



CFOA
Chief Fire Officers
Association



Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire & Rescue Authority Fire Peer Challenge

Report

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1. Introduction, Context and Purpose

This report captures the outcomes and presents the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA) Fire Peer Challenge at Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire & Rescue Authority) in June 2014. For ease of reference the report will refer to the Service as Buckinghamshire FRS (BFRS).

The Fire Peer Challenge is part of 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 10-12th June 2014. One day of the peer challenge coincided with a 24 hour Fire Brigade Union strike. Consequently one peer team member was unable to attend. Due to this and the operational commitments of some members of the peer team, it was agreed with BFRS to shorten the peer challenge by one day.

The peer challenge consisted of a range of on-site activity that included interviews, observations and focus groups. The peer team met with a broad cross-section of elected members, officers, staff, frontline firefighters, stakeholders and partners. Due to the reduced team and the industrial action the team were only able to visit two wholtime and two retained fire stations to talk to fire fighters. During their time with BFRS the peer team were well looked after and everyone the team met was fully engaged with the process and appeared open and honest.

The peer team also undertook background reading provided to them in advance, including the BFRS OpA self-assessment and key supporting documentation.

The evidence and feedback gathered was assimilated into broad themes and a discussion of the findings was delivered to the Service's senior management team and members of the fire authority.

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 fire authority 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 is part of the LGA's approach to self-regulation and improvement which aims to help councils and FRAs strengthen local accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services. 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

The report provides detailed information on three core questions under the theme of Leadership and Corporate Capacity:

- How effective is Leadership and Governance?
- How well are outcomes for citizens being achieved?
- How effective is the organisational capacity to meet current requirements and future needs?

The peer team were also asked to focus on three key areas:

- Community Risk Management – with particular reference to the Service's gathering of data; how data is turned into intelligence and how effectively this inter-relates with Prevention, Protection and Response.
- Prevention – How a smaller streamlined central community safety team can support the needs of local stations to drive forward Prevention initiatives. Given that partnerships had been reduced over the past two years, how the Service could make best use of its partners particularly around evaluating local initiatives
- Response – The Service is facing significant change and asked the team to provide some scrutiny of its response model going forward; opportunities for further innovative ideas to enhance efficiencies and the effectiveness and communication of its risk information particularly in operational assurance.

The areas of Protection Health and Safety, Call Management and Training and Development received a very much lighter touch consideration by the peers.

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 BFRS was:

- Mark Yates CFO Hereford and Worcestershire FRS – Lead Peer
- Cllr Mac McGuire – Cambridgeshire County Council
- Andy Johnson – Assistant CFO – Shropshire FRS
- George Marshall – Group Commander - Hereford and Worcestershire FRS
- Gill Elliott – Local Government Association

3. Background

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service serves a population of more than 750,000 in the South East of England. The area stretches from the outskirts of London to the South Midlands. It comprises the four districts of Buckinghamshire – Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe and Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes is the northernmost part of the area, bordering the East of England and the East Midlands and is one of the fastest-growing places in England. Since 1971, its population has risen from 67,000 to around 249,000. Government plans for housing in the region could see tens of thousands of new homes built in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes over the next 25 years or so, with most of this development taking place in Milton Keynes and Aylesbury Vale.

The area served by Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service includes stretches of the M1, M4, M25 and M40 motorways, a section of the West Coast Main Line, several miles of the River Thames, part of the Silverstone motor racing circuit and Chequers, the Prime Minister's country residence. Heathrow and Luton Airports lie just outside the area. The proposed HS2 high speed rail link will travel through the county.

Although many parts of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes enjoy the affluence associated with the Home Counties, there are pockets of deprivation throughout the area. Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service receive around 18,000 calls for assistance every year, of which about 8,000 are emergency incidents. It has 42 frontline and specialist fire and rescue vehicles and hosts an Urban Search and Rescue team, an Incident Response Unit and a shared response with Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service for a Detection Identification and Monitoring Unit.

More than 500 firefighters operate from Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service's 20 strategically placed fire stations. There are three protection offices, Great Missenden (covering Aylesbury Vale and Chiltern Districts), Broughton (covering Milton Keynes) and Marlow (covering Wycombe and South Bucks Districts).

The Service is overseen by Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority, whose membership is drawn from Buckinghamshire County Council (12 members) and Milton Keynes Council (5 members). It has an annual net revenue budget of around £28 million.

4. Summary of Findings

BFRS has been on a significant improvement journey since 2010 when it was severely criticised by an Audit Commission inspection that took place in 2009. Since then the Service has had a new Chief Fire Officer and Authority Chair and together they have driven through a change agenda which included restructuring the senior management team; reducing the number of authority members and reducing the number of wholetime firefighters by natural wastage. At the same time a culture of empowerment has been cascaded from top to middle managers. Human Resource (HR) policies and procedures

have been updated to facilitate this approach and to support managers to deal with issues around capability, performance, and attendance of their staff. Members of the Fire Authority have been very supportive of the change agenda. They are well briefed on proposals and relationships with officers are good. One example of this which was brought to the team's attention is around the Service's new approach to dealing with unwanted fire alarms.

The Service is delivering good outcomes for its citizens and key response targets are either being met or are improving. The tri-service Thames Valley Control project is progressing well and BFRS has the capacity to ensure this is delivered effectively for its communities. Equipment and appliances are improving and this is recognised by staff. Health and Safety processes are very good and there is a strong and improving culture of safety in the Service.

The availability of On Call crews and appliances remains a challenge but the organisation has started to explore this via an On Call improvement forum which is looking at the issue in a holistic way that includes recruitment, retention and training. All the On Call staff peers spoke to were proud of the service they provide to the community. On Call staff appear optimistic that improvements to their part of the service will be forthcoming. The peer team felt that management engagement with frontline staff going forward will be the key to the success of future changes.

The organisation is currently focussing on its new Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) referred to as the Public Safety Plan (PSP) for 2015-2020. The Plan sets out how the organisation will respond to the changing environment including reduced demand for operational services. The Plan also details how the Service will deliver further savings of £4.6M. It sets out possibilities for a new response model for the Service which could result in station closures and changed crewing arrangements. Members have given their support and appear ready to take the tough decisions that will be needed to implement it. It will be important for the Service to carefully consider the staff and public consultation process around the Plan as so far efficiencies have not affected the number or location of stations or arrangements for crewing which is widely accepted as contentious and emotive. Both Members and senior officers demonstrated innovation in their thinking but as yet this hasn't manifested itself as significant innovation in delivery of the Authority's business or services.

BFRS is a business focussed and ambitious service and one that in recent years has been very much externally focussed as its reputation has been rebuilt. It will be important going forward to ensure that it also seeks out the innovations that are taking place in other Services and uses the good practice that it finds elsewhere to inform its own thinking around new ways of working. This may be around response models, crewing arrangements, On Call improvement, and data systems.

The Service is working on a number of major projects currently and as it implements the Public Safety Plan there are going to be even more work streams. It will be important to make sure that this programme of change is managed in a way that does not over stretch BFRS' capacity both in terms of management but also ICT infrastructure. Several ICT systems were described as "creaking" including the intranet, and the database that records home

safety fire checks (HFSC). The HR system ideally requires greater functionality. Performance Plus has not been used to its full potential due to the system's design, management buy-in and lack of ownership. The importance of capturing performance data across the Service is a major cultural shift and it remains a challenge for the service. Ensuring the ICT infrastructure and maintenance is adequate to support the Service through their self-set change programme is fundamental to the Service as it addresses the challenges of the future.

As part of its efficiencies since 2012 the Service has revised the way it approaches Prevention activities. The number of partnerships it maintains were reduced to ensure that those that remain are contributing to fire service aims and objectives. The central Community Safety Team was reduced from 28 to 7 posts and wholtime fire stations have been tasked with delivering Prevention activities at a local level with support from the three area based community support co-ordinators. This model has the potential to deliver some good results however the structure is in the early stages and creating effective links between the Community Safety Team and station personnel will be key to its overall success. There is improved identification and targeting of vulnerable households and some good local prevention initiatives. The peer team did have a concern that locally driven initiatives may not always be linked to the central strategy and not always evidence and data based in their design. It was difficult to identify examples as the structure was new but staff did articulate this potential. The Service has good links with Thames Valley Police but going forward it will be important for the Service to maintain good working relationships with all its partners, particularly if there are staff changes. BFRS has expressed a desire to utilise volunteers to support its Community Safety functions. Consideration should be given to exploring volunteers systems in existence in partner organisations and other FRSS.

Key Areas of Focus

5. Leadership & Governance

Strengths

The Chief Fire Officer and his team provide a strong vision for the Service to be the best fire and rescue service and for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes to be the safest areas in England in which to live work and travel. They also provide good leadership on change in the organisation. The Service is currently implementing a tri-service control room project with Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire Fire Services. A joint fire control provision was originally planned with Cambridgeshire FRS but this option was not pursued as BFRS considered that the current tri-service project would be a better option in terms of financial efficiencies and service delivery.

Since 2010 the “Moving Forward” programme has seen significant costs taken out of the organisation. The number of Members in the Fire Authority and committees were reduced, the senior management team was re-structured and new managers were brought in from outside the Service. Managers further down the structure feel empowered to “get on with things” and have demonstrated a desire to deliver. This culture of continuous improvement is being embedded in the management and support structure.

The Leader of the Fire Authority and its Members fully support the senior officers. Relationships are very good and Members receive open briefings on key issues. Workshops are held for Members to consider proposals early on in the planning process and these informal meetings ensure issues are thoroughly discussed before proposals go before to the committee stage. There are good communications between officers and Authority Members including a regular Members’ newsletter.

The new IRMP, termed the Public Safety Plan 2015-2020, has just been approved by Members with some caveats and the document will be ready for staff and public consultation shortly. The Plan details savings of £4.6m from the annual budget and contains proposals to revise the response model that could include station relocation and potential closure and revised crewing arrangements. Authority Members appear to be ready and able to take the tough decisions that will be needed to implement the outcome of the Plan.

Members support for innovative solutions to issues has already been demonstrated by their support for a new approach by the Service for dealing with unwanted fire alarms.

Relationships with the Fire Officers Association (FOA) which represents middle managers have improved over the past six months which is perhaps an indication of the way changes are being perceived more positively by this group of staff.

Areas for consideration

Although consultation with both staff and public on the new IRMP had not commenced at the time of the review, this is now on-going, including with staff groups. Consultation on the Public Safety Plan to date has involved

stakeholder forums, involving a total of approximately 50 members of the public and staff forums, with approximately 40 staff from various departments. However, few of the staff peers had spoken to were aware of what it contained and certainly none of the frontline firefighters were aware of it.

Effective engagement and consultation with employees and the public around the Public Safety Plan will be crucial to its implementation. The document is very clear that a number of measures have not been ruled out including outsourcing, privatisation, station closures and changes to crewing patterns. All are potentially controversial so it will be important for the Service to convey the message about why such changes are necessary and to actively consider any alternative models that may be suggested. Dialogue with the workforce over the rationale for and pace of change needs to continue, more two-way communication would help.

The Service has dealt with the national dispute over pensions and series of strikes in a robust and effective way which has not adversely affected the public. The dispute has inevitably affected employee relations with wholetime firefighters and their representatives, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). Improved relationships with representative bodies would help to deliver future service plans. It would also be useful to have more discussions with employees and their representatives around new ways of working and any alternative delivery models. Once they have become clearer, any potential options need to be communicated throughout the organisation with that communication being repeated and reinforced.

There is a clear need for strong political leadership to address the Service's future challenges, explore all options and embrace the difficult decisions. All Members of the Authority need to be advocates for the fire service and engage with their local communities on fire service issues. There needs to be a better shared understanding of future potential options for going forward. The limited number of station based staff who were seen said that they have little contact with the Fire Authority and other councillors. The Service should consider how it can provide more opportunities for Members to attend community events that staff are involved with. Members can also be a good source of generating volunteers for the Fire Service from the community.

Since 2010 BFRS has developed a strong external focus both within the UK and abroad. Staff have been seconded to the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the CFO and senior officers have high external profiles. This along with service improvement has undoubtedly helped to improve the Service's reputation. Going forward, however, the Service should consider whether it has the capacity and resources to sustain this strong external focus whilst delivering a significant internal change agenda.

6. Outcomes For Citizens

Strengths

Partners spoke very positively about BFRS as a partner in prevention activities. They value the fact that the Service has a “can do” attitude and is always willing to take part in initiatives. They also appreciated the fact that fire service premises were often made available for community events. The Biker Down initiative to reduce collisions involving motor bikes was singled out as a really good initiative and partners praised the knowledge and commitment of the Service’s Community Safety Team.

The Service has exceeded its HFSC target and is now starting to better use its data better to target the most vulnerable 1700 homes in the community. This self-set target is considered to be modest and should look to be extended.

BFRS is performing well against their targets for making people safer in their homes, work and public places, for example reduced fires, injuries and false alarms. BFRS is working towards meeting their targets for making people safer on the roads’.

Emergency call handling response times are improving. This is significant as emergency control staff have faced considerable uncertainty over their future in recent years with a proposed merger with Cambridgeshire FRS and now a Thames Valley tri-service project with the control room being located in Reading. The Service has been effective in addressing resourcing problems in the Control Room and this has contributed to the improved performance.

The Service has well established contingency plans for dealing with industrial action that has occurred over the past nine months. The response has been effective in keeping the community safe and responding to emergencies.

The Authority has taken a robust stance on controlling rises in council tax to ensure citizens pay as little as possible for their fire service. This is evidenced by the Authority being the only Authority in England to not raise the council tax by £5.00 (Band D) when given the opportunity to do so.

Areas for consideration

The availability of On Call appliances remains a challenge for the service with officers accepting that up to ten or more On Call appliances can be off the run due to staff unavailability at any given time during the working day. A recent On Call Review Workshop and Management Information document, indicated that the Service was facing a period of unprecedented numbers of On Call staff leaving the Service. Of those who are serving members, the majority are aged between 45 – 54. Recruitment and retention into the current system has been limited in its success; of the 115 leavers in a six year period, 36 have left without completing one years’ service. This is an area that urgently needs to be addressed.

Partners based in the Milton Keynes area seem to have maintained their access to the Fire Service and its data better than those in other areas. It was

clear that in the past community and statutory partners had been used to having a close relationship with the Community Safety Team. Now that the team is smaller some partners feel that they have lost that personal contact. Several didn't know who their main contact with the Service was, others said that they no longer have the same access to data that they used to have.

Community Safety partners were keen to work with BFRS, however they felt that a better understanding of their strategic aims would create a more effective working relationship. Partners praised the fact that BFRS were always keen to be involved in projects but some partners said that they would like to see the Service take the initiative as they had in the past when BFRS was leading and resourcing partnerships across a wide spectrum.

7. Organisational Capacity

Strengths

Managers and support staff are clearly very proud to work for the Service. All those that peers spoke to were highly motivated and keen to deliver.

The approach which the Service has to being both cost focussed and business minded is tangible throughout all managerial levels of the organisation. Even operational crews appreciate that this will stand the Service in good stead for reaching future cost targets.

The organisation is successfully starting to tackle sickness absence and poor performance. One example of this robust approach is the reduction in the number of staff on light duties from an average of 8 each month to zero. Overall levels of sickness absence have dropped significantly since 2012. There are a relatively high number of discipline cases which again reflects the robust approach. Station managers are embracing their line management role and seem keen to attend the training offered.

The Service and its staff are confident that it can deliver its part of the tri-service Thames Valley Control Room project with Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire FRSs. An Operational Support Room will be set up to deal with out-of scope issues. This will reduce the potential savings but nevertheless the project will deliver substantial cost reductions to the Authority. The Operational Support Room 'Budget Growth Bid' states that a time and motion study has been conducted which has indicated that the Service will need to retain 5 people to do all 'Out of scope' activities, after the Thames Valley Control has been implemented. The work identified as activities detailed for this new team covers the management of all information to and from the TVFCS, as well as other internal information processes (e.g. distribution of 'After the fire' letters and performance reporting) and also includes business continuity arrangements during very busy periods. The Peer Team are of the view that this level of resourcing should provide a good level of resilience to the Service.

Areas for consideration

BFRS will be embarking on some significant change projects from 2015 onward as it implements the Public Safety Plan 2015-2020. This is in addition to a number of projects already started such as the On Call Improvement Forum; a new website, an improved intranet, and the VIPER upgraded Performance Plus system. It will be important for the Service to be able to manage the cumulative effect of all these projects. A robust approach to programme management will be needed to co-ordinate the various projects.

Peers gained the impression that resources to deliver future change are being well used but also that they are already being stretched. All the new projects will require ICT support as well as HR, Finance and other managerial resources if they are to be delivered effectively.

A key area of concern is the Service's ICT infrastructure. A number of systems were described to peers as "creaking" including the HFSC data base, the I-Drive intranet and the website. HR would like its system to have a direct employee user facility. The Performance Plus system is being upgraded and re-launched, hopefully to be more effective. The Service needs to fully understand the issues in the ICT function and infrastructure and then rectify them if it is to have any hope of successfully delivering all the change it wants to over the next five years. This is a major risk area for the Authority and caused the peer team the greatest concerns during our field work.

Since 2010 efficiency savings have been achieved by restructuring, a programme of redundancies and by not filling posts resulting from natural wastage. Whilst this has created opportunities for staff to take on new work and be empowered to take decisions, it has also meant a loss of managerial skills and knowledge. Skills of engaging, consulting and operational delivery are being lost. This may affect the ability of the Service to deliver in the future. BFRS has adopted targeted development and succession planning to minimise the impacts of these departures.

The Service has expressed the desire to build up a cohort of volunteers to help it across a variety of work around community safety and community engagement with the Service. Peers would commend this approach and suggest that the Service explore working with the County Council volunteer infrastructure as it develops its own volunteer groups as well as approaching other FRSs that have established volunteer schemes.

8. Community Risk Management

Strengths

The Service has good data systems for determining risk profiles. It has recently moved from Mosaic to Acorn which incorporates a unique property reference. The Service is proactively reviewing its current risk modelling systems and is currently exploring solutions provided by CadCorp. An effective system will be required to support the potential changes detailed in the Public Safety Plan 2015-20. The Corporate Gazeteer was recognised as an effective systematic approach to storing risk information. It is linked to the Site Specific Risk Inspection programme and has the potential to be developed further by creating links to areas such as Technical Fire Safety inspections and Partnership data.

The Service has undertaken significant statistical analysis, looking at the correlation of various population characteristics and the prevalence of fires across their area. This information has been used to good effect in the identification and subsequent targeting of those properties likely to be at greatest risk.

The risk analysis team has explained the processes by which the vulnerable groups have been identified, to the community safety team, which has ensured that staff have an understanding of their target audience when undertaking Home Fire Safety checks. The data obtained from the analysis has been entered into the HFSC database and is used to direct this important work.

All appropriate statutory legislation and guidance has been taken into account during the development of the new Public Safety Plan. This includes the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The requirements placed on the Fire Authority by the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework Document has also been considered.

In considering changes in the risk profile of the Authority area going forward across the five year period covered by its new Public Safety Plan, the Service has sought and gained intelligence from its partner agencies about their plans for regeneration across the county. This includes changes in the transport infrastructure and the built and natural environments. These possible changes have been appropriately included within their future planning.

Areas for consideration

Although the Service has implemented a plan to target the vulnerable in high risk properties in the more urban areas (e.g. Milton Keynes), this is not the case across the whole of the Service's area. Due to rural properties being more widely dispersed the Service does not use the analysis results in the same way in what are predominantly On Call areas. The new Prevention Strategy also encourages more local decision making, around where CFS

activity should be targeted, which could result in the Service not realising the benefits in the more rural areas so this issue may be compounded.

The changes implemented to date, to meet the financial challenges placed upon the Authority, have been achieved with minimal impact on frontline service delivery which is commendable. However, although the Service has clearly demonstrated it has a comprehensive understanding of risks across the county, the peer team feels unable to draw any firm conclusions and/or predictions about how the Service will balance risk and resources into the future, especially in relation to the potentially more significant options being explored within the new Public Safety Plan.

As highlighted previously, the risk analysis work, undertaken by the Service over the last few years, is of an excellent quality and should be able to support decision making well into the future. However, the Service is conscious that the skills and abilities within this area are invested in very small numbers of people and would therefore be severely impacted if these staff were to leave. The Service may wish to consider how resilience in this area could be improved.

Performance Plus received strategic backing however it only realised 20% of its capability. The re-launch of the system upgrade 'VIPER' will need to be carefully managed. Lessons will need to be learnt from the implementation of Performance Plus and consideration given to the skills lost within the department. In addition to the provision of appropriate training, identifying clear lines of responsibility and appropriate performance management at all levels will be key to the success of the new system.

9. Prevention

Strengths

The Service launched its new Prevention Strategy on 1st April 2014. The Strategy underpins the Corporate Plan and sets out the high level strategy for how the Service will continue to make its communities safer. The Strategy outlines the key activities that the Service will undertake from 2014 to 2016 and it provides a good steer for delivery. The launch of the new prevention strategy, station plans and the Community Safety Team structure provides the foundation for effective change and there are examples of innovative local initiatives.

Since the Community Safety Team was restructured in 2011 the emphasis has been on station based prevention activity based on data from systems like Acorn, partner referrals and the community safety intelligence. Station plans for Wholetime stations outline the prevention activity for the area including the On Call station areas. Each station has an annual target for completing HFSCs. Evidence provided shows that there are a range of good local initiatives including school visits, youth courses, fire and road safety roadshows, advertising at leisure centres, links with colleges and joint training for housing tenants. Stations are being encouraged to set objectives for their activities and to evaluate their success.

Activity at station level is supported by the Central Community Safety Team and three area based community safety co-ordinators. Partners were very complimentary about the Community Safety Team and co-ordinators and praised their knowledge and commitment. However, some were concerned that if individuals left or the post was lost these good links would not continue.

The Service maintains good links with other agencies, e.g with Thames Valley Police around arson control. It has memoranda of understandings with the police, the prison service, and cross border fire services. The Service also has data sharing protocols with Bucks County Council and Milton Keynes Council. It has formal agreements with national charities like Age UK and the British Red Cross which has trained volunteers who carry out HFSCs. A representative from BFRS sits on the Adults and Children's Safeguarding boards in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

The Service has improved its targeting of vulnerable groups, homes and premises. The Acorn system is able to generate risk information about specific addresses with other information coming from local knowledge and signposting from other agencies. The 1700 most vulnerable households have been identified and are targeted for HFSC checks and "warm calling".

Comments from the Community Safety Coordinators indicate that they appreciate that the changes are still bedding in and therefore it is too early to make a judgement on how effective the changes have been. However, they are quite optimistic that, despite the significant reduction in the number of staff within the community safety team, they will gradually be able to focus their

work on the most vulnerable groups in their respective areas, thereby overcoming the loss in capacity.

Also based on comments from the Community Safety Coordinators, verified by comments from the local Station Managers, it would appear that the change in policy, towards more local decision making on the targeting of safety campaigns, has been implemented to a varying degree across the Service area. There again appears to be a Milton Keynes and County split here, possibly due to it being easier for the MK Community Coordinator to keep in touch with the Station Manager and other Partners, and therefore give more directional support than it is in the larger more rural areas.

The same point also applies to the ability for Partners to get involved in evaluating local initiatives. Partners in the rural areas may not be in a position to help here. The Community Safety Coordinators commented that, in relation to setting up data sharing agreements with partners, they felt this was very difficult due data protection issues and they were also concerned that if they received data about vulnerable persons, the Service may not be in a position to respond to all of the properties that might be identified.

Areas for consideration

Since 2011 there have been a number of significant changes to the way prevention activities are carried out by the Service. Community Safety was restructured from a centralised team of 28 posts to small central team of 4 and 3 area co-ordinators. Prevention became station focussed using local intelligence and data, with this change of culture still being embedded, with some station commanders slow to really take on their new role. At the same time specialist knowledge has been lost and some of the professional links with the central team have been broken. The Service has also reduced the number of partners it works with to focus on those they felt were able to contribute to fire service aims and objectives.

Station based prevention activity in an area is planned and delivered by whole-time station crews that also cover the On Call areas. The On Call crews that peers spoke to both said that they would like to be more involved in community safety. They felt that because they no longer carry out HFSCs or visits to vulnerable businesses like care homes, they are becoming less familiar with their local area which has had an impact on their performance at incidents.

Although the restructure of the Community Safety Team took place in 2011 several of the partners that peers spoke to were still unfamiliar with the new structure or who their main point of contact in the Service is. All appreciated that the Service had to operate in more difficult economic times and that this would mean reorganisation and changed roles. However, they all felt that at times like this partnership working was more important than ever. Several partners said that they needed a better understanding of the Service's strategy for community safety, the community safety organisational structure and the names of station managers. BFRS should ensure that the Community Safety Team, station personnel and partners have a full understanding of the

new structure, including individual responsibilities, in order to deliver the Community Safety Strategy.

There appeared to be inconsistencies in the way partnerships work across the fire service's area. Partners based in Milton Keynes said that partnership working now was better than 5 or 10 years ago and they always had access to a fire safety officer. Partners in other areas like Chilterns and South Bucks were less satisfied with the contact they had with the fire service. One partner said they now only had an e-mail contact with Community Safety.

Partners generally felt that the Fire Service was less focussed on working in partnership and more on each station "doing their own thing". Links with the area co-ordinators are still good but there were comments that there was often no feedback from fire stations after a partner referral. Access to fire service data appeared to be an issue for several partners, arson data was mentioned by several partners. A partner working on road safety said that fire station staff were keen to visit schools but there was a lack of co-ordination around what they said and to whom. Schools visits seemed to be ad hoc and often led to a negative impact on other road safety initiatives organised across the wider area. There was concern that road safety activities were not based on data but the fire service's own information. The local authorities stressed that they are keen to work in partnership with the fire stations, so that common messages can be delivered using a data led approach.

10. Response

Strengths

The two main strands to the Service's response model in the future are around the On Call fire fighter service delivery and the new IRMP or Public Safety Plan 2015-2020. The On Call service has by the Service's own admittance been poorly managed in the past and that has resulted in poor recruitment, high turnover, low morale and problems of availability of appliances. This is well understood by many officers who spoke to peers. A new on-call working group has been established which has already started working on a range of On Call issues including availability, contracts, training, recruitment and retention. This is a very positive step and for the first time in a while On Call staff feel optimistic about their future in the Service and have confidence in their management. On Call staff feel that they are no longer being kept in the dark about service developments with communications improving

Staff appreciate that the standard of their appliances and equipment has improved and is still improving. All the operational staff peers spoke to were proud of the service they provide to the community.

Robust Emergency Planning arrangements are in place and this was evidenced by the industrial action plan implemented during the review. BFRS also has effective business continuity arrangements in place. This includes a regional approach through the South East Business Continuity Group and national links through the CFOA lead for Business Continuity Working Group.

Operational Assurance is delivered by a highly motivated and well-resourced team. This has led to a proactive approach to incident monitoring and feedback, monthly performance reports, debriefs and gap analysis, with actions influencing training, operational intelligence and health and safety. There is scope within the current system to create closer links with training, for example identifying inexperienced or infrequent Incident Commanders and providing support and monitoring opportunities.

Thematic reviews are completed to provide evidence for future initiatives, such as watch visits covering a range of practical, technical and risk based assessments. This evidence based approach promotes positive engagement with operational personnel but it is important that the rationale behind initiatives is clearly communicated to operational personnel to ensure understanding and positive engagement.

Innovation is demonstrated through involvement with the Assessment Development Centre, use of Survey Monkey and co-responding arrangements with South Central Ambulance Service.

Areas for consideration

The draft Public Safety Plan 2015-20 sets out the way the Service will respond to the risks within the community. The Plan is still at the consultation stage so it provides a good opportunity for the Service to consider how it can

further innovate. Peers felt that the current response model lacks innovation seen in many other FRSs, which is possibly a reflection of the fact that since 2010 the Service has had to concentrate on cost cutting and rebuilding its reputation, all of which have been achieved without impacting on the level of service delivered to the public.

There are a range of innovative response models around the country that could be considered and BFRS is encouraged to tap into its external focus to harvest innovative solutions that already exist. The multitude of CFOA groups and work streams could provide “rich pickings” for assistance. The Service has a lot of information on the risk across the area, but will need to consider how this can be communicated most effectively to the public and other stakeholders.

The Service has started to explore the many issues affecting the On Call system. This is commendable, but expectations have been raised which need to be met. There are good opportunities to capitalise on the On Call enthusiasm for change.

Members have expressed their appetite to support the challenging changes contained in the new response model. These include the possibility of closed or re-located stations as well as new crewing patterns. So far the Service has managed its efficiency savings without appearing to significantly affect frontline services. Delivering the new model will impact on sections of the public and on operational staff and there may well be difficult decisions to be taken by Members. It will be important to ensure that Members really understand the changes they will be asked to support and the impacts that the communities may feel

The ongoing industrial action has inevitably coloured the views of operational staff, but there does seem to be a lack of understanding about other changes the Service is experiencing. Going forward the management team may need to look at how effective their communications with wholetime personnel have been in the past and to consider and consult on the best ways to communicate with operational staff.

The following areas received a lighter touch consideration from the peer team

11. Training and Development

Strengths

Peers noted the Service’s awareness of opportunities for delivering training with different models such as privatisation or outsourcing. BFRS has ambitious plans and are currently carrying out a review of operational and commercial training in addition to piloting an e-learning system. The Service is already involved in inter-agency working with Thames Valley Police and local authorities using its incident command suite

Areas to explore

When changes are made to the way training is delivered it will be important to consider the impact this is having, including the cumulative impact of a series of changes.

As training is driven down to station level it will be important to know early on if there are problems. Both On Call and wholetime staff said that there was an overemphasis on assessment rather than training, e.g. breathing apparatus training. Some On Call staff thought that cascading training to stations via I-Drive was not always fully effective, e.g. high rise training. Training at station level needs to be high quality and station managers may need additional support to be really effective trainers.

Over the next five years there may be a skills gap amongst managers in the future that could become a serious issue. The Service needs to recognise where there this may occur and ensure training plans are in place to address it.

12. Protection

The Service has an agreed approach to automatic fire alarm (AFA) reduction. It currently attends all calls for assistance and does not attempt to delay/filter calls on the basis of number of previous unwanted fire signals (UWFS) or premises type. BFRS consider that this approach gives a consistent safety message to industry and commerce and fosters an improved fire safety culture within premises based on education, guidance and where necessary, through enforcement, by use of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

Peers feel that the BFRS approach, whilst innovative and encouraging a fire safety aware culture in premises, may not fully demonstrate a risk based approach to AFA reduction and may not fully encourage premises owners to take proactive steps to deal with their alarm systems, rather relying on BFRS staff to assist them to do so. This approach also relies on a specialist post which is commendable but does also rely on the post being reliably available.

During the visit it was made known that consideration is being given to crews carrying out basic fire protection inspections. This is commendable and may provide positive benefits to the operational arena but an effective structure will need to be established and operational personnel will need appropriate training to carry out inspections. In addition consideration must also be given to introducing this alongside other initiatives that will also require greater involvement at station level, such as Community Safety initiatives and a proposed increase in station based training.

It was not clear whether the recent decision to stop supporting FSEC will impact on BFRS BFS prioritisation process. Another FRS adopted an approach whereby they sent out a self-evaluation questionnaire to all businesses in the Service area, asking them to provide relevant fire safety information. BFRS may wish to consider a similar approach in an effort to help inform its property gazetteer and future enforcement programme.

13. Health and Safety

The Service has a good focus on Health and Safety. There are appropriate processes that are being improved constantly. Staff are well qualified. A Health and Safety Strategic Review has recently been carried out.

14. Call Management

The peer team had no contact or examination of Bucks Fire Control except exploration of the resilience of the function until cut over to TVFCS – resilience appears to be in place. Peers were satisfied (within the confines of the available time and staff contacts) that the organisation has the capacity to deliver the project and to continue delivering an effective service until “cut-over” to the new service.

15. Conclusion and contact information

Throughout the peer challenge the team met with enthusiastic and committed officers and staff. It is clear that BFRS is determined to provide an excellent service. There is enthusiasm and commitment from all staff and the peer team believe that by harnessing this and by seeking out more innovative and creative solutions BFRS will continue on its improvement journey.

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

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Appendix – Presentation Slides

Leadership & Governance

Strengths

- Strong vision and leadership on change from the senior team
- Empowerment from the top appears to cascade down to middle managers
- Culture of continuous improvement is being embedded in the management structures
- Authority Leader and Members support the senior officers and are ready for the future challenges
- Acceptance that the new IRMP may mean changes to the response model
- Members support has been demonstrated for innovative solutions such as unwanted fire alarms
- Engagement with FOA has improved in the last six months

Areas for consideration

- Limited involvement in the development of new IRMP below SMT level
- Consultation on Public Safety Plan
- Improved relationships with representative bodies
- Station based operational personnel, especially On Call, have little contact with Fire Authority and other councillors
- Success or otherwise of direct engagement with operational staff
- The available capacity within the change agenda to maintain the strong external focus

Outcomes For Citizens

Strengths

- BFRS is a valued partner within Bucks and Milton Keynes
- Service has exceeded its HFSC targets and is now better targeting vulnerable homes The direction of travel around accidental and

deliberate fires is positive with numbers reducing in line with national trends. Targets are broadly being met for non-domestic fires

- Emergency call handling response time is improving
- Strike contingency planning is established and well understood
- Control of Council Tax

Areas for consideration

- Availability of On Call appliances remains a challenge
- CS Partner relationships (notably outside Milton Keynes)
- Impact in relation to the scale and speed of CS restructure

Organisational Capacity

Strengths

- Managerial staff throughout the organisation are proud to work for BFRS and are a major asset to the service
- Service is cost focussed and business minded
- Organisation is successfully tackling sickness absence and poor performance
- BFRS has the capacity to deliver their part of the TV Control project

Areas for consideration

- Is the organisation sufficiently aware of the impact of the scale and pace of change, especially considering the PSP 2015-2020 – programme management
- Resources needed to deliver future change agenda
- Sustainability and effectiveness of ICT in order to deliver current and future improvements
- Loss of managers may affect skills to deliver services in the future
- Use of volunteers

Community Risk Management

Strengths

- Service has good understanding of local risks and this informs targeting
- Development of IRMP has taken statutory responsibility and national guidance into account
- Considers future risks for partner agencies e.g. transport, planning and regeneration

- BFRS are moving towards a targeted approach

Areas for consideration

- Good data is available to inform strategies but may not be fully utilised on the ground
- Service has ability to balance risk and resources but no evidence of how this will work in practice
- There is limited resilience within the risk analysis team
- Learn lessons from Performance Plus in the re-launch of Viper

Prevention

Strengths

- New Prevention Strategy launched on 1st April 2014
- Good range of positive initiatives across BFRS
- Within Wholetime areas there are examples of good engagement with crews regarding local initiatives
- Highly motivated and experienced Community Safety team
- Links with other agencies e.g. Thames Valley Police
- Accurately identified vulnerable groups and premises

Areas for consideration

- On Call involvement in Community Safety
- Partners' understanding of new structure, strategy and contacts.
- Use of Partners data
- Inconsistent approach to Partnership working between Districts
- Stakeholders understanding of the framework linking strategy to station initiatives
- Ad hoc nature of initiatives

Response

Strengths

- Establishment of an on-call working group that has commenced work
- Sense of optimism within On Call personnel for future improvements
- On Call stations now receiving far more information
- Improving appliances and equipment

- All personnel demonstrated pride in delivering services to the community
- A proactive, well-resourced and innovative approach to operational assurance and Emergency Planning

Areas for consideration

- Consider innovations within response model detailed in Public Safety Plan 2015-20
- Use external focus to inform innovations in response model
- On Call issues
- Member appetite for the very challenging changes to the response model
- Effectiveness of communication with wholetime personnel and therefore their understanding of changes within the Service

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