



CFOA
Chief Fire Officers
Association



Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service Fire Peer Challenge

July 2012

Executive Summary

Cheshire FRS was Fire Service of the Year 2011-12 and has a strong track record of very good operational performance. The Service has worked hard over a number of years to drive down the number of fire incidents significantly.

From frontline staff to senior management, there is an atmosphere of enthusiasm, commitment, a 'can do' attitude and a palpable sense of 'Team Cheshire'.

The Service can point to a number of innovations which have underpinned its success in the past, including; changes to shift patterns, partnerships with organisations like Age UK, investment in training, the extensive use of advocates and volunteers and a very high level of home safety assessments. Leadership has been key in initiating and sustaining these developments.

The Service has also made good progress since its Operational Assessment three years ago, including; embedding the approach to Unitary Performance Groups, further raising members' awareness of key strategic issues (underpinned by member champions and UPGs), a sharper intelligence led approach to targeting initiatives, further improving training and achieving the 'Excellent' level in the Equalities Standard.

All of this has laid a strong platform for the future. However, the likely significant future funding reductions nationally will create pressure for a very different Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service in the future.

The Service asked the peer challenge to focus on a number of issues, which are summarised in more detail in the report. However, the plans the Service has for its future service delivery are the most crucial of these. The Operational Response Review the Service is currently undertaking represents a significant recasting of the response provision in Cheshire. Plans for this comprehensive change are being thought through carefully.

The review reflects the need for the Service to tackle anticipated significant future funding reductions. The Service is still developing these ideas and creating a picture for staff and members of the future shape of the Service as a whole will be essential.

The outcomes from the review will only hang together if implemented as a whole. Courage and resolve will be necessary by the Authority in both making the decision and seeing through its plans. As ever in such significant change programmes political and professional leadership needs to be consistent and unwavering.

The financial underpinning of the future plans for change is also critical. Accepting that is difficult with the current financial uncertainties, alignment with the change programme is crucial for success. Extending the Medium Term Financial Plan to 2017/18 and modelling scenarios in relation to the uncertainties associated with business rates funding, council tax benefit

changes and the IRMP proposals would provide a platform for a robust debate on alternative funding plans.

There will be a need for a capacity and skills audit within the organisation to ensure the plans for the future can be delivered. This will require core functions like Finance, ICT and HR to be 'fit for purpose' to support the delivery of the Authority's ambition.

Introduction

This report captures the outcomes and presents the key findings from the Local Government Associations (LGA's) Fire Peer Challenge at Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service in July 2012. Fire peer challenge is part of the new 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 17-20 July 2012 and consisted of a range of on-site activity including interviews, observations and focus groups.

The peer team met with a broad cross-section of elected members, officers, front line firefighters, stakeholders and partner agencies. During the time in Cheshire 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 the team in advance, including Cheshire's Operational Assessment 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 Services' senior members and officers.

This report provides detailed information on the key focus areas agreed with the Service:

- Plans for the future:
 - leadership and governance
 - financial viability
 - organisational capacity
- Community risk management
- Fire control
- Training and development
- Community budgets
- Asset management and ICT

The purpose of the peer challenge was to complement the Authority's Operational Assessment self assessment by providing 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.

The peer challenge team was:

- John Bonney – Chief Fire Officer, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service (Lead Peer)
- Councillor Kay Hammond – Surrey County Council
- Dene Sanders – Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Humberside Fire & Rescue Service
- Beverley Sandy – Director of Finance & Resources, South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Melanie Kinsella – Learning & Development Manager, Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service
- Neil Shaw – Programme Manager, Local Government Association

Plans for the future

Strengths

- Fire Authority works collaboratively across political party lines
- strong ethos of 'Team Cheshire'
- balanced Medium Term Financial Plan to 2015/16
- broadly 'right people are in the right posts'
- good level of operationally competent staff
- well regarded by partner agencies

Members of the Fire Authority work collaboratively across political party lines, for the benefit of all Cheshire's communities, with ambition for the future. There is a well established Service Management Team (SMT). A good relationship exists between members and SMT.

The Chief Fire Officer and SMT are well regarded by members and staff. There is a strong ethos of 'Team Cheshire', which is recognised throughout the organisation. The Service is well regarded by external partner agencies and has established a community leadership role.

The Service has a balanced Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) covering the four years to 2015/16. The MTFP has been drafted to allow for saving £4m in four years based on the likely grant reduction and is supported by £6m of general and £6m of earmarked reserves. Latest grant projections as well as determinations around council tax benefit and localisation of business rates may impact significantly on this projection.

The revenue assumptions for day to day spending made in the budget and MTFP are robust. There is a well developed financial risk register to support the reserves strategy. There has been early engagement with the unitary authorities to try and establish the impact of the Council Tax benefit changes on the funding of the Authority. Members and SMT are significantly involved in budget planning.

Within a good proportion of the organisation the 'right people are in the right posts'. The Service has a high level of operationally competent staff. The extensive use of advocates and volunteers enhance capacity at relatively low cost and provides added value.

The organisational culture of the Service is open and transparent, and this has been deliberately fostered in recent years. As a result staff morale is very positive and there is a strong 'can do' culture. The Service uses a range of channels to communicate with local communities and staff. The internal communication channels are generally good and staff understand key issues within the organisation through bulletins, core and team briefings and face to face contact with senior officers.

Emerging challenges

- creating a coherent picture of the future Service for staff and members
- courage and resolve to see through ambitious plans for change
- financial underpinning of the future plans is critical
- capacity and skills to deliver the ambition

In terms of the future the Operational Response Review the Service is currently undertaking represents both a significant recasting of the response provision in Cheshire but also a fundamental plank to delivering their medium term financial plan. An enormous amount of evidence collection and analysis has been undertaken and this should provide assurance to both the public, members and staff that the plans for this comprehensive change have been thought through carefully.

The review appears to achieve the imperatives of both using resources more efficiently and delivering effective improvement in response coverage. Successful delivery of the review will need to not only emphasise the strong evidence base but more also the overarching vision.

Creating a picture for staff and members of the future shape of the Service as a whole will be essential. In many ways, for both groups, creating a shared picture of the future is necessary to sustain commitment through what will inevitably be a challenging transition. A recognition that the review only hangs together if implemented as a whole is critical.

Although the transition is broken down into a number of work packages, members need to appreciate that the financial viability and operational integrity only holds together as a whole. Courage and resolve will be necessary by the Authority in both making the decision and seeing through its plans. As ever in such significant change programmes political and professional leadership needs to be consistent and unwavering.

The financial underpinning of the future plans for change is critical. Accepting that is difficult with the current financial uncertainties, alignment with the change programme is crucial for success. Extending the MTFP to 2017/18 and modelling scenarios in relation to the uncertainties associated with business rates funding, council tax benefit changes and the IRMP proposals would provide a platform for a robust debate on alternative funding plans.

A bid has been made for £4.2m of capital grant for the delivery of the Operational Response Review and IRMP. Should this not be forthcoming, this would need to be funded through reserves or a complete reappraisal will be required.

The Service has a three-year value for money programme to deliver savings outside of the Operational Response Review. The same coherent and rigorous approach on which the IRMP is founded, project managed and delivered needs to be applied to the value for money programme. The programme targets need to be clearly owned and monitored and the inter-related impact of the separate reviews need to be identified and accepted.

This is particularly pertinent as these functions will necessarily need to complement and support the Operational Response Review.

The impact of the transfer of community safety related funds to the new Police and Crime Commissioner needs to be assessed. The potential for income generation/trading should be considered as an element of Value for Money reviews and for wider consideration as part of the overall financial strategy. The peer team have heard a consistent message throughout the organisation that the Service will be smaller and leaner. One of the key questions the peer challenge team have wrestled with is: does the Service have sufficient capacity and the right skills to deliver its future ambitions?

There will be a need for a capacity and skills audit to ensure the plans for the future can be delivered. This will require core functions like Finance, ICT and HR to be 'fit for purpose' to support the delivery.

Community risk management

Strengths

- The evolution of the approach to risk management
- Unitary Performance Groups
- Data sharing

The Service has evolved and shaped its approach to risk management over a number of years. It has firmly positioned itself as a community focused organisation and this has been translated into its IRMP – which puts community risk management at its heart. The Service has further evolved its' intelligence led approach by using a wider range of more sophisticated and targeted data sets. This is enabling the Service to tightly target its resource on Home Safety Assessments on the county's most vulnerable communities.

The IRMP sets out a clear risk assessment process which is underpinned by a range of data and risk modelling systems, including FSEC. The IRMP also meets the expectations within the national framework and other guidance.

The IRMP is translated into action through a series of effective supporting functional, departmental, team plans and individual appraisals which have been iteratively developed over several years which are incorporated and monitored by the 'Cheshire Planning System'.

Robust performance management structures exist to systematically manage performance at Unitary Performance Group (UPG) level. The UPGs have matured over the four years since they were established, with member engagement going from strength to strength and this is an area of notable practice for the Service.

The extensive sharing of data amongst the Service and its partner agencies is a particular strength and this has been accelerated in Cheshire West and Chester as part of the community budget pilot.

Emerging challenges

- Police & Crime Commissioners
- Consultation on Operational Response Review

In terms of the future the Service needs to quickly determine its approach to the new Police and Crime Commissioner arrangements to build on the good relationships with the Police and further strengthen the community safety agenda.

Given the current limited extent of the co-responding scheme the Service needs to take stock. Consultation will be key to residents understanding the proposed new response standards.

Fire control

Strengths

- Clear vision and a strong sense of purpose
- Right people, right skills, in the right places
- Expansion of the Programme Board's remit

The North West Fire Control project has a clear vision and the benefits, in particular, efficiencies, resilience, interoperability and operational improvement provide a solid foundation on which to progress.

The strategy to deliver the project and its associated governance are particularly strong, supported by a robust and detailed delivery programme. There is evidence that lessons have been learned from the previous FiReControl programme.

The project is on track and is expected to gather pace once the preferred bidder for the technology is selected, which will have happened prior to the publication of this report.

The peer challenge team got a strong sense of 'right people, right skills in the right places' in place to deliver the project work streams successfully. The NW Control Programme Board remit has been expanded to cover CFOA work streams. This is a good signpost for future collaborative working beyond immediate fire control activities.

Emerging challenges

- Communications with staff requiring further development
- Resilience on the Control function

The positive outlook toward the North West Fire Control Project as a whole is not shared by the staff potentially affected locally. There was a strong sense of concern for the resilience of Cheshire's Control function in the period leading up to cut-over to North West Fire Control under the current plans for staff transfer i.e. new job announcements 12-18 months prior to cut over.

The communication strategy surrounding the project may need further development, in particular, regarding staffing issues.

Whilst 'lessons learned' from FiReControl is in evidence, the Service and North West Fire Control Project Team may benefit from incorporating a similar approach to that taken following the acquisition of the Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service Control function in terms of live issue resolution, into the wider North West Fire Control Project. For example, Cheshire and Cumbria's different AFA policies.

The Service may wish to consider the benefits of greater involvement of existing control staff in the implementation phases of the NW Fire Control Project. The Service may also wish to consider a review of the significant amount of 'out of scope' work they may lose or have to resource differently post cut over to NW Fire Control Ltd.

Training and development

Strengths

- Incident Command
- Member 'buddy' system
- Strong process for identifying training needs

The Service has placed an increased focus on operational training in the past year or so. A rolling annual training programme exists which is assessed through cluster exercises. The new Incident Command Suite is a significant investment in operational training.

Staff have a good understanding of the link between the IRMP, team plans and their own appraisal objectives. Training needs are identified formally through appraisals and also informally through feedback from incident debriefs. 85% of staff has an annual appraisal and the Service is seeking to further improve this by tackling pockets of the Service who do not undertake them.

Strong processes exist for identifying training needs, delivering training, monitoring competencies and feeding back into individual's development plans. Frontline staff commented that operational training is effective.

There is a structured approach to member development with the 'buddy system' being a particular strength.

Extensive leadership development opportunities exist for officers, including Institute of Leadership & Management courses at levels 3, 5 and 7.

Emerging challenges

- Integrating the People Management function and systems
- Members – complexity of the public sector landscape

There is clearly scope for a more integrated approach to the people management function (People & Development and Employee Services) in the Service. This will create opportunities not only for a more integrated service but also creating opportunities for financial savings. Consideration should be given to a 'people management' system which is based on a single platform for personnel, training, competency and appraisal.

Given the radical shifts in the public sector landscape in relation to health, localism and policing members need to continually improve their understanding of this complex environment in which Fire and Rescue Services are key players.

Building on the current work underway, there are ongoing organisational cultural challenges around getting middle managers to take responsibility for core management issues like people management, rather than relying on People & Development.

The Service needs to reassure itself on an ongoing basis of the suitability of the use of e-learning in particular topics and for an individual's learning style and those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

The Service could be bolder in looking to exploit income generation opportunities in training and potentially beyond. Although this happens at the moment this is relatively small scale and opportunistic. The Service could be more ambitious without losing its focus on its core customers, as part of an overall strategy for the Service.

Community budgets

Strengths

- Well placed to be a successful partner
- Seen as a community leader
- Track record of delivery

Cheshire West and Chester is one of the national pilots for community budgets. The Service has given leadership to the project and is well regarded by partner agencies. The Service has engaged in the process wholeheartedly with an intention to make it succeed.

Emerging challenges

- Consider carefully your approach and impact on partners
- Models of future delivery

The Service has been remarkably successful in building partnerships to deliver a whole range of safety, health and risk reduction initiatives. Their enthusiasm and pragmatic approach means they are recognised as a significant strategic player in both the 'Altogether Better' community budget pilot and the sub regional management and leadership groups.

This rapid and extensive expansion has been driven by enthusiasm, capacity and opportunity. This has led, on occasions, to a sense from some partner agencies that the Service can lack empathy towards the agendas of others and often default to direct delivery. In the future the Service needs to consider the extent of their direct provision, the greater expectation and ambition of the not for profit sector that they are commissioned to deliver more.

Presently Cheshire sees the community budget initiative in West Cheshire and Chester as a great opportunity to be commissioned to provide more health, safety and wellbeing activity. If this is the corporate intention both there and elsewhere then a clear intention to adopt this approach needs to be stated. As financial pressure mounts and the enormity of the operational response transition unfolds, the shape and intention of the prevention strategy needs to be clear and complementary.

Asset management and ICT

Strengths

- Clear commitment to improving IT infrastructure
- Poynton as a good example of future asset use

There is a clear commitment to improving the Service's IT infrastructure, with a recognition that this has been underperforming for some time. Significant funding has been allocated to upgrade and improve the IT infrastructure.

There are some examples where the Service has worked collaboratively with other organisations. For example, Treasury Management with Warrington Borough Council, Age UK and Payroll with Mouchel. This demonstrates some of the benefits of collaborative working upon which the Service can build.

The plans for co-location of facilities at Poynton with Cheshire Police are a good example of how the Service should be making better use of its assets in the future.

Emerging challenges

- Alternative service delivery models – more concerted and coherent view
- Value for money reviews

Options to consider alternative service delivery models have, in the past, been too quickly closed down. The future financial landscape is likely to mean that these options need to be considered more seriously. This includes options to collaborate on service delivery, share services and outsource. These need to

be balanced against the risks associated with moving away from in-house service delivery.

Whilst Value for Money reviews has driven efficiencies in the individual functions there is the potential that they do not ultimately best support the new Operational Response model. This is particularly true in relation to IT and HR.

A business case needs to be developed for the principle of co-locating services and sharing facilities to increase the number of 'stations'. This needs to include clear valuations of the existing building asset base.

Conclusion and contact information

Throughout the peer challenge the team met with enthusiastic and committed officers. It is clear that Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service is moving into a new phase focused around the new plans for the future and there is enthusiasm and commitment to drive the service forward.

The peer team believe that by harnessing this enthusiasm and commitment Cheshire can embrace these plans for the future, managing the risks and challenges along with way.

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