and open and honest.

The peer team also undertook background reading provided to them in advance, including the AFRS Operational Assessment (OpA) and key supporting documentation.

The evidence and feedback gathered was assimilated into broad themes and was verbally presented on the final day of the peer challenge.

Context and purpose

The OpA self-assessment process is designed to:

- Form a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement within the Fire and Rescue Service
- Provide elected members and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust

In addition to undertaking OpA self-assessment the sector led peer challenge process aims to help Fire Authorities strengthen local accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services. Fire Peer Challenge is a voluntary process that is managed by and delivered for the sector. It is not a form of sector led inspection and is a mechanism to provide fire authorities and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust.

AFRS has been planning and implementing an 'Invest for the Future' programme that is designed to protect operational services in the face of financial austerity. It has been proactive in managing its assets to achieve these aims and to take advantages of financial savings. The Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) also faces the prospect of significant change at leadership level as the chair of the fire authority is standing down after 34 years, having been Chair of Avon Fire Authority since its creation in 1996, and previously being Chair of the Public Protection Committee. Other membership changes may arise as a result of local authority elections in May.

The purpose of the peer challenge was to complement the AFRS Operational Self Assessment by providing external challenge to help identify strengths and areas that the Service may wish to explore as part of its improvement journey.

2. The Peer Challenge Team

Fire peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. Peers are at the heart of the peer challenge process. They help Services with their improvement and learning by providing a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

The peer challenge team for the AFRS peer challenge was:

- **Des Prichard** (Team Leader) - Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive - East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service
- **Joy Brindle** - Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service
- **Guy Keen** – Head of Community Fire Protection, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service
- **Jason Kirby** - Group Manager, North East Lincolnshire Community Protection Unit Manager, Humberside Fire and Rescue Service
- **Sharon Milner** – Performance Analyst, East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service
- **Darrell Pulk** – Chair Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Authority and LGA Fire Services Management Committee
- **Bob Ross** – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

3. Outcomes

Strengths

- Strong political leadership and effective engagement with constituent authorities
- Frontline changes to date have been phased, well-managed and have had little impact on operational services
- Good partnership working with a diverse range of partners
- 'Big picture' system is a useful tool for targeting activities
- Wider contribution to safeguarding vulnerable people and 'potential' victims of hate crimes

Areas to explore

- Are you ambitious in your target setting?
- Is there an emphasis on operational response that impacts other services?
- An opportunity to place prevention at the core of service delivery

AFRS has clear and simple statements of its mission, vision and values. These are underpinned by three key corporate objectives which appropriately cover how the Service will protect the community it serves, ensure value for money in how it does this and how it will care for its own people. These key principles have been followed by AFRS in the planning of its financial savings and its "Investing for the Future" programme. Although considerable changes to the Service and financial reductions have been implemented, great care has been taken to protect operational response services.

The area covered by AFRS is diverse and covers four separate unitary authorities. This theoretically has the potential to lead to tensions within the FRA as regards the demand for services in each of these authorities and which could also be exacerbated by party political considerations. It is praiseworthy that such tensions have not been allowed to develop and there has been good inter-party working and a consensus approach to secure good outcomes across the whole area served.

The Service is successful in supplementing its own resources and in working to achieve community outcomes through a wide range of partnership activity at both strategic and operational level. These include traditional activities such as road safety but also extend to a direct financial contribution to and involvement with local safeguarding boards, working directly with organisations that support vulnerable people or those requiring basic life skills together with those who may be the target for 'hate' crimes.

To achieve successful outcomes AFRS utilises a range of tools including the effective use of MOSAIC. The peer team found good use being made of the 'Big Picture' tool that provides data in a format that enables targeted community risk reduction activities. This is allied to the pilot approach of devolving more authority to station managers who have the local knowledge and links to improve community safety outcomes. This pilot approach is discussed in greater detail later in the report.

There are two aspects that AFRS may wish to consider as regards the overall delivery of its services:

Firstly, the vision and mission of the Service are clear but consideration could be given as to whether targets set are truly stretching and whether more ambitious targets could help it achieve its aims even more effectively

Secondly, the Service has to balance many demands and to ensure an overall balance of operational services, risk management, protection and prevention. The saving requirements imposed upon the Service have made achieving this balance even more challenging. The Service will shortly be undertaking the next phase of its financial planning and entering into a period where there are likely to be new members on the FRA. It would seem an opportune time for the Service to consider whether there has been an emphasis on operational response that has impacted other services in a way that has affected this overall balance.

The team met staff who were totally committed to the prevention agenda. In discussions with staff and partners, there was a recognition of the benefit of prevention activities, not only to reduce the incidence of fires and road traffic collisions, but also to bring about wider community safety and health and well-being benefits.

4. Leadership and Governance

Strengths

- The organisation is led by an experienced and well respected Chairman
- Good inter-party working and consensus approach within the Fire and Rescue Authority
- Good member – officer relationships with range of formal and informal meetings
- Effective relationship with FBU and an emphasis on staff consultation
- Effective engagement at the political level across all four unitaries
- Difficult budget decisions have been handled decisively

Areas to explore

- Potential changes to FRA membership
- Opportunity to explore new member arrangements including whether forums become part of formal governance
- Consideration be given to the membership of the Special Purposes Committee
- Scope for 'sharpening' scrutiny function and challenge
- Member attendance at all Fire Authority meeting, which in some instances was described as 'patchy'
- Maximise strategic opportunities for joint working with other blue light services
- Ensure clear accountability and 'audit trail' for action plans

The FRA and AFRS have benefited from a long period of political leadership stability under a very experienced and well-respected Chairman who has served the Authority for 34 years. This has been of considerable benefit to the overall leadership, stability and governance of the FRA and AFRS. In addition there is clear evidence of co-operative working to ensure effective collective leadership across all political parties on the FRA.

An inclusive approach is evident in other layers and aspects of AFRS. The peer team noted that there are good and effective relationships between officers of AFRS and the FRA. This is supported not only by the professionalism of those involved but also by ensuring that there is a good range of informal meetings/ briefings to supplement the formal processes of governance.

This approach is not restricted to senior officer/ member relationships. The peer team spoke to a wide variety of staff at different levels within the Service, many of whom felt well informed and enjoyed good two - way communication. It is noticeable that despite the financial pressures upon the Service there are still good relations with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and good consultation with them.

All of these factors have helped to nurture effective leadership and governance of the Service. However, no matter how effective the governance structures there is always a need to be able to make decisive decisions within these structures when circumstances demand. The leadership has shown in the implementation of its 'Invest for the Future' programme that it is willing and has the capability to do this.

The FRA and the Service will be entering into a 'new era' very shortly when the present Chairman stands down at the next local government elections. These elections may also create other changes to FRA membership. Although the governance arrangements to date have been effective there is now an opportunity for them to be reviewed to see whether some changes would add benefit, particularly in the areas of audit and scrutiny, and to encourage wider member participation.

In particular the peer team would suggest that three areas are explored:

- There are a number of member/ officer forums which are used for discussion regarding policy and operational issues. These forums are inconsistent as regards their purpose, attendance etc. and they do not form part of the formal governance arrangements. Consideration should be given as to whether making these forums a formal part of the governance arrangements with clear terms of reference would aid decision making and accountability. By giving a specific role to the forums and raising their status it may also help to improve member attendance at meetings.
- The peer team saw little evidence of an audit and scrutiny function. As effective audit and scrutiny provides an opportunity for members to examine in detail proposed actions and contribute to policy making, consideration should be given as to whether an audit and scrutiny function could be better embedded and 'sharpened' within the FRA
- Many key issues are considered and recommendations made by the Special Purposes Committee. The membership of this committee is small consisting of the leaders of the three political parties on the FRA. An extension of membership would again allow for greater member involvement and exploration of issues.

The responsibility of members and senior officers obviously extends beyond internal management and into relationship management with partners. The peer team saw many examples of good 'on the ground' co-operation but the arrangements for the development of strategic initiatives and developing joint working with other blue light services was not clear.

In view of the wide range of initiatives, strategic developments, financial and operational pressures the Service should also be certain that it has clear accountability and audit trails for each of these and that these are understood by all.

5. Corporate Capacity

Strengths

- Proactive approach to resource management under the 'Investing For The Future' programme
- Well thought through station re-location programme that has protected response and is achieving savings
- Overall savings targets achieved
- Prudent approach to borrowing and reserves
- Proactive approach to realising capital receipts to assist financial pressures
- Professional and enthusiastic staff with a real pride in the service

Areas to explore

- Determine and focus on your key priorities
- Consider possibility of more innovative approach to future bidding opportunities
- Severn Park training facility has significant capacity – how will you maximise the remaining time of the PFI contract
- Link between emerging workforce development and IRMP is not yet clear
- Early consideration of MTFS for post 2017/18
- Further consideration of organisational structure to liberate capacity

AFRS has had to face significant financial challenges already and is anticipating more of these in the near future. Tackling these challenges has been co-ordinated primarily through the 'Invest for the Future' programme. Effective planning and implementation has gone into this programme and through a proactive approach (particularly as regards the management and location of its station and headquarters assets together with targeted staff reductions) AFRS is in the process of achieving the required savings with little impact on operational services.

There is also a prudent approach to borrowing and financial reserves. A policy of limiting borrowing to 6% of annual budget has been adopted to manage debt and interest payments. In addition the Service has maintained a good balance between identifying reserves for future contingencies and not stifling current services of required funds. It has prudently established separate reserves for austerity, Investing in the Future and other pressures. These are anticipated to be in the combined region of £4.9m at the end of the 2014/15 financial year.

The Service anticipates that it will utilise £4 million of reserves over the next four years. This could begin to place a strain upon reserves but the service is also managing a portfolio of potential capital receipts (including the current high value HQ site) which will help ease this pressure. However, regardless of the potential capital receipts early consideration should be given to putting in place a medium term financial strategy for the post 2017/18 era.

Although the Service has extended the replacement cycle for its fleet this is within appropriate limits and no significant shortfalls in fleet or equipment were identified during the peer challenge.

Apart from the financial and tangible assets the peer team also found an overwhelming culture of pride and professionalism amongst staff and this is greatly helping the service overcome the challenges it faces.

The financial situation created by the government's austerity measures obviously creates both financial and capacity pressures. This is exacerbated by the Service's own desire to maintain services and, where possible, expand them at the same time as undertaking large scale projects such as station re-locations and refurbishment, move of HQ premises etc. Although this desire is

understandable and, indeed, commendable it is important that capacity does not become over-stretched and there is a need to ensure that there is a focus on the agreed key priorities.

AFRS has already been successful in supplementing its resources by the winning of external funding. Bidding regimes such as the governments' transformation funding are becoming increasingly competitive. The Service will need to consider how to present increasingly innovative projects/ bids if it is to continue its bidding success.

One of the key assets of the Service is its impressive Severn Park training facility. This provides very significant training capacity. However, there are two associated issues in that the full capacity of the training centre is not being utilised but the financial commitment is fixed by the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract for the next 13 years. Consideration needs to be given as to how to maximise and develop the use of the centre for the remaining time of the PFI.

Another key and critical resource is the actual workforce. There is no formal written workforce development strategy to support the organisation as it works to implement the 'Investing for the Future' programme. As this workforce development strategy is being developed there should be clear links to the requirements of the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP). Although the Service has recently undergone some re-structuring (partly to assist with its financial savings requirements) further consideration could also be given to the organisational structure to liberate further capacity.

6. Community Risk Management (including business continuity management)

Strengths

- IRMP identifies risk across each unitary area and describes the risk assessment process
- A range of tools and data are used to assess risk and target action
- Good evidence in children's and young persons action plan of engagement with unitary managers to take local risk into account and take action
- Local empowerment pilots have potential to drive down risk locally ('SM is CFO of local area')
- Community Support Team created (to be supplemented by volunteers)
- Evidence of good engagement with other local agencies to help identify and reduce risks

Areas to explore

- Community Risk Reduction Strategy is high level and appears to be aspirational, without strongly evidenced underpinning plans to achieve this aspiration
- Some action plans to deliver the Community Risk Reduction strategy are still being developed or are relatively new
- The action plans could be more visible in the organisation
- Some evidence that the evaluation of preventative initiatives has reduced (important if you are looking to be commissioned)

The IRMP covers the period 2012-15 and is currently being refreshed. There is also evidence of a comprehensive thought process to develop the next IRMP and this is set out in a 'mind map' based on a PESTEL analysis.

The current IRMP provides a high level overview of the risks across the whole AFRS operating area and lists the main risks within each of the unitary areas covered e.g. heritage sites in Bath and North East Somerset, flooding in Bristol etc. Good use is made of a range of tools and data to determine these risks including the Fire Service Emergency Cover Toolkit (FSEC), MOSAIC, community engagement activities and deprivation and demographic data.

Sitting under the IRMP is the Community Risk Reduction Strategy 2014-17. This covers the areas of Prevention and Protection. There is a sister document, the Operational Response Strategy, covering response. It is intended that unitary area plans then translate strategy at a local level. However, the latest Unitary Area Plans appear to be for 2013 – 14

The Community Risk Reduction Strategy references some of the community risks identified in the IRMP including the types of people considered most vulnerable. The strategy sets out four themes for prevention and protection: vulnerable adults, children and young people, safety of buildings and partnership and community working. A useful circular diagram lists some of the actions/ sub themes e.g. fire setter interventions.

It was noted that the Community Risk Reduction Strategy is high level and to a degree aspirational. It is understood that detailed action plans will be prepared to implement the strategy. Only one was made available to the peer team so it is not possible to comment on their status or quality. The one supplied was for Children and Young People and had SMART targets but the Community Risk Reduction Strategy and action plans appear quite new. It was also noted that one action is to establish effective process and performance measures which again indicates that the plans are new.

There is an interesting approach being piloted to improve community risk management through the empowerment of local Station Managers. This was described to the peer team as making the Station Manager 'the Chief Fire Officer of the station area'. Under this approach Station Managers would decide how time will be spent within the overall strategy/ constraints set at the corporate level. In an activity diagram shown to the team for one station, half of available time was left 'free' for the Station Manager to make decisions about what interventions are best for that area taking account of local risks.

A station reference guide has been produced for the community safety function although this is very new (March 2015). It sets out principles of 'an ownership of area' and states that Station Managers will be responsible for preparing station role profiles and developing interventions linked to corporate objectives.

The approach is being piloted in a number of stations and will obviously require testing and monitoring.

A Community Support Team has been created. This comprises staff working extra hours to deliver community safety interventions. In turn the staff are to be supplemented by community volunteers. This approach is designed to create more capacity to offset reductions in community safety staffing. It is intended that this team work both on a wide range of direct activities and also be used to enhance partnership working. The peer team viewed this as a creative approach although still quite new.

The peer team was asked to examine the approach to Business Continuity Management (BCM). The team found that BCM policies and procedures are in place with some good elements but that BCM is not embedded across the organisation and should have clear ownership to help make this happen. There does not appear to be a consistent process for recording and learning from business interruptions although such interruptions have been managed appropriately.

Some aspects of the BCM policies and procedures are relatively old e.g. the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is dated 2005 and describes BCM as a project being undertaken. This is likely to be because introducing a coherent approach to BCM would have been a project after the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act. However the SOP could be updated to reflect BCM as "business as usual". Some of the statutory guidance mentioned in the SOP has been superseded.

The peer team also felt that the documents (particularly the SOP) are complex and with a considerable amount of narrative. Some of this is useful but the SOP also describes the overall organisational approach to risk management which could be confusing and makes the engagement with the procedure difficult.

A possible cause of the absence of complete embedding of BCM is that there have been various changes as to who is responsible for this. It would be helpful to have a period of stability in this respect and for BCM to be driven forward in a well-documented manner. A Station Manager post is being created to have oversight of BCM and this dedicated time is important. However, further embedding BCM will also require full corporate commitment at the senior management level.

Another particular issue to be considered is that written BCM plans in respect of industrial action are heavily reliant upon external assistance. AFRS must ensure that such assistance can be guaranteed and if not, amend plans accordingly.

7. Prevention

Strengths

- New App to support Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSV) is high quality and innovative
- Community Risk Management Strategy identifies high level themes for prevention work
- Data and Big Picture are used to target prevention activity
- Police community risk profiles shared with station teams
- Partnership working on HFSVs (referrals and delivery)
- Good use of social media

Areas to explore

- Reduction of accidental dwelling fires has been achieved but the reduction is not as high as many other FRS's
- Level of community safety activity has reduced
- Empowerment approach is positive but untested- need to identify the specific outcomes you are looking to achieve with prevention activities, and have a clear understanding of the volume and quality you intend to deliver
- Review methodology for targeting home safety visits to ensure it is well documented, clear, effective and commensurate with the risk
- Changes of personnel involved in partnership liaison can be disruptive
- Evaluation of activities

The key themes for prevention activities are set out in the Community Risk Management Strategy, which also covers Protection.

Performance and risk data is supplied to senior managers, members and staff to enable strategic and tactical decisions to be made. The Performance Improvement Unit (PIU) has a range of effective tools which are used to create intelligence relevant to Prevention activities. Tactical assessments are prepared on a quarterly basis for the whole of the AFRS area. These show performance trends and detailed information such as the percentage of domestic fires where alcohol consumption was a contributory factor.

In addition, police community risk profiles are shared with station teams. All these types of information have potential to enhance local prevention activity.

Performance outcome indicators (e.g. deaths, injuries, all fires etc.) are showing demonstrable improvement. The Service does benchmark its performance on key fire outcomes against its family group, which is good practice. However, the benchmarking section of the Service's scorecard presents performance against the *average* in the family group, and shows performance as "green" if it is better than the average. This may mean the Service is missing the opportunity to compare against the *best* performers in the family group, or the best performers nationally according to the Fire Statistics Monitor.

In terms of reducing accidental dwelling fires AFRS has consistently reduced these over a 10-year period but not to the same degree as the best performers nationally. This particular indicator should be kept under review given the change in approach to targeting community risk reduction activities.

There appears to be no mention of the latest tactical assessments in the new station guide and it may be helpful to make clear what data sources are available to help Station Managers make informed decisions regarding their local area.

A particularly innovative approach (and an example of notable practice) is the development of a HSFV App. When rolled out later in 2015, this will:

- Assist firefighters to deliver HFSV ensuring consistency of approach along with the opportunity to tailor for specific needs identified at the start of the visit (i.e. children in dwelling or not in dwelling)
- Provide pictorial, graphical and video representation to assist in delivery of the key messages
- Have potential for further development, e.g. as a self led app

Regarding HFSV, the methodology for targeting these is not clearly documented. Performance data shows that HFSVs are monitored but no target is currently set. In 2012/13 (when targets were set) the Service missed its HFSV target by 53%. The following year the target was removed and 7,000 visits were delivered against 15,000 the year before. This was explained to the team as a deliberate choice coinciding with a move from a blanket 'numbers' approach to a more sophisticated targeting approach.

The new approach could be effective and target those identified as being most vulnerable– but care should be taken to evidence at a corporate level whether the most vulnerable people are being reached. This is about balancing the local “empowerment” approach with keeping a good handle on targeting at the corporate level through a clearly stated risk based policy which is regularly monitored.

Firefighters indicated that they do engage with vulnerable people particularly through referrals from housing agencies, hospitals etc. However they did also state that they are still required to do HSFV in affluent low risk areas through leads generated through very wide ranging publicity campaigns.

8. Protection

Strengths

- Strong performance as regards enforcement and prosecutions
- Strong evidence of influencing fire safety in the built environment e.g. sprinklers
- Early adoption of Primary authority partnership and the “Coach to comply” ethos demonstrates a commitment to the regulatory reform agenda
- Wide use of RP11 for information sharing between Ops and Technical Fire Safety
- Some good examples of corporate communications being used to promote fire safety

Areas to explore

- No documented risk based strategy
- Consider need to enhance protection knowledge at the more senior levels in the organisation
- RP11 process limited and cannot be audited or tracked (paper based and fax)
- Risk information systems do not talk to each other effectively
- Investment in Green Book technical fire safety officers could offer opportunities for greater efficiency and more resilient succession

AFRS has a wide variety of protection activities and a Technical Fire Safety capacity that comprises four teams within a centralised unit to address functional areas of technical fire safety. The unit is particularly active and has strong performance as regards prosecutions and enforcement in its protection activities. This strength has been recognised externally as evidenced by AFRS providing training in this area to Shropshire FRS.

The protection service is also active in improving protection at an early stage of building development and has developed good relations with the building control departments in the four unitary authorities it covers. This has allowed it to influence positively fire safety in the built environment such as influencing the installation of sprinkler systems in new-build and re-development projects e.g. Broadmead shopping development, purpose built student accommodation etc. The Service also hosts regular Sprinkler seminars to try to broaden the range of persons engaged.

There is a clear commitment to the regulatory reform agenda. The Service was an early adopter of the Primary Authority Scheme in order to provide businesses with good regulatory advice. A 'Coach to comply' ethos has been adopted across Technical Fire Safety (Inspecting officers & crews) to focus on supporting business compliance with fire safety legislation. The Enforcement Policy sets some high level aims for targeting risk but is not underpinned by a more detailed risk based audit strategy or programme that provides direction for the targeting of technical fire safety activity.

Information Sharing between Technical Fire Safety and other functions, particularly Operational crews and the Control room, is generally good with wide and regular use of the RP11 form to pass risk information both to and from Technical Fire Safety. There is a simple but effective form of sign off to evidence that watches have been briefed on RP11 risk information. However, whilst the RP11 process is widely used it is a paper-based process that currently relies on faxing to communicate risk critical information in a timely fashion. The limitations of this approach are an inability to track and audit the process. Some work has begun on producing an electronic version of the process to overcome the above limitations though it would be prudent to ensure that some of the strengths of the existing paper process are retained i.e. simplicity and ease of use.

Corporate Communications provide good support and target fire safety campaigns to the appropriate audiences with good use of MOSAIC to identify main audience groups and then produce fire safety leaflets in the appropriate languages e.g. Turkish, Mandarin & Bengali for a recent restaurant fire safety campaign.

There is evidence that risk information on the same premises is fed into a number of separate systems that do not communicate with one another. This creates the potential that in a worst case situation risk critical information could be known to the organisation but not available to others in the organisation. It appears that some of the premises risk information held in some of the services systems is not being utilised to increase the effectiveness of risk based targeting for Technical Fire Safety activity.

Targeting of technical fire safety activity is led by expertise at lower levels within the organisation (Technical Fire Safety Watch Managers). There appears to be an absence of Technical Fire Safety experience at Senior levels and consequently a relative lack of understanding, scrutiny and direction at Senior levels with the Service, e.g. officers were unable to demonstrate awareness of the current CFA Business Fire Safety Strategy or how Avon FRS was aligned to it's national priorities. Additionally Technical Fire Safety has had 2 Station Manager changes within a relatively short time period (4 years) and would likely benefit from some stability. It would be prudent to ensure that the Workforce Development Strategy takes account of the succession risks of this expertise being held by a single individual in the Service and also consider the benefits of building capacity at higher levels in order to secure the future strategic direction of Technical Fire Safety within AFRS.

9. Response

Strengths

- Response standards linked to IRMP and are being achieved
- Good operational de-brief and monitoring process
- Strong praise by partners as to FRS commitment to supporting the LRF and JESSIP
- Strong involvement in MTFA
- ILO network has been developed well with Avon FRS playing a lead role across the SW region
- RDS availability is good and supported by the Rappel system
- USAR arrangements appear to be a model way of working with highly skilled and dedicated staff

Areas to explore

- You are comfortably meeting your response standards - which we believe are sound - but are there opportunities to review how you deliver against these standards
- Service response to automatic fire alarms
- Further development of high absence level operating

AFRS has clear response standards linked to its IRMP which are appropriate for the area it serves and proportionate to risk. The main standards are first appliance attendance within 8 minutes for category 1 areas, 10 minutes for category 2 and 15 minutes for category 3. The Service has a good record in achieving these standards and they have been taken fully into account in the station re-location programme. Performance against the standards continues to be high even with reducing numbers of personnel/appliances.

In view of the fact that the response standards are being met comfortably the Service may wish to consider ways to maintain its standards but create additional efficiencies within the delivery of them.

The Service has good monitoring methods to examine its performance and undertakes operational de-briefs to examine any lessons learned. Debrief reports are produced by the intelligence unit and considered at the Service delivery meeting, subsequently feeding operational exercise planning and the Training Needs Analysis via the Training Management Group. Performance reports are generated and discussed at weekly update meetings with unitary managers and individual performance sheets are produced for each station including reporting against response standards at station level.

The Service takes a variety of actions and has devoted resources to ensuring that it does not act in isolation from relevant partners and other agencies, An Inter Liaison Officer (ILO) network has been established and is used to promote joint understanding of resource capability, joint working and generally fostering good partnership relations.

This approach to joint working is also evidenced in the Service's active participation in the Local Resilience Forum and Joint Emergency Services' Interoperability Programme. Good consideration has been given to response to marauding terrorist firearms attack training including considering how the fire control staff should operate in such an incident. This joint working approach extends to a willingness to share resources such as the hovercraft at Weston – super – Mare which is primarily used by the Service to aid people stuck in mud but which is also made available to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and is part of the Service's resource for flooding issues

The Retained Duty System (RDS) works well and the peer team were impressed by the professionalism and commitment of those they met. There is a centralised Resource Planning Unit that is used to forecast resource availability and draw attention to any likely deficiencies. This is supplemented by control staff utilising actual crewing figures provided by stations for individual shifts and the use of the RAPPEL system which allows individuals to state accurately their 'real-time' availability. Successful application of these procedures and systems has led to high levels of Retained Station availability.

AFRS forms part of the national response resource for Urban Search and Rescue (USAR). This is a dedicated unit that spends a high proportion of its time on training to ensure that it is fully capable of dealing with a wide variety of situations. The unit is based at the Nailsea station which is good for assisting with inter-service relations, communications etc. but care is taken to ensure that the specialist skills of the unit are not diluted.

The mobilisation policy for Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs) has recently been revised resulting in a reduction in the weight of response through specific periods in the day. This has reduced appliance movements significantly and created capacity for other activities, specifically operational training. In order for AFRS to realise the full potential of this work they must continue to work towards reducing the number of unwanted fire signals in its area which are higher than the family group/national average and whilst it is acknowledged they the Service is reducing these this reduction is at lower rate than that of other services.

Good work has been undertaken to establish fit for purpose High Absence Level Operating procedures (HALO) following an initial over reliance on national asset availability. The section 16 arrangements with South Wales Fire & Rescue are now in place and a cadre of auxiliary firefighters has been recruited with further development well underway beyond basic fire-fighting skills (Blue light driving, Breathing Apparatus). Senior management has proposed that this be developed further with the possibility of establishing zero hours contracts, a cadet service and possible apprenticeships routes to secure individual availability. Following these proposals through would aid the resilience of AFRS still further.

10. Health and Safety

Strengths

- A health and safety audit in 2013 has been a big driver for improvement
- Good management of road risk e.g. reducing reversing accidents (exemplar)
- Increasing emphasis on embedding a health and safety culture
- Good awareness of areas for improvement
- Support for general health and well being
- Safe contractor list created with built in health and safety requirements

Areas to explore

- Ensure strong action when health and safety targets are not met
- Importance of accurate record keeping does not seem fully recognised
- There are cultural and ICT barriers to record keeping
- Improve controls over data input
- Document control vulnerability with duplication and contradiction
- ARA process is not meeting its full potential to enhance fire fighter safety

AFRS undertook a comprehensive health and safety audit in 2013 that has made significant inroads to improving the organisation's awareness and processes for health and safety. The audit was led by its own Health and Safety officer who was recruited from the Health and Safety Executive. The findings of the audit were captured in a comprehensive action plan with clear targets against areas where improvement was required. The audit continues to be a significant driver of change that is visible in a number of current and developing plans.

Particularly noteworthy is the strong performance in the Management of Road Risk (MoRR). This is evidenced by the excellent reduction of reversing accidents as a consequence of thorough and innovative interventions targeting internal and external contributory factors e.g. a no blame culture focusing on supporting and educating staff to improve, use of 'Big Picture' to geographically target accident hotspots and tackling issues such as parking that obstructs the access of fire appliances.

It was evident that Senior Managers across the organisation are committed to embedding a health and safety culture and the peer team found a clear understanding of the importance of health and safety at all levels of the service. This extends to consultations with the FBU. There was also evidence of a holistic approach to health, safety and well-being with many forms of support for staff who require assistance with issues such as stress etc.

AFRS had identified health and safety issues resulting from contractors employed by the Service and has robustly addressed this by a combination of controls including the creation of a Safe Contractor List. This comprises identified contractors based upon evidence of good health and safety standards. All contractors are required to sign up to the Service's health and safety policy before commencing work and all contractors are required to provide written risk assessments and method statements before commencing work.

A number of actions set following the 2013 Audit are still in the process of being addressed. There is evidence of failure to hit some important health and safety targets e.g. risk critical training. However, work is ongoing to overcome the gaps and this includes the establishing of a 'crew based' training model. . A benefit of this approach is that crews who work together undertake realistic training together in a safe, controlled environment improving cohesion within the team. The approach is run alongside close management by the Resource Planning Unit to ensure attendance is optimised through the use of detachments, forecast in advance. This helps ensure that individuals who previously may not have attended have access to important training events

Monitoring against health and safety targets is important and this also extends to the recording of health and safety activities, recording of training etc. It was not apparent that the importance of record keeping was fully appreciated. As regards recording of training there is also a need to ensure that this captures the syllabus of the training.

The H&S Manager demonstrated a good understanding for the need of document control and a suitable procedure has been written. However, the procedure has not been fully adopted across the Service and there are significant document control vulnerabilities e.g. the duplication and contradiction of having old Brigade Orders frequently being accessed alongside the newer Standard operating Procedures.

The Analytical Risk Assessment (ARA) process is not meeting its full potential to enhance fire fighter safety. In practice it appears that the task of ARA completion is delegated to an appliance driver who is frequently remote from both the risks and the Incident Commander. The nature of the ARA form makes it impractical to complete as part of a fire-ground safety audit and does not make it practically portable in order that it can be sighted and signed off by the Incident Commander. It was unclear, therefore, how the ARA process is adding to the effectiveness of operational tactics and whether it is fulfilling its full potential to enhance firefighter safety during incidents. Consequently the ARA process lacks credibility at operational level and does not appear to have the buy-in of firefighters and junior officers.

11 Training and Development

Strengths

- A wide range of realistic training facilities are available for operational staff
- Crew based training
- Reported high levels of satisfaction with training
- RDS core training time protected with other tasks being undertaken outside of drill time
- Range of instructor level skills provided for RDS and whole time staff
- MOST system widely reported as an improvement in reporting and monitoring of training
- Good improvements in ADC process

Areas to explore

- Workforce development strategy is at an early stage and requires 'whole organisation buy in'
- Lack of a clear **corporate** training needs analysis
- The approach to succession planning and training to support this is unclear
- A more rigorous approach to CPD
- Need to maximise attendance on courses and utilise the full capacity of all training facilities
- Continuation of ADC process

A strength already mentioned is the high quality training facilities at Severn Park. These allow for a wide range of training activities for operational staff. Another strength mentioned is the 'crew based' approach to training. This ensures that those who have to operate together receive the same 'real-time' training and can easily share their learning, queries etc. as well as discussing how they would respond as a crew. The levels of satisfaction with training reported to the peer team were high.

Care is also taken to ensure that RDS core training is not affected by other necessary activities e.g. 'paperwork'. Regular drill time is used solely for training purposes and is actively protected for this purpose.

To help ensure the maximum effectiveness of drill time training the Service has a network of station-based instructors who have achieved a Level 3 Teaching and Learning Award, Best Practice Assessor (BPA) and IOSH qualifications. This network delivers various aspects of specialist training e.g. breathing apparatus, specialist appliances, road traffic collision (RTC) skills and trauma care.

As captured in a 2013 Health & Safety Audit there were issues with the capturing of training information, records etc. The peer team found that most people recognised the Maintenance of Skills Training (MOST) system as a significant improvement in doing this although there were some frustrations at station level with the reliability of the software and the time taken to input the relevant data. Credibility of the system with end users at station level is vital in ensuring accurate training records are reflected and inputted. The peer team found evidence of engagement (e-mails) between systems administrators and station personnel to improve the system.

An active approach has been taken to enhancing Assessment and Development Centre processes and training. AFRS has benefitted from the employment of an Occupational Psychiatrist for a number of years which has helped development. Work in this area has benefitted other Services nationally with contribution to guidance documentation through the Skills for Justice website. As this member of staff has now left the organisation there is a risk that performance and future development in this arena could suffer.

The peer team was asked to examine the emerging workforce development strategy. However, this was found to be at a very early stage and beyond the team supporting the creation of such a strategy it is not possible to comment. However, it is essential for the success of any such strategy that it enjoys full corporate support and is not left to an individual or group to devise in isolation from the rest of the service.

Another area where corporate strategy could be enhanced is in the creation of a corporate training needs analysis. Although this analysis exists at individual level no overall corporate strategy was evident. Clearly this needs to dovetail with the emerging workforce development strategy.

The lack of these two strategies also means that it was hard for the peer team to determine the Service's approach to succession planning and what training steps are being taken to support this.

AFRS has a simple agreement in place for payment linked to Continual Professional Development (CPD) but which only requires personnel to 'sign up' to the Service values. There is a recognition that more can be achieved through a review of this agreement and work is underway to link CPD payments to achievement of Level 2 foundation skills. The peer team consider that there is a much greater opportunity for AFRS through a more rigorous approach to determine CPD payments, for example, by linking to:

- Maintenance of Operational Competency;
- Achievement and maintenance of fitness standards;
- Achievement and maintenance of attendance standards;

12 Call Management and Incident Report

Strengths

- Good relations with operational staff
- Good regular meetings with senior management
- Evacuation vehicle provides resilience
- Improving training facilities for control
- Educational visits to police and ambulance controls undertaken
- Familiarity visits when new equipment introduced
- Staff consistency and experience
- Regular inclusion in operational debriefing

Areas to explore

- No clear relationship with alarm monitoring centres
- More stringent action against 'repeat offenders'
- Scope for further AFA reductions – use of CFOA guidance could be considered
- Divert of emergency calls to back-up fire and rescue service by BT not sufficiently robust

The peer team visited the control centre at Lansdown. It was good to note that staff there did not feel any sense of isolation from operational staff and enjoyed good relations with them. In addition they stated that they had regular meetings with senior management that allowed for two-way feedback, exchange of ideas etc. Fire control staff are also regularly included in operational de-briefings.

Considerable thought has also been given to fire control resilience. This includes the establishment of an evacuation vehicle and procedure that ensures the functions of the fire control centre can continue to operate even if it has to evacuate its permanent building.

There also is a very good emphasis on training. It has been identified that the physical layout of the control centre is not ideal for training purposes and alterations are being made to create a more specialised training area. In addition fire control staff have undertaken familiarisation visits to other blue light control centres. The peer team was pleased to note that when new equipment is introduced that fire control staff have the opportunity to view this and understand its full capability.

The professionalism of the staff was evident and this is enhanced by the fact that there has been a period of great stability in staffing although some changes are 'on the horizon'.

There are two aspects that the peer team noted should be taken forward. The first relates to automatic fire alarms where steps could be taken to reduce the number of automatic fire alarm calls responded to by the adoption of CFOA guidelines, building enhanced relations with alarm monitoring centres (it was reported that some of these centres routinely state that key holders cannot be contacted) and the taking of more rigorous steps against 'repeat offenders'.

The team also heard that although there is a 'back up' system for calls to be diverted to a partner FRS the technical system supplied was not sufficiently robust. It should be noted that the peer team was not able to examine this whilst on site and the comment is included in case AFRS wish to examine this further.

Conclusions and key findings

It is clear that AFRS has a pride in its services and has had a focus on maintaining its operational response services in a difficult financial climate. It must ensure that it also maintains its balance of prevention, protection and response to meet the authority's ambition and emerging community safety and well-being needs.

Not only is the Service facing financial challenges but it is also entering a period of change at its most senior political leadership levels. This will mean the loss of well-respected and knowledgeable members (including the Chairman) but this can also be used as an opportunity for a review of member arrangements to increase challenge and participation.

The continuation of the 'Investing in the Future' programme and taking this into the next round of austerity measures is a good response to the challenges faced. The service has shown it has the ability to be effective in its resource management and this approach should continue. However, it does need to formalise and embed its business resilience and workforce development strategies.

The peer team were impressed with the overall pride and professionalism of the service. It was also very notable that an inclusive approach by management is appreciated by staff at all levels and by partner organisation

This report provides numerous points of detail both of strengths and areas for further consideration. To help AFRS continue its improvement and development journey the peer team suggests that the following broad themes be considered:

- Leadership at both political and officer level remain committed to providing an effective service to all local communities across Avon focussed on prevention - whilst maintaining protection and response services to meet community needs
- That early consideration is given to the continuing impact on public service funding pressures beyond the current plans to 2017/18

- AFRS continues to refine its performance data collation and benchmarks performance against other FRSs to support continuous improvement
- Members use opportunities to consider their governance arrangements, including enhancing the audit and scrutiny function

The Peer Review Team has identified a number of areas across AFRS which we believe would benefit from further consideration. The team were pleased to see the extremely positive way in which members and officers received the presentation at the conclusion of the Team's visit and acknowledged the issues that had been raised. This indicates a mature approach to the Peer Challenge and a willingness to seek opportunities to drive forward improvement and innovation in the Service.

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