

Statement of Assurance 2012-13

1. Introduction

The revised *Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2012* sets out the requirement for fire and rescue authorities to publish an annual Statement of Assurance. It says:

'Fire and rescue authorities must provide annual assurance on financial, governance and operational matters and show how they have had due regard to the expectations set out in their integrated risk management plan and the requirements included in the Framework. To provide assurance, fire and rescue authorities must publish an annual statement of assurance'.

One of the principal aims of the Statement of Assurance is to provide an accessible way in which communities, Government, local authorities and partners may make a valid assessment of their local fire and rescue authority's performance.

Statements of Assurance should be published annually by fire and rescue authorities to integrate with existing reporting arrangements where practical. The first statements are due for publication in the financial year 2013-14 and annually thereafter. It is the intention of Cheshire Fire Authority going forward to publish its Statement of Assurance at the same time as the Annual Statement of Accounts and the Annual Governance Statement during September each year.

Preparation of the Statement of Assurance

This Statement has been prepared in line with the Government's *Guidance on Statements of Assurance for Fire and Rescue Authorities in England*. The Chief Fire Officer and the Chair of the Fire Authority are responsible for its contents.

The aim of the Statement is not to duplicate information already prepared and published elsewhere, so key processes and pertinent issues are briefly referenced here with links and signposts provided to main documents or web pages at the end of the statement.

The evidence underpinning this Statement of Assurance has been independently checked by the Authority's internal auditors, Baker Tilly.

Accountable to our Communities

This Statement is underpinned by detailed documented evidence, most of which has been made available to the public on the Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service website. Agendas, minutes and supporting reports relating to the Cheshire Fire Authority's meetings are published on the Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service website. This

includes quarterly performance reports, policy decisions, audit, evaluation and assurance reports.

The Authority measures and monitors performance using a range of Key Performance Indicators that are also used to compare performance against other fire and rescue authorities in England. The Authority publishes an Annual Report in September each year summarising progress against plans and a range of other performance measures. The performance information available to the public on the Cheshire Fire and Rescue Website continues to be improved.

In addition, the Authority is committed to adopting the best practice guidance set out in the *Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency*, as far as is practical.

2. Financial and Governance Assurance

Annual Statement of Accounts

The Cheshire Fire Authority provides financial assurance through the publication of an Annual Statement of Accounts. This is a statutory requirement under the *Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2011*, and the accounts are prepared following the *Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting*. The financial statements are subject to review by independent auditors as directed by the *Audit Commission Act 1998*.

Annual Governance Statement

The Cheshire Fire Authority provides assurance relating to matters of corporate governance through the publication of an Annual Governance Statement. This is also a statutory requirement under the *Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2011* and is published as a section within the audited Annual Statement of Accounts.

3. Operational Assurance

Statutory Responsibilities

Fire and rescue authorities function within a clearly defined statutory and policy framework. A list of key legislation/guidance appears below:

- *Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004*
- *Civil Contingencies Act 2004*
- *Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005*
- *Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007*
- *Localism Act 2011*
- *Fire and Rescue National Framework for England*
- *Health and Safety Act 1974.*

Integrated Risk Management Planning for Safer Communities

Cheshire Fire Authority has developed a four year strategy, *Planning for a Safer Cheshire*. This outlines the key risks and challenges facing local communities and the organisation itself, and sets out the approach and direction it will take in response. The practical implementation of the strategy is supported by annual action plans. Together, the publications satisfy the Authority's statutory requirement to produce an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), demonstrating how the Authority plans to balance and match resources to the level of risk.

The Authority is committed to the involvement of stakeholders in the development of its plans and it encourages this by carrying out a structured consultation programme on its draft action plan each year. Local communities, partners, staff, representative bodies and other stakeholders are invited to comment to ensure that before any decision is taken all perspectives are taken in account. To enable active and informed participation, data and information relevant to the plans is made available to the public on the Service's website, in consultation packs that are distributed at community roadshow events across Cheshire, and also to key local stakeholder meetings.

Interoperability, Resilience and Safety

A comprehensive range of risk intelligence data and information is taken into account as part of the risk identification and analysis process underpinning the IRMP. This includes Community Risk Registers, with the Service having a leading role in the Local Resilience Forum which focuses on interoperability and joint planning with other emergency services.

Sections 13 and 16 of the *Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004* allow for mutual assistance arrangements to be agreed with neighbouring Services to improve resilience and capacity in border areas. Cheshire Fire Authority has in place contractual agreements with all bordering Fire Authorities for response to life risk incidents.

Cheshire Fire Authority will be part of the new North West Fire Control arrangements and is therefore perfectly positioned in terms of interoperability and shared services across the four fire and rescue authorities involved.

The Authority's Business Continuity plans align with best practice standards outlined in BS25999-2. Along with the Crisis Management Plan, these are comprehensive, robust, and tested on a regular basis to ensure they are current and fit for purpose. The last major exercise conducted to test the arrangements was in March 2012 and identified areas for improvement have been resolved, including some practical matters e.g. comprehensiveness of protected information stored in secure boxes and upgrades to portable computer equipment.

The Authority follows the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance on Health and Safety management and carries out regular audits of health and safety arrangements. During 2012-13 the Authority worked with the Health and Safety Executive to ensure compliance with recently revised asbestos regulations, particularly in relation to training and guidance for staff working out in the community.

4. Peer Challenge

With the Government's abolition of the inspection and regulatory regime and the national performance framework for local authorities, there is a shift to local accountability for performance and self-regulation. To supplement internal assurance processes and the independent reviews conducted by external and internal auditors, the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), in partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA), has developed a fire sector specific Peer Challenge approach using an Operational Assessment framework.

An external Peer Challenge team, made up of senior officers and Members from other Fire Authorities, visited Cheshire in July 2012 for four days. The focus was to provide an independent view on the Fire Authority's future plans in light of funding challenges and ongoing transformation of the organisation. The team carried out a general health check and review of leadership, capacity and governance, as well as an assessment of a number of key operational areas. A number of positive findings and areas of notable practice were reported as well as some areas to consider.

5. Conclusion

The Authority is satisfied that there is substantial evidence that the policies, systems and processes are in place across the organisation to fulfil the requirements of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2012, and is therefore able to provide assurance of compliance to local communities and other stakeholders.

Signatories

Chief Fire Officer



Chair of the Cheshire Fire Authority



Date: 11th December 2013