



CFOA
Chief Fire Officers
Association



Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service Fire Peer Challenge Report

November 2013

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1. Executive Summary

The large geographical area of Northumberland and reliance on a significant proportion of retained firefighters presents a number of challenges for a fire and rescue service.

From a resident's perspective the performance in responding to incidents is one of the most visible aspects of the Service. Frontline equipment and appliances are good and held in high regard by the majority of staff. The Service also has a number of long established co-locations of facilities with organisations like NE Ambulance Service and SureStart. Meeting response standards in a large, sparsely populated county will always be challenging. Revisiting options to introduce co-responding could be one way of improving response performance and providing a better service to local communities.

The Service recognises the need to focus on identifying the county's most vulnerable individuals. It shares data with other parts of the County Council, which is helping to provide a better picture of these individuals. It is an active member of the Local Resilience Forum. The Service's early work on the 'Think Family' Support Programme is also encouraging. The overall number of incidents the Service responds to has halved over the last ten years, partly due to the success of its prevention activities. If the Service is to get a much more robust understanding of risk in Northumberland it will need to place a much stronger emphasis on the analysis of risk data. Data is collected but needs to be analysed more consistently and used to drive activity at station level. Undertaking a countywide risk review would also be a useful part of taking a more intelligence-led approach.

The Service supports Northumberland County Council in its responsibilities to road safety, and partners in the authority who lead in this area of work. Although reducing the number of road traffic collisions is a strategic priority for the Service there is a need for more strategic leadership on the issue, using risk data, understanding the impact of activities and strengthening the role of the multi-agency Road Safety Group.

In 2013 the Service has been undertaking a significant project to deliver a partnership arrangement to call management. The project has been well managed and in November 2013 the new Control arrangements went 'live'. There is now a need to systematically collect, analyse and use call handling data to drive further improvement. There will also be opportunities in the future to explore options for greater efficiency in call management and the Service has a chance to take advantage of these.

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is a lean organisation. It has opportunities to take advantage of this leanness by being more innovative and creative in how it looks to tackle response and prevention activity. Re-visiting the feasibility of co-responding, reshaping the focus of the Community Safety Academy and expanding capacity by recruiting more volunteers are just three ways in which the Service could make significant further improvement within the existing level of its resources.

2. Introduction

This report captures the outcomes and presents the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA's) Fire Peer Challenge at Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service in November 2013. Fire Peer Challenge is part of the approach to sector led improvement. It is a key component of the LGA's 'Taking the Lead' offer (www.local.gov.uk/taking-the-lead).

The Fire Peer Challenge took place from the 25-28 November 2013 and consisted of a range of on-site activity including interviews, focus groups and visits to four fire stations.

The peer team met with a broad cross-section of members, officers, front line firefighters and partner agencies. During the time in Northumberland the peer team were very well looked after and everyone the team met were fully engaged with the process, open and honest.

The peer team also undertook background reading provided to the team in advance, including Northumberland's summary Operational Assessment self-assessment and key supporting documentation. The peer challenge did not aim to re-run the Operational Assessment, but instead focused on areas identified specifically by the Service. The overall scope of the peer challenge was to explore four areas in depth:

- Community risk management
- Response
- Call management
- Prevention

In addition to these four areas, the team explored a number of guiding questions for all fire peer challenges:

- Does the Service understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
- Does the Service have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
- Does the Service have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
- Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change and transformation?
- Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

The evidence and feedback gathered was assimilated and a discussion of the findings was delivered to the Services' Portfolio Holder and officers.

The purpose of the peer challenge was to provide external challenge to help support improvement and to reflect how the Service is performing across the areas of focus.

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.

3. The peer challenge team was:

- Steve Apter, Chief Fire Officer, Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service (lead peer)
- Councillor Darrell Pulk, Chair, Nottinghamshire Fire Authority
- Paddy Gallagher, Group Commander Operational Risk Management, Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service
- Andy Bowers, Area Manager, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Tracey Nuttall, Policy & Performance Improvement Manager, Greater Manchester Fire & Rescue Service
- Neil Shaw, Local Government Association

4. Community risk management

Strengths

- **Benefits of being part of the County Council**
- **Local Resilience Forum**
- **Engagement with partner agencies**

The Service has a structured approach to community risk management. A range of risk information is drawn upon, including; FSEC, Mosaic, community risk registers, debrief information, referrals and station based intelligence. The Service is reaping the benefits of being part of the County by achieving closer working with Childrens, Adults Services, Highways and Public Health. This is enabling sharing of risk data on vulnerable individuals as well as receiving referrals and a mutual understanding of each other's agendas within the County Council.

There are a number of examples of how risk data has been used to inform service planning, for example, the approaches to animal rescue and flood response. Subject specific experts have been used to review policies and procedures. For example, Tyne and Wear Fire & Rescue Service have reviewed the Service's swift water rescue procedure.

The Service is an active member of an effective Local Resilience Forum and they have made the link between the national risk register and local risks. The Service is engaged with a number of partner agencies, including the Northumberland Strategic Partnership and Safeguarding Board. Some partnership activity has evolved into broader community development work on wider agendas such as health promotion and developing young people's skills to prepare them for the world of work.

The early work on the 'Think Family' Support Programme is also encouraging. The Service is getting actively involved - taking a joined up approach to working with some of the county's more challenging families.

Areas to consider

- **Access to wider data sets**
- **More risk data analysis**
- **Risk review**

Although the business planning process is well established, the IRMP is not underpinned by delivery plans which are robustly based on the consistent use of risk data. Currently there are delivery plans and a considerable amount of data exists. However, there is an incomplete risk picture for the county. At station level, whilst operational staff have an understanding of their local risks, there is a fundamental need for station activity to be driven by risk analysis. This will help to better target activities for local vulnerable people and to manage risks in localities. Overall, there is a need for a more robust cycle of risk analysis, targeting and evaluation which would considerably 'tighten' the approach to business planning and ensure that this was being more intelligence-led.

The halving of the number of incidents over the last ten years (from 6,399 in 2003/04, to 3,145 in 2012/13) and the growing and ageing population of the County continue to change the risk profile of Northumberland. The Service should consider undertaking a countywide risk review, including consultation with local communities to ensure it uses its risk data to better understand current and future areas of need and how it plans services and matches resources to risk.

Whilst obtaining risk data from other parts of the County Council, the Service receives limited data on vulnerable individuals, from organisations and agencies such as social landlords. Recognising the challenges of limited capacity, data from the clinical commissioning group and NE Ambulance Service could be used to aid better targeting of future activities.

5. Call management

Strengths

- **Project has been well managed and gone live**
- **New arrangements provide more resilience**
- **Added value – out of hours calls**

The Service has undertaken a partnership with Tyne and Wear Fire & Rescue Service to implement a new Fire Control system. This has been undertaken over recent months. During the peer challenge the new call management arrangements went 'live'. The transition to the new arrangements has gone well with the project being well managed.

The new arrangements will mean the nearest appliance is mobilised to incidents across the two areas. It will also generate a financial saving, estimated by the Service at £1.8m up to 2020/21 for Northumberland. Fallback arrangements are in place with the two authorities working in parallel. The Service provides increased capacity to the County Council by taking out of hours emergency calls for the last twelve months. This process is operating well and makes better use of the capacity.

Areas to consider

- **Performance management**
- **Standardise operating procedures**
- **Future business case options to be explored**

The Service needs to systematically performance manage the Control function by collecting, analysing and using call handling data. The Service recognises this and plans to introduce further systems to collect data as the new fire control becomes embedded. This data can then be used to plan services.

There would be value in reviewing the project management, implementation and communications plan to ensure lessons learned from the project are communicated to all staff and used to improve future projects.

The new arrangements have resulted in two Control functions in the respective Services. The Service should explore future business case options for greater efficiency in call management. This should be focused on streamlining of the function and personnel and standardising operating procedures (as well as identifying the risks).

6. Response

Strengths

- **Good quality equipment and PPE**
- **Co-locations**
- **Wildfire**

The Service has agreed response standards. The level of provision of frontline equipment, personal protective equipment (PPE) and appliances is held in high regard by the majority of staff and there is a good level of investment in this area. There are new facilities in West Hartford and Pegswood and the Service has a long-term plan for the upgrading of stations.

The Service have a good track record of co-locating with other service providers like NE Ambulance Service, SureStart and Mountain Rescue. This is an area of notable practise. These are well established and long-standing. The Service is committed to exploring other options to co-locate in the future.

Robust procedures are in place for incident debriefs with effective systems to track the identified improvements. This has also enabled the Service to make necessary changes in procedures to improve future response. Sound arrangements are in place for level 1 incident command initial training and on-going assessment.

The Service takes a national lead on tackling wildfires. This is an area of notable practice. This includes developing the Scottish Operational Guidance Manual for Wildfire commissioned by the Scottish Government and implementing wildfire detection work in the National Park.

The peer team touched on training and development in relation to the response theme. Although the peer team did not explore training and development in-depth, this appears to be sound. Training is structured and feedback from frontline firefighters is positive. The Service relies heavily on its retained firefighters. The retained firefighters the peer team met feel included and informed on the 'bigger picture' and operational issues. There is a willingness to facilitate additional training/exercises for retained firefighters. It is recognised that the strengths highlighted support good firefighter safety.

Areas to consider

- **Response standards and analysis**
- **Heavy reliance on short term contracts**
- **Command strategy**

If the Service undertakes the risk review highlighted earlier, this should include a review of response standards. In 2012/13 the Service responded to 80% of incidents (by a first pump in 10 minutes), against a target of 75% and 87% of incidents (responded to by a second pump) in 13 minutes, against a target of 90%. The Service recognises the challenges of meeting response

standards in a large rural county such as Northumberland and this should be taken into consideration should the Service conduct the suggested review.

In the future, the Service should re-visit the potential to introduce co-responding. This will utilise capacity and, more importantly, improve the emergency response for local communities.

The Service has a heavy reliance on temporary appointments and short-term contracts to underpin its operational service delivery model. This has the potential to impact on operational resilience and command competence. It is understood that this arrangement has been put in place in light of future changes to be implemented by 1st April 2014. The service may wish to compare its shift/crewing models against other Services to improve resilience and reduce the reliability on temporary contracts. The Service recognises that undertaking command assessment at levels above level 1 is needed. The peer team strongly suggests this should be a priority. A clear command strategy including command support and active incident monitoring should be developed in conjunction with the introduction of the newly commissioned command vehicle.

7. Prevention

Strengths

- **Historically strong on prevention**
- **Activity at station level**
- **Princes Trust and use of volunteers**

The Service has a structured approach to community safety and in the past has made a considerable investment in community safety activities, through its own funding and by accessing external funding and created the Community Safety Academy. Between 2003/04 and 2012/13 the Service has fitted over 70,000 smoke alarms. The Service has reduced accidental dwelling fires by 38% and the overall trend in numbers of accidental dwelling fires in the county is declining, with a reduction of 10% over the last five years.

There is evidence that the Service is looking to learn from other Services like Merseyside and Cheshire on prevention activity. Over recent months the Service has been exploring how it can better target Home Fire Safety Checks to ensure they are better reaching vulnerable individuals. This refined targeting process is due to start in April 2014.

The Service is undertaking a number of initiatives, campaigns and projects aimed at preventing incidents. There are many examples of these initiatives making a positive impact on raising fire awareness, including; programmes with the Princes Trust, Whatever It Takes, Fired Up, Young Firefighters Association and local station initiatives like the West Hartford boxing club. Many of these provide evidence of the Service's commitment to preventing incidents. The team received very positive feedback from partner agencies

on a number of the prevention activities and the staff involved, who are clearly passionate about community safety.

The Service makes use of approximately 30 volunteers to make a positive contribution to prevention work, mainly focused on supporting the Young Firefighters Association.

Areas to consider

- **Community Safety Academy**
- **Focus on road traffic collision priority as part of the County Council**
- **Risk analysis and evaluation**

The Service's historically strong focus on prevention, through the Community Safety Academy, is diminishing. This is partly due to the reduction in funding for prevention activity. To maintain a focus on prevention there are a number of actions the Service may wish to take. This might include:

- reshaping the Community Safety Academy to provide an intelligence-led co-ordinating and quality assurance role (based on a stronger service plan outlining more clearly how the service will provide a steer on the targeting of prevention activity)
- making more extensive use of station staff to undertake more co-ordinated community safety activity
- more extensive use could also be made of volunteers to deliver prevention activity. A large proportion of volunteers are being used on the Young Firefighters Association. The Service should either look to redirect some of these or recruit a greater number of volunteers to undertake this work (building on the positive work already underway in training housing association staff to undertake Home Fire Safety Checks)

Although reducing the number of road traffic collisions is a strategic priority for the Service it receives only limited attention in the Service's main prevention plan (the Academy's service plan). Reflecting on the effectiveness of partnerships, the Road Safety Group, led by the County Council, should provide more strategic leadership on the issue, using risk data and understanding the impact of activities. The Service has the opportunity to take a more assertive lead on road safety, building from a position of strength on road safety initiatives currently delivered at Area/Station level.

The Service recognises that the evaluation of prevention activity is an area in need of development. A more robust cycle of risk analysis, targeting and evaluation process would considerably 'tighten' the approach to prevention and create a feeling that this is being more intelligence-led. It will be important to ensure the evaluation process is focused on understanding how improved outcomes are being delivered. The Service already has some useful examples upon which it can build, like the evaluation of the Princes

Trust work. The challenge will now be to ensure that evaluation is more extensive (but still proportionate) and moves away from tracking the delivery of outputs e.g. number of HFSCs undertaken, the number of school visits, and towards analysing the impact interventions are having. This should significantly help the Service to understand how it can make best use of its resources as funding and resources become tighter.

8. Leadership and governance

Strengths

- **Portfolio Holder and CFO visible and well respected**
- **Local Services Group**
- **Leadership on wider agendas**

In 2013 the County Council had a change in political administration. This includes the agreement of a new set of priorities for the Council. The Portfolio Holder plays an important role in providing political direction to the Service. The Portfolio Holder is visible and well respected by staff. The Chief Fire Officer provides clear and visible leadership of the Service. He has a good working relationship with the Portfolio Holder and is highly respected by staff and partner agencies. The Fire Service's move to the Local Services Group has already demonstrated benefits both to the Service and the Council.

The County Council has new governance structures which members and officers are comfortable with, including creating a cross-party Policy Board, reshaping the scrutiny committees and appointing a new Scrutiny Chair for issues related to the Service. Members consider the Service to be a high priority for local people. Members have clear passion and pride in the Service and in making local communities safer. Members feel they have the opportunity to be involved in fire service issues.

The Service communicates to the wider community including members through area committees. The Service is exhibiting leadership on agendas beyond fire, such as co-location, safeguarding and health and wellbeing. Initiatives undertaken by the Chief Fire Officer has resulted in establishing a positive working relationship with the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Areas to consider

- **Shaping the operation of Scrutiny**
- **Communication and feedback**

As the Service reflects on the impact of being a more intelligence-led organisation it should ensure its management structure is aligned appropriately and has sufficient capacity to meet priorities.

The Scrutiny Chair should consider more actively shaping the scrutiny agenda for fire issues. This could be achieved by providing more steer to scrutiny support officers, on issues it wishes to explore. Examining fewer issues in more depth and taking a resident's perspective is likely to add more value.

Feedback on communication from frontline firefighters experienced by the peer team seemed to be inconsistent across the Areas. It is probably important to recognise that the timing of the peer challenge coincided with a period of national industrial action by the Fire Brigades Union over pensions and this may have influenced this situation to some degree.

9. Financial viability

Strengths

- **Track record of delivering savings**
- **Planning for future budget reductions**

Like all County Councils, Northumberland is planning for large-scale future budget reductions. The financial impact for the Service is relatively limited in the wider context of the savings the Council needs to make. The Service has managed its previous financial challenges well, making a saving of £2m since 2010.

The projected savings requirement over the next Comprehensive Spending Review period is £846,000. The Service has profiled the savings and is modelling larger scale savings should this become necessary. The Service has a good track record of sound financial planning.

Area to consider

- **Relating budgets more closely to priorities**

One of the primary financial challenges will be to relate future budgets much more closely to the Service's agreed priorities. Some of the Service's priorities are reliant on external funding, particularly prevention. The Service now needs to take the opportunity to see how its resources can best support the delivery of its priorities and inform what happens at the operational level. This should be focused on making the best use of existing resources.

The financial strategy for future years outlines areas of potential savings. The Service will need to manage the on-going risk of greater long-term financial reductions if these are called for and monitor the changing landscape.

10. Organisational capacity

Strength

- **A lean organisation**

Previous staffing reviews have created a lean organisation. The Service have aimed to make more efficient use of capacity by sharing services like stores, PPE, equipment and fleet maintenance with Tyne & Wear Fire and Rescue Service. Additional capacity has been created through work with the Princes Trust, deployment of volunteers and recruitment of apprentices. The Service brings in additional capacity for specific projects on a bespoke basis.

Areas for consideration

- **Stretched capacity**
- **More focus on organisational development**

The Service has not been able to prioritise organisational development and change management, following the impact of efficiencies over the last three years. This potentially creates a long-term risk as it weakens the Service's capacity to undertake effective workforce planning and succession planning. This may become more significant in the future as the Service is reshaped due to funding reductions. The Service does, however, make use of County Council Organisational Development.

11. Conclusion and contact information

Throughout the peer challenge the team met with enthusiastic and committed officers. As a result, it is clear that Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service has opportunities to make further progress.

The peer team believe that by harnessing staff enthusiasm and commitment Northumberland can embrace the future, managing the risks and challenges along with way.

For more information regarding the Fire Peer Challenge please contact:

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www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

12. How the peer challenge aims to add value

The LGA is keen to understand how peer challenge can add real benefits for the Service. We will evaluate the peer challenge, but we are also keen to track the benefits the Service have derived from the work. The benefits will be explored sometime after the peer challenge. However, the peer team have identified the following likely significant benefits from this peer challenge:

- **Developing call management performance and further opportunities** - this is a major piece of work being undertaken by the Service in 2013 and the peer challenge provided reassurance on the work achieved in this area. It also flagged areas for future improvement like the need to ensure robust call management performance monitoring in the future.
- **Exploring wider opportunities to be creative with prevention work** – the Service recognised the declining overall resources focused on prevention work and the team identified ways prevention work can be expanded by drawing on volunteers to a greater extent and reshaping the role of the Community Safety Academy.
- **A greater intelligence-led approach** – the team acknowledged the current use of risk data but advocated a more comprehensive and consistent use of data (and widen the data used to assess risk). This should enable the Service to better target its future risk work as well as look at the ‘bigger picture’ by undertaking a risk review across the county.

13. Notable practice

National work on tackling wildfires

The Service takes a national lead on tackling wildfires. This is an area of notable practice. This includes developing the Scottish Operational Guidance Manual for Wildfire commissioned by the Scottish Government and implementing wildfire detection work in the National Park.

Long established work on co-location

The Service have a good track record of co-locating with other service providers like NE Ambulance Service, SureStart and Mountain Rescue. This is an area of notable practise. These are well established and long-standing. Some of the co-locations have been in place for a number of years. The Service is committed to exploring other options to co-locate in the future.