



CFOA
Chief Fire Officers
Association



**Northamptonshire 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 Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) in June 2014.

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

Fire peer challenge is part of sector led improvement. The NFRS Fire Peer Challenge took place from the 02 – 06 June 2014.

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 NFRS staff, partners and stakeholders
- Visits and focus groups including to three fire station visits and two training premises
- Challenge and testing of specific processes and systems

During the time in NFRS 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 NFRS 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, and
- 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

NFRS has been undertaking a continuing improvement journey since an Audit Commission report rated it as a 'weak' service in 2005. This journey has included tackling identified areas of focus and priority as well as harnessing the benefits of innovation. In 2009 a further Audit Commission recognised the improvements made at that time and rated the service then as 'fair'.

The purpose of the peer challenge was to complement the NFRS Operational Self Assessment by providing external challenge to help identify further progress made 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 NFRS was:

- **Mark Hardingham**, Chief Fire Officer, Suffolk FRS
- **Ian Howell**, Group Commander, Suffolk FRS
- **Mick Crennell**, Area Manager, Hampshire FRS
- **Craig Ducat**, Group Manager, Northumberland FRS
- **Councillor Kay Hammond**, Cabinet Associate for Fire and Police Services, Surrey County Council
- **Bob Ross** – Challenge Manager, LGA

3. Outcomes

Strengths

- Good performance framework evidencing - low level of fire fatalities & injuries; significantly reduced incident numbers; strong HFSC performance
- Good examples of working with schools and young people
- Some good examples of working with partner organisations
- Growth in co-responding
- Evidence of good industrial relations
- Blue light integration delivering early outcomes

Areas to explore

- Is NFRS making best use of data and partner engagement to target limited resource on the most vulnerable?
- Improve the links with NCC ASC to maximise the benefit from FRS to vulnerable older people
- Consider appropriate timing for representation on the Health and Wellbeing Board – help to influence CCG's and bring greater benefit to wider public health agenda
- Improve on the evaluation of activity and initiatives to assess outcomes are being achieved

The Service has an established performance management framework that it uses effectively to drive service improvement. The framework supports performance against NFRS's three objectives of Public Safety, Fire-fighter Safety and Value for Money. There is strong evidence that fires and other incidents have reduced by around 50% in the last 10 years. Fire fatalities and injuries are very low and the Service has achieved its stated intention to deliver 30,000 Home Fire Safety Checks.

There are a number of good examples of the Service working closely and effectively with schools and young people. The Service recognises the value that the fire service brand and the reputation of firefighters and fire staff bring to youth engagement activity. The Service is proactive in developing these links and has instituted a very popular School Challenge fire safety competition.

Partner organisations value their engagement with the NFRS and recognise the extent to which all partners share similar aims and objectives and value the additional capacity that is created, and outcomes that can be delivered, through working together. Work on co-responding with the East Midlands Ambulance Service (EMAS) and partnership working with British Legion, Red Cross etc. are examples of this type of approach.

The partnership work with EMAS is particularly worth mentioning as it has clearly enhanced public safety. The increase in co-responding calls has been notable and there is a clear appetite to do more. This approach has also brought further benefits for those on-call firefighters who co-respond with anecdotal benefits associated with morale, retention and availability.

Both representative body groups and officers welcome the positive working relationship that exists within NFRS. Whilst there have been challenges such as the financial reductions required, and there are expected to be more of these in the future, the current arrangements for engagement are effective and well regarded. The Cabinet Member for Fire and Rescue engages regularly with unions and this adds to the sense of a shared approach to decision making.

The work on integration with the Police has now been underway for some time and there are some good signs of effective outcomes being jointly delivered. The joint work already underway with Police and Fire in fleet, training and procurement, and the soon to be established joint teams for Operations, Prevention and Protection with officers from both NFRS and Police, are examples of notable practice.

There are some examples of NFRS targeting their efforts to vulnerable people. However, with increasingly limited resources there is a need to ensure that the Service is making the best use of data from, and engagement with, partner organisations to ensure that services are consistently provided to those who are the most vulnerable.

As an integral part of Northamptonshire County Council, the FRS should ensure that it is making the best use of its proximity to colleagues in Adult Social Care. The Service should consider if it is making the best use of this relationship for sharing information about vulnerable elderly people and working together to best address their needs.

Now that responsibility for Public Health sits with the County Council, and Health and Wellbeing Boards are in place, there is an opportunity for the FRS to use its brand and reputation to help improve public health. The FRS is not currently a member of the Health and Wellbeing Board – it is suggested that, at the right time, the FRS is invited to sit on the board and to target its prevention agenda to the public health arena.

There is some evidence that community safety activity is being formally evaluated to ensure that initiatives and partnerships are working effectively and delivering the expected outcomes. However, this is not being consistently applied and more robust arrangements should be established.

4. Leadership and Governance

Strengths

- Enthusiastic and effective political leadership through portfolio holder and some examples of good member engagement
- SLT are clearly very passionate about NFRS and have great pride in what they are achieving
- There is a clear ambition for NFRS and communities centred around the 3-strands of Public Safety, Fire fighter safety and Value for Money
- There is a culture of organisational development
- Engagement between officers and members has created a clear approach to delivering savings since 2010/11 – successfully implemented
- SLT sessions with staff are securing positive engagement

Areas to explore

- Scrutiny of FRS needs development and evidence of greater effectiveness
- Greater clarity between the scrutiny function and IRMP group
- Some Members need to understand the broader role of the FRS and the balance between Ff and community safety
- Consistency and clarity of blue light interoperability beyond the blueprint is now required
- Is the FRS taking full advantage of being part of NCC (and vice versa)?
- Some staff are unclear about the vision and feel a lack of involvement with the solutions for managing ££ pressures
- Is there appropriate succession planning?

There is very strong and effective political leadership on behalf of the Fire Authority by the Cabinet Member and Assistant Cabinet Member. This leadership is evident both within the county of Northamptonshire and also within the national fire service arena where the Cabinet Member has represented the Fire Authority on several national forums.

The Chief Fire Officer and senior leadership team have a clear passion for the Service. This pride is evident to others across the Service and has been instrumental in ensuring the Service continues on its improvement journey that started several years ago under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework.

The Service has a clear vision and set of objectives. The 3-strands of Public Safety, Fire-fighter Safety and Value for Money are at the heart of everything the Service sets out to achieve and are clearly understood across the Service. The focus on firefighter safety in particular has underpinned the culture of organisational development that is evident in recent years through the development of new fire fighting techniques, incident command training and investment in appliances and equipment to support operational response.

Financial savings of more than £1m have been achieved since 2010/11. The changes to service delivery were decided by elected members and have now been fully implemented by officers. These have been realised with very limited impact on front line response services.

Further financial savings, changes to service delivery and blue light integration are just some of the issues that are being discussed with staff groups across the Service as part of the Senior Leadership Team presentations and discussion forum sessions. The feedback from these has been positive and officers should consider how to build on this strength and positive feedback.

There was little evidence of robust scrutiny of NFRS by members. The authority has established an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Working Group that provides for member engagement on the development and implementation of IRMP and also in a number of areas outside this direct remit. It is understood that this group is also intended to provide a scrutiny function. However, there exists some confusion over how this operates, its effectiveness and the relationship between this and the County Council's actual Scrutiny Committee. It is recommended that the scrutiny arrangements for the FRS be reviewed to ensure that robust and constructive scrutiny is being applied and is integral to the development of the Service. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (<http://www.cfps.org.uk/>) may be able to help with this.

The Service and Cabinet Member have engaged with members across the wider County Council. However, they should look to engage members further to ensure they are fully aware of the wider role of the modern fire and rescue service, particularly beyond the operational response role and into the fields of Prevention and their contribution to the Public Health agenda.

A great deal of effort and resource has been directed to the development and agreement of a blueprint to underpin the innovative work on blue light integration with the Police. However, possibly due to the blueprint only recently having been completed there does not appear to be a commonality of view on the vision for any integration, how it will be achieved and the associated communications. Unless this is resolved there is the potential for a considerable amount of wasted effort. It is understood that a visioning event is planned between the on-site peer challenge and the publication of this report.

Whilst the direction of travel for the FRS appears to be in the direction of other blue light partners it does currently remain part of the County Council. In doing so there is an opportunity for both the Service and the County Council to consider whether it is maximising the benefits for local communities from such a position. In particular the relationship and engagement with Adult Social Care and Public Health could be enhanced to the extent that such relationships exist with Children's Services.

Feedback from various people spoken to during the peer challenge suggests that within the FRS officers should consider how they address communications with the wider Service to ensure that all staff groups feel appropriately engaged in realising the Service's vision. This could extend to wider engagement with staff about how best to meet the financial challenges for the next 3 years – there is a clear thirst for such engagement and where it takes place it is well received.

The Service recognises that there will be a high turnover of staff in the next 2-4 years and this will, in part, be used to facilitate the future financial challenges. The Service should consider if it has a robust and structured approach to the succession planning challenges that this will present.

5. Corporate Capacity

Strengths

- Professional and enthusiastic staff with a real pride in the Service
- Exploring blue light integration to increase capacity with good evidence of early achievement
- Strong and effective approach to securing external funding
- Significant investment made in appliances, equipment, facilities and premises
- Range of effective partnerships to secure additional capacity
- Innovative use of fire fighters to build capacity – IIV / On-call contracts / CIV

Areas to explore

- Consequence of ambition versus available resource
- Staff are looking for consistency of approach and some help with prioritisation of ambition
- Interoperability agenda does not appear to have a jointly owned and clear programme plan
- 3x£500k per year reduction – need for robust prioritisation process based on clear risk information across the whole service
- The impact of a high number of people in temporary posts
- Making better use of volunteers and other organisations to create capacity

NFRS benefits from staff and representative bodies who are very professional and have a great deal of enthusiasm and pride in their Service. The peer team were impressed by the passion and professionalism displayed right across the Service.

The current and future organisational capacity challenges have been recognised and the Service has embarked on some innovative work with blue light colleagues to seek opportunities to increase their overall capacity. Within this approach there are a number of examples of early progress being made with shared arrangements in areas of training, fleet management, operations, property, prevention and protection.

NFRS also has a good track record in securing external funding to bring additional capacity and benefit into the Service and then through to local communities. This includes the work on blue light integration. Fire Control funding, Transformation Challenge Award and European funding are three significant examples of this approach.

The Service's focus on community and firefighter Safety has, in challenging financial circumstances, been supported through continued investment in appliances, equipment, facilities and premises. This investment has been in new innovative approaches such as Cobra and the Command Development Centre. However, and importantly, this has not been at the expense of 'base line' service provision and the investment has been maintained on all areas of appliances, equipment and Personal Protection Equipment.

The Service has good examples of where it has formed effective partnerships to secure additional capacity. Discussions with those partners illustrated the value upon which they place their relationship with the fire service and the outcomes that they feel the work provides.

Additional capacity has been realised in the operational response arrangements across the Service. In particular, the use of full-time watch commanders on Initial Intervention Vehicles to support on-call fire stations has started well with plans in place to expand the scheme. The purchase of a second Cobra Intervention Vehicle is building on the success of the first vehicle. Finally, the use of on-call staff on flexible short-term contracts brings additional capacity to the full time fire stations whilst also providing an opportunity to invest in the development of those on-call firefighters in a cost effective way.

The Service has set out clear and ambitious plans for the future across a number of different areas aligned to its overall vision and objectives. However, this brings with it a challenge in terms of being able to match those ambitions, and the timescales within which they will be delivered, with the capacity to achieve them. There is evidence that this is being stretched in a number of areas and would benefit from some additional consideration.

In recent years the Service has explored different approaches for its future governance, structure and position within the wider public sector and outside Northamptonshire. The reasons for this are sound but it has come with an impact on staff across the Service. There is a thirst for a clear picture for the future, prioritisation of tasks and a sustained approach where this is possible in the current local government climate.

The blue light integration work has been brought together under the blueprint that has been referred to previously in this report. However, given the challenges with capacity, the integration work would benefit from a more robust programme and project management approach. In particular some additional clarity on the work programme, timescales and responsibilities for delivery would help improve direction.

The Service is clear about the savings that will be required over the next 3 years. However there isn't yet a published plan about how these will be delivered. In developing this plan the Authority and Service should ensure that it is based on a clear understanding of the associated risks across all aspects of the Service – Prevention, Protection, Response and Support functions.

A conscious decision was taken some time ago not to substantiate staff into posts. This has created a situation where there is an increasing number of temporary/acting staff, and in some cases close on 50% of uniform staff in a function are either in temporary or acting roles. The Service should consider, given the extended period that this has been operating, the impact it is having on capacity, morale and the wider management of the Service.

The Service has considered but due to other priorities, has not yet introduced a fire service community volunteer programme. Given that there are a number of successful models in place across other Services then there is potential for this approach to bring further capacity into Northamptonshire, particularly in the Prevention arena. The peer team encourage NFRS to reconsider this option.

6. Community Risk Management

Strengths

- Clear and structured approach to strategic assessment providing an holistic view of community risk – external
- Top down and bottom up approach to CRM - internal
- Sound IRMP planning system utilising SWOT and STEEPLE
- Good culture of risk and performance management - risk registers used to drive improvement
- Strong partnership approach to understanding local risk
- CCA – effective engagement with LRF and sound BCM in place
- Operational Risk Management Group - effective 'radar' for risk awareness – shared learning for risks and events inside and outside FRS

Areas to explore

- 'Line of sight' between the corporate priorities & objectives and the risk reduction work on stations
- Station risk profiles not currently being produced
- Station plans could be used to better effect
- Establish a mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of the CRM process
- Some frustration exists with reliability of ICT systems for risk data management – NCC

There is evidence of a good use of external indicators and factors that inform future service planning. The service conducts an annual strategic assessment/review that is used to drive the IRMP and then departmental business plans

The service has a strong culture of performance management and a sound Performance Framework based around its IRMP and risk management framework. A Balanced Scorecard system is also in place and a strategic risk register with department risk registers.

The Operational Risk Management Group (ORMG) acts as a focal point and 'radar' system for the gathering of information and maintains a risk register that is used to capture learning from key fire incidents across the country

The responsibilities of NFRS within the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) are well understood and it is recognised as a proactive partner. There is significant evidence of partnership working which includes with voluntary bodies but also on issues such as blue light integration and co-responding.

As part of the overall Community Risk Management (CRM) there is clear evidence that business continuity management arrangements are sound. Evidence includes the fact that Industrial Action resilience planning and control fall back and buddying arrangements are in place and effective.

However, station risk profiles were previously produced and reported as being effective in focussing local risk reduction needs. It is understood by the peer team that these are no longer produced which potentially provides a gap between the overall risk picture and station activity. Similarly the same could be said about the Station Plans which could be used as the focal point for station work by linking and bringing together the top-down and bottom-up approach to CRM.

At station level it did not appear that there was good awareness of the relationship between wider corporate priorities and immediate workloads. This may be a point worth stressing in the Senior Leadership Team's visits to stations and through other communication mechanisms.

There is a Service Evaluation Toolkit and a system for conducting evaluations but it appears that very few are conducted to establish whether the Service has achieved the intended outcomes of its work. The CRM process is not evaluated.

The peer team would like to mention that some staff expressed concern and frustration over the reliability of data systems used for risk management. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the link to NCC appears to frustrate some staff with reported and lost data. The peer team encourage NFRS to investigate this.

7. Prevention

Strengths

- Arson Task Force is a real success story - notably End of Life Vehicle Impound Scheme (ELVIS)
- Wide range of established and proactive community safety initiatives
- Good evidence of successful and strong partnership working
- ATF and joint Prevention team - Good examples of effective blue light integration
- Good representation on key multi-agency groups and strong relationship with children's services
- Some good examples of community engagement – sessional workers accessing vulnerable groups

Areas to explore

- More consistent use of evaluation toolkit to explore benefits realisation and organisational learning - consider central repository for evaluations
- Potential to improve capacity for Prevention through a structured volunteer programme
- Opportunity to develop the Health agenda to leverage joint efficiencies and capacity
- Heavy reliance on local knowledge at station level – station risk profiles and station plans could be used to better effect

The Arson Task Force (ATF) is an extremely proactive small team and is well regarded. There is clear evidence of the success of the team and the ELVIS vehicle removal system appears especially effective and is considered an example of notable practice.

Additionally, the work relating to Domestic Violence, the Sanctuary Scheme, safer farms, fire setters intervention etc. provide excellent examples of a partnership and collaborative approach.

A significant range of community safety initiatives are undertaken and with good partnership working. These range from national campaigns such as the Fire Kills initiative and Chief Fire Officer Association (CFOA) calendars but also includes local campaigns based around local community risk and crews local risk knowledge.

Many of the initiatives are undertaken in partnership and links with partners are strong. Examples of such involvement include with EMAS, the local Safeguarding Board, Multi Agency Strategic Hub (MASH), Road Safety Alliance, and the Young Farmers Electrical Safety Council.

There is a clear area of notable practice with the creation of a joint prevention team with the police and the joint appointment (although the officer came from NFRS) of a Head of Prevention. This is a strong example of enhancing blue light interoperability.

This partnership approach is also evident in the form of good representation of service personnel on the key multi-agency community groups which provides good referral systems to those most vulnerable.

Evaluation of activities could again be more apparent. An Evaluation Toolkit exists and some examples were evidenced of its effective use (for example the Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Project) but it appears that it is not used consistently to check if the Service achieved its intended outcomes. A 'light', less onerous version of the toolkit may be beneficial for smaller initiatives together with a central repository of completed evaluations to help the organisation to share its learning.

The Service may also wish to consider if its prevention activities could be enhanced at a reasonable cost by developing a structured volunteer's programme which would enable an increased capacity to deliver community safety and risk reduction

The 'top down – bottom up' approach to both protection and prevention is generally good. However, the Service should consider whether the apparently heavy reliance on local community knowledge at station level is striking an appropriate balance with strategic CRM. The bottom up approach is effective but the stations also need to know that they are contributing directly to the overall IRMP and that all their local knowledge is being captured. The peer team could not readily see a clear 'line of sight' between the corporate priorities/objectives and the workloads of station personnel.

8. Protection

Strengths

- Established and mature risk-based inspection programme
- Good multi-agency partnership approach to Protection work
- Joint Prevention Team – good example of blue light integration
- Excellent results in reducing unwanted fire signals
- Capacity limitations but clearly achieving the inspection and audit targets set
- Good use of sessional community workers to achieve outcomes for local people

Areas to explore

- Explore new model of Protection risk-profiling and a new risk based inspection methodology – measuring risk reduction rather than audits completed
- Shifting the focus of Protection evaluation from outputs to outcomes
- Potential to increase capacity by investing in Primary Authority Scheme (PAS)
- Potential to increase capacity by developing business support officers/advocates (volunteers) to help reduce business risk
- Consider further increasing capacity for Protection by continuing with the plan to train ops crews

The Service has a mature risk-based inspection programme which is based around the IRMP. There is a clear focus on fire fighter safety and occupant's life safety. Sleeping risk premises such as hospitals and care homes as well as HMO's are of particular focus. This approach is enhanced by having created effective partnerships with Borough and District Councils and their Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licencing functions.

The inspection programme has clear new targets and these are currently being exceeded with 665 audits performed against a target of 600.

The Service has had real success in reducing unwanted fire signals by working with business, Alarm Receiving Centres (ARC's), call challenge from Control as well as adjustments to the Response model. This has reduced operational demand significantly and is creditable.

The Protection team utilise sessional workers effectively to reach communities that have been historically harder to reach. This ensures that the Responsible Persons are aware of their responsibilities under the Order.

The reduction in capacity of the Protection function arising from the financial savings required means that they are unable to achieve the same level of output compared to the previous risk-based inspection programme or the themed inspections for houses in multiple occupation, hospitals and care homes. This has been recognised by reducing performance targets (900 to 600). As mentioned above Protection are currently exceeding the new target.

However, moving forward, and in order to achieve community risk reduction effectively across the same existing building stock with less resource, the function should consider developing a new risk-mapping and risk reduction delivery methodology to achieve its aims and objectives.

There is a generally good approach to performance management across the Service but performance indicators for Protection appear focussed around the number of inspections/re-inspections conducted rather than a definable risk reduction system of measuring actual risk reduction. The Community Fire Risk Management Information System (CFRMIS) tool could be utilised to individually risk rate premises effectively so that the service can measure true risk reduction as a result of its activities.

The Service may also wish to consider the introduction of Business Support Officer volunteers and utilising operational crews for Protection work which would provide additional capacity and enable the Fire Protection Officers to focus attention on very-high risk premises.

9. Response

Strengths

- Excellent standard of appliances and equipment – some real innovation
- Robust debriefing process that can be instigated by crews or officers
- Co-responding welcomed in RDS
- Use of innovative fire fighting techniques
- Crews understand the benefits of COBRA – and recognise it as another ‘tool in the box’
- Good examples of joint team working – BLI

Areas to explore

- Appropriateness of the current response standards and targets
- Officer mobilising / capacity – is Level 2 officers to 2 pump incidents too risk averse?
- Cobra IV – fire fighting tactics/ culture
- ICS Assessments Level 3 & 4 (see T&D)
- Location of resources matched to risk – IIV – response or on-call support?

The level of provision of frontline equipment and appliances observed during the review was of a high standard. The introduction of COBRA technology onto frontline appliances has been welcomed by personnel and is contributing greatly to the safety of personnel at operational incidents. Many examples of good practice were provided by both operational managers and frontline personnel. The new Cobra Intervention Vehicle was demonstrated and the progression of robot technology to further enhance fire fighter safety explained. These are examples of notable practice

The work to explore interoperability with other blue light services was demonstrated clearly. Many examples of successful partnerships were observed, with the work of the ATF, co-responder programme and the newly formed joint protection team presenting examples of good practice.

There is a robust process for operational performance scrutiny with a Minor and Major incident debriefing system in place. Any incidents attended by six or more appliances instigate the Major debriefing process and a Performance Review Committee is held to assess incident commander performance and highlight areas of good practice and learning points. The Service's move to include Fire Control Operators into this process is welcomed and should lead to even better understanding of incident performance and ensure that Fire Control feel valued and part of the learning culture.

The peer team were concerned that currently the response standards and targets appear aspirational and unachievable and that NFRS should consider reviewing these. Whilst the intention to capture other agency data and to drive innovative approaches in operational response is acknowledged, the team remain concerned at the potential for these targets to act as a demotivating factor, undermine effective performance management and potentially misinform the public about fire service performance.

The Service policy of mobilising level 2 officers to all incidents attended by two pumps could be reviewed and take into account the potential to free up capacity of officers by employing a risk based approach to mobilising on information received. The peer team recognise however that this observation needs to take account of the broader role of level 2 officers in the Assurance Framework through the contributory roles of activity monitoring, mentoring and preventing skills/knowledge from fading.

The command training centre provides a first class training facility to address level 1 and level 2 incident commanders and is an example of notable practice. The opportunity to expand this provision to the level 3 and level 4 incident commanders should be explored. The opportunity to explore the benefits of team assessments and realistic incident command structures should also not be overlooked.

During the peer challenge some staff expressed opinions about the process through which the operational capability and crewing arrangements for the COBRA Intervention Vehicle were established. It is recommended that the Service utilise project management disciplines for all significant change activities to ensure there is clarity on these points and this is shared widely with the necessary parties.

The Service may wish to review its resource provision and associated location to be certain that resources are in the most appropriate locations to ensure that all community risks are addressed, and that locations are not used due to historical factors.

10. Health and Safety

Strengths

- Positive health and safety culture - clear focus on fire fighter safety
- Engagement with staff and representative bodies
- Approach to wellbeing and prevention
- Station inspections
- Standard testing of equipment
- Good use of new technology and equipment to improve safety

Areas to explore

- Health and safety management system audit
- Opportunity to rationalise and consolidate risk assessments
- Serious accident investigation training
- Ambiguity surrounding sickness information – CFOA / NFRS / NCC

NFRS asked the peer team to place a considerable amount of focus on examining firefighter safety. The team is pleased to report that it found a positive health and safety culture across the Service with a clear focus on firefighter safety.

There is a clear message from NCC members, right through to firefighters, of the importance NFRS place on firefighter safety and how this is a top priority. Individuals are aware of the importance of health and safety and the responsibilities on themselves and their colleagues. The team found that sound systems and processes are in place to support this (accident and near miss reporting, station inspection, training recording, operational debrief and monitoring.). It is worth noting, however, that there are a number of IT systems that are not able to be cross-referenced to each other, making a holistic picture difficult which may hinder identification of emerging risks.

The engagement with staff and their representative bodies is seen as an integral part for the health and safety culture. Feedback from staff indicated that they feel their representative bodies are engaged with and they are able to raise any concerns through meetings, use of the debrief system or via their line manager. There was clear evidence of engagement at formal meetings, through the consultation process and informal channels of communication.

The Service has good wellbeing and prevention strategies in place. They work proactively with Breathing Apparatus Instructors including cardiovascular, respiratory and core temperature monitoring. There is a strong approach to risk analysis through a robust framework. A training package has been developed and is used to reduce the risk at station level. There is 12 monthly fitness testing of all operational staff, underpinned by three yearly routine medicals. There was some evidence of slippage with regard to the programme of firefighter medicals, however the Occupational Health Department is aware and taking steps to address this. Firefighters are also provided with advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle - diet and exercise.

Quarterly station inspections are used to drive improvement and ensure safe systems of work and standards are met. It was noted that there is no formal standard enabling station comparisons. The process is carried out by the Station Managers who apply their own individual standards.

Good use is made of technology to ensure the testing and maintenance of equipment is completed at station level. All equipment is bar coded, with stations automatically prompted on a weekly basis as and when the due date for the test. Each item is scanned with the outcome of the test and the identity of the individual carrying out the test being recorded centrally.

Although the approach to health and safety is strong, there is no systematic process of auditing of the H&S management system used within the service. This is a departure from NFRS policy (E16). Work to address this gap is in progress and NFRS is looking to develop methodology used by one of their regional partners.

The H&S culture and approach has resulted in a large number of risk assessments used across the Service. Many of these are similar with control measures being replicated on a number of occasions e.g. driving and tactical fire fighting training. The Service may wish to rationalise the number of risk assessments to improve and ease the manner in which they are used to drive firefighter safety.

A new policy and procedure is being implemented to support serious accident investigation (L3). Staff with potential for being part of an investigation team will require training to support this process. The Service should consider exercising the new procedure to ensure the process is embedded across the Service. This will provide those with responsibility for its implementation an understanding of its requirements and resource implications.

During the peer challenge the team noted variances in sickness performance information that has been communicated both internal and externally to the organisation e.g. differences between NFRS figures used in the internal performance dashboard and the statistics published in the CFOA Occupational Health working group. It is understood that the reasons for these variances have now been identified and steps taken to rectify this. It is worth noting that care should be taken to ensure that there are no inconsistencies between NCC and NFRS as regards data collection that could impair the ability to effectively benchmark performance against other FRS's.

11. Call Management and Incident Report

Strengths

- New facilities at Daventry
- Resilience arrangements are robust – exercised and tested
- Language line installed to meet delivery needs
- Call handling speeds have improved – by 6 seconds 13/14
- QA evolving within Control to establish commonality in call handling process
- Call handling staff now included in Performance Review Committees

Areas to explore

- Call handling targets - SMART
- Complexity of over the border attendance arrangements by other FRS
- Impact of the new Fire Control – staff feeling of isolation from rest of FRS?
- Communication and clarity of intention on future Control arrangements – Warws / Thames Valley
- Control staff desire to crew the Incident Command Vehicle – add value??

The staff at the new Fire Control facility were enthusiastic about the quality of the new control centre and the standard of welfare provision. The passion and pride of the staff was evident throughout the visit. The Language Line facility is invaluable to the call handlers given the diversity of languages spoken across the county.

The resilience model in place appears robust with measures in place to address any loss of call handling. This model helps ensure business continuity and has been tested and employed on a number of occasions. Through both the in-house secondary provision and the ability to switch calls to Warwickshire FRS it has ensured that the Service can continue to handle emergency calls. Further support is also provided by Cheshire FRS if required.

The call handling times have improved from the previous year's performance. The Fire Control staff are committed to further reductions having identified that a commonality in call handling across the Fire Control watches is required to further improve call handling times.

The introduction of Fire Control staff into the Performance Review Committee process has been undertaken and will enhance the debrief and review process for all response personnel and ensure that the Fire Control staff feel included in the Service's desire to learn and improve safety and performance.

The peer team were concerned that the challenging call handling targets are perceived by some as unachievable and potentially demotivating. It is recommended that they should be assessed to ensure that they are realistic as well as challenging and that staff understand how the intended 'new ways of working' will contribute to improved performance against the targets.

The peer team received comments that some of NFRS's neighbouring fire authorities raise charges for cross border activities whilst others do not and that this complexity is adding to the workloads of Fire Control staff who need to identify additional resources to attend incidents to relieve neighbouring appliances. In balancing this, the peer team recognise that the introduction of new mobilising systems has changed some traditional working practices and that the service is striving to ensure the most effective use of its resources.

Although the new facilities at Daventry are impressive there is the potential for a feeling of isolation from the rest of the Service amongst the staff located there. The Service should ensure that this is managed and that Fire Control staff feel included and involved. The progress of the joint working project with Warwickshire should also be proactively communicated to Fire Control staff. It was reported that information on progress has not been forthcoming since the joining of the two work streams earlier this year into one project team.

The potential use of Fire Control staff as part of the crew for the incident command vehicle could be considered although it is recognised that this would require alterations to some staffing arrangements and may not be feasible at present.

10. Training and Development

Strengths

- An effective training plan based on 4 key strands
- Level One incident command training
- Use of new technology and facilities to maximise training benefit – CDC / Cobra / PPV
- Overall approach to the competency framework
- High levels of staff satisfaction with training

Areas to explore

- Establishment of a robust IC competency framework for Levels 2, 3 and 4
- Dissemination of PRC evidenced information among the wider officer group
- Explore opportunities for disparate training facilities to be consolidated
- Enhance the arrangements to support the approach to development programmes
- Implement a clear programme with associated milestones for the competency framework

There is a clear structure to the approach to training with well understood priorities. This includes a major emphasis on Fire-fighter safety. The approach is encapsulated in a four strand training plan consisting of:

- Tactical fire fighting,
- Incident command,
- Development programmes
- Competency framework assessment for all levels.

It should be noted, however, that some of this structure and work is quite new and the team were not able, whilst on site, to determine how embedded it currently is. It is notable that there is clear evidence that the compartment fire training and the use of COBRA are embedded across the Service. Positive Pressure Ventilation (PPV) and some of the assessment of Incident Command at the higher levels are still in their infancy.

Level one incident command training is very strong and the Command Development Centre at Daventry is an example of notable practice. There are clear standards and assessment criteria together with a process for development into role with support given at regular intervals through training and development. Assessment is on a rolling programme with reassessment timescales according to assessed outcomes (can be 6, 12, or 24 months). The L1 process verification is provided to all L1 incident commanders and there is a strict policy that only allows competent Incident Commanders to ride in charge of appliances. In support, L2 officers monitor and support the Incident Commanders that are only qualified in the “safe to ride” role.

NFRS has been very proactive in the implementation and use of new technology and use this to strengthen Fire-fighter safety. Any such implementation is backed by appropriate training and support. The integration of advanced tactical fire fighting methods e.g. COBRA, PPV can stand alone or in combination with traditional fire fighting tactics.

NFRS has also introduced a combination of thermal imaging into the Dynamic Risk Assessment (DRA) process for all Incident Commanders. This enables the Incident Commander to develop the best and most suitable tactical plan in order to deal with incidents whilst maintaining a high degree of Fire-fighter safety. The use of thermal imaging cameras in the DRA enables COBRA to be deployed at the earliest opportunity supported by aggressive tactical ventilation before firefighter entry into compartment fires.

The Service has a thorough approach to implementing firefighter competencies. Whole-time recruitment is supplemented by the use of on-call firefighters. This process supports on-call firefighters in gaining and maintaining their competency. The development programmes utilise a clear process for acquisition, maintenance and proving competence at incident command L1.

The excellent LI training and development has already been mentioned. The Service needs to, and has plans to, extend this to the L2, L3 and L4 carried out at Fire Service College (FSC). The L2's have been trained at FSC, however, some officers have not had refresher training for some years.

Command debriefs occur and information is disseminated across the Service effectively. However there is a perceived need from L2/L3, for the detail and lessons learned from command debriefs to be shared more widely amongst all officers as opposed to just those who attended incidents. This is considered particularly important for the more infrequent incidents e.g. Hazardous Material. This would aid all L2/L3 officers in their experiential learning.

The Training and Development staff work from a number of sites to deliver training. This can cause issues when trying to develop courses and allow for the department to collectively come together in order to share learning, develop new ideas and carry out their routine work. Obviously the consolidation of all training facilities into one location could benefit training staff but it is accepted that this would have to be a long-term aspiration.

Assessing, verification and provision of support from the assessors to those on development could be enhanced. This arises from capacity issues as officers with this responsibility are few in number and have a number of other roles to perform within the Service. There is a concern that the support required by those on development may suffer as a consequence.

As stated above, the four strand plan is well received by all staff. The importance of the competency framework is well understood but there was no evidence of a staged plan for implementation despite its importance.

Conclusion and Contact Information

Throughout the peer challenge the team met with very enthusiastic, professional and committed officers and members. It is clear that NFRS has made very significant progress in recent years (despite financial pressures), has a good awareness of what still needs to be done and has a proactive approach to service improvement. This includes the use of innovative approaches, a strong emphasis on firefighter health and safety and a forward looking approach to creating greater interoperability.

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

- a) That a clear and shared vision for blue light interoperability is further developed between all parties and stated in accordance with local wishes and a robust programme devised for its implementation
- b) NFRS should collectively consider how it will achieve its ambitions with the resources it has available

- c) To avoid a perception of under-performance, and to ensure that they are able to be used as an effective performance management tool, NFRS may wish to re-consider the current response standards. The operation of Member scrutiny should be reviewed to ensure a clear structure exists and the function is effective
- d) NFRS should consider whether it has clear and effective processes for evaluating its activities across all of its functions

For more information regarding the Fire Peer Challenge of NFRS please contact:

Gary Hughes – Programme Manager

Local Government Association

E-mail - gary.hughes@local.gov.uk

Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

www.local.gov.uk