



**CFOA**  
Chief Fire Officers  
Association



# **West Midlands Fire Service Fire Peer Challenge**

**9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012**

## **Report**

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# Introduction, Context and Purpose

1. West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) requested a Fire Peer Challenge. This challenge is part of sector led improvement for Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs). These arrangements have a strong focus on peer challenge and self assessment.
2. It was recommended by the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and approved by Fire Services Management Committee of the Local Government Association (LGA) that CFOA and the LGA operate a partnership approach that included developing the already established local government peer challenge process to fully meet the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) sector requirements. The peer challenge process is designed to complement WMFS self assessment by providing external challenge to help support improvement. The peer challenge is not an inspection. Instead it is a supportive approach, undertaken by friends – albeit ‘critical friends’. It aims to help an FRS identify its current strengths and what it needs to improve.
3. The basis for this Fire Peer Challenge is the Toolkit for Operational Assessment developed by CFOA and the LGA. The Key Areas of Assessment (KAA) are:
  - Community Risk Management
  - Prevention
  - Protection
  - Response
  - Health and Safety
  - Training and Development
  - Call Management and Incident Support.
4. The members of the peer challenge team were:
  - **Paul Fuller** – CFO, Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service
  - **Councillor Paul Lakin** - Lead Member, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
  - **Joy Brindle** – ACFO, Tyne & Wear Fire and Rescue Service
  - **Tim Murrell** – Service Delivery Manager, Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service
  - **Joanna Carter** - Chief Officer, Resources, North Yorkshire Police
  - **Len Allen** – Fire Safety Technical Manager, Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service
  - **Jonna Stevens** – Adviser, Local Government Association
  - **Marcus Coulson** - Programme Manager, Local Government Association.
5. The team was onsite from 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012. The programme for the onsite phase included activities designed to enable members of the team to meet and talk to a range of internal and external stakeholders. These activities included:
  - interviews and discussions with councillors, officers and partners

- focus groups with senior and middle managers and frontline staff
  - visits to fire stations and the Control Room
  - reading documents provided by the fire service, including a self-assessment of progress against the operational assessment KAAs.
6. West Midlands Fire Service asked the Peer Challenge Team to consider some specific areas of focus during the peer challenge. These were:

- **Response**
- **Community Risk Management**
- **Protection** – fire safety

These issues were considered through the totality of the OpA Benchmark and are explained in the detail of the feedback.

7. The Peer Challenge Team also considered **three core questions** which are:
- How well are outcomes for local citizens being achieved?
  - How effective is leadership and governance?
  - How effective is the organisational capacity to meet current requirements and future needs?

# Leadership and Corporate Capacity

## Strengths

- The CFO is committed to driving improvement and efficiency
  - Visible Chair of the Authority
  - Positive approach to engaging staff and communication
  - BuS has generated over 6000 ideas and outputs are being codified and prioritised as evidence based options for change
  - Good formal engagement with Representative Bodies.
8. The Chief fire Officer of West Midlands Fire Service is clearly committed to the improvement of the service. He is informed of changes within the sector, the demands upon it and understands the options he has at his disposal to drive change within the organisation and puts plans in place to achieve these aims.
  9. The Chair of West Midlands Fire Authority is a visible and known presence within the fire service. He is closely involved in the service through the time he spends at headquarters and previous experience as a firefighter. He makes regular visits to stations to talk to frontline staff and has a well known blog.
  10. The service has a positive approach to communication both internally and externally. Staff are informed of the direction, aims and objectives of the service. There are a number of regular communication channels and messages to partners and other stakeholders which are clear.
  11. The Building upon Success project (BuS) which seeks to codify the suggestions and ideas developed from staff and others has generated over 6000 ideas and outputs which is testament to the involvement of the organisation in this process.
  12. The relationship between WMFS and the Representative Bodies appears good with appropriate formal engagement procedures to discuss the historical and emerging issues present for the organisation and its staff.

## Areas for consideration

- The clarity of message could be improved
- The future direction of the service is sometimes set opportunistically rather than following a clear strategy
- The future direction sits across a number of documents which need consolidating into strategy

- The service will require compelling collective leadership from members and officers to guide the organisation through the coming years
  - Many BuS decisions are outstanding and staff would benefit from seeing the outcomes of their work.
13. The service has a number of documents which outline the strategic direction the organisation wishes to take. The Peer Challenge Team suggest that the clarity of the central message from these documents could be improved into a clear single vision.
  14. The future direction of the service is sometimes set opportunistically rather than following a clear strategy. It is the case that changes being discussed and put in place sometimes seem to be created when senior staff come across new ideas or initiatives rather than been driven from a strategic plan based on the analysed needs of the service.
  15. As with all areas of the public sector the fire service is under pressure to make considerable savings which will be given further clarity by the Comprehensive Spending Review announcement in November. To address this challenge effectively the service will require compelling collective leadership from both members and officers to guide the organisation through the coming years.
  16. The Building upon Success project has a significant number of decisions which are outstanding. There is recognition within the service that this is the case and it would benefit staff to see some of these concluded so that they can see tangible outcomes from their activity.

## **Outcomes for local citizens**

### **Strengths**

- The WMFS brand is highly regarded across organisations and partners with strong local relationships
- Most areas of performance in provision of services are good and improving
- There is a culture of managing performance and seeking improvements at District and Station level.

### **Areas for consideration**

- Seek clarity on the value added by key activities.
17. The West Midlands Fire Service brand is very highly regarded by partner organisations as they have confidence in the service to deliver and as a consequence these local relationships are strong.

18. In the judgement of the Peer Challenge Team WMFS has, in most areas of its service delivery performance, good services which are improving.
19. In the experience of the Peer Challenge Team the culture driven at District and Station level is one where staff are consistently managing performance and seeking improvements in their work.
20. The service has staff who are involved in a wide range of activities and who are working hard. It would be prudent to ensure there is clarity on how all of this activity adds value to the strategic direction of the service.

## Organisational Capacity

### Strengths

- There is good organisational capacity going forward however there is a significant financial challenge for the service in the future
  - Excellent performance in reducing sickness absence
  - Considerable improvement in performance management since 2009 OpA
- There are examples of creativity and innovation at a tactical level.

### Areas for consideration

- Maximise the use of the new scrutiny arrangements to drive improvement
  - Consider the relative value of the income generation initiative
  - Reconsider your approach to regional collaboration
  - Focus ICT capacity on key projects to drive change
  - Staff want freedom to exercise their judgement
  - There is some evidence of silo working.
21. WMFS has a good deal of organisational capacity to be able to deal with the challenges facing all fire and rescue services, in particular the significant financial challenges. The service's excellent performance in reducing sickness absence will assist in meeting this challenge. There have also been considerable improvements in performance management since the 2009 Operational Assessment, where it was deemed an area for consideration.
  22. The Peer Challenge Team were made aware of a number of examples of creativity and innovation at a tactical level. This is borne out by the high number of ideas created in the BuS project and is a testament to the morale of the frontline staff.

23. The Fire Authority has recently decided to change its governance arrangements to include a scrutiny committee. There is expertise within the Authority on the use of this style of organisational working and we recommend you use this process effectively to drive improvement.
24. The income generation initiative could be an example of where activity is driven by opportunity. The service should consider the relative value of this initiative in terms of the time committed to it by staff and the return on this investment at the present time and in the future.
25. The service recognises that regional collaboration is not easy, with fire service partners hard to find. As this is a consistent pattern of engagement which is not working you should reconsider your present approach to regional collaboration.
26. The Information Communication Technology (ICT) department supports a wide range of activity across the service. However it appears to have a high demand upon its capacity. We recommend you focus ICT capacity on key projects to ensure you can drive the change you need.
27. The Peer Challenge Team spoke to a variety of staff from across the service and heard that there is a desire for greater freedom to exercise personal judgement. To do this the service would need to be able to give direction to staff within clear boundaries and be tolerant of errors as individuals deal with these new opportunities.
28. The team saw some evidence of silo working. We suggest that you consider how joined up departments are and how well they work effectively together. An example is that a more corporate approach to ICT developments would remove groups working on projects which subsequently stall as they are not a priority or resourced; creating and maintaining a one organisational approach encompassing the contributions made by all staff groups could avoid a frontline/support divide.

# Community risk management

## Strengths

- New approach to community risk analysis has promise to underpin all strategic and tactical work e.g.
  - Commitment to work in an intelligence led way
  - Risk baseline created to assess impact of changes
  - Risk team is modelling potential impact of BuS changes on community risk
  - Data transfer between partners is effective
- Good partnership approach to Community Risk Management (prevention).

## Areas for consideration

- Potential for more use of risk analysis in decision making
  - Does commitment to response times inhibit flexibility?
  - Low risk flexible crewing explored but not yet willing to implement
  - Relationship between Protection & Prevention should be strengthened.
29. In the view of the Peer Challenge Team the new approach at West Midlands Fire Service to community risk analysis has significant promise to underpin all strategic and tactical work. The areas considered in the clear commitment to work in an intelligence led way and the risk baseline which has been created to assess impact of changes should give feedback on the effectiveness of interventions. The risk team is also modelling the potential impact of BuS changes on community risk whilst the data transfer between partners is effective.
30. There is a good partnership approach to Community Risk Management (CRM) in the area of prevention. Partners were able to give examples of where at risk individuals and communities are being jointly targeted to reduce risk. The specific targeting of vulnerable people by Vulnerable People Officers (VPOs) working with partners is an example of this.
31. There is evidence of using community risk data in making key decisions, such as the introduction of the specialist Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) vehicle. This approach stands the organisation in good stead for future decisions, particularly those which may involve reducing cost.

32. WMFS is committed to maintaining response times as part of its future strategy. It is recommended that if this continues to be a key driver for WMFS, the organisation considers the flexibility of response supported by such an aspiration.
33. The relationship between Protection & Prevention should be strengthened to ensure that the available resources are used most effectively as part of a suite of measures to reduce community risk.

# Response

## Strengths

- A strong area with good performance
- Debriefs are working well and findings communicated and issues actioned
- Close working relationship between blue light services
- BRVs promise good returns but need further consideration
- Operational staff have a pragmatic approach to dealing with risk
- Events Control Suite and MAESU have made inter-operability more effective

## Areas for consideration

- Consider how embedded new operational procedures are
  - The system for site specific risk information requires a review to ensure information about high risk premises is captured, disseminated and the information is current and accessible
34. The response function at West Midlands Fire Service is a strong area with good performance. Most metrics point in the right direction which is a testament to the hard work and dedication by staff.
  35. Operational debriefs are working well with findings communicated and issues actioned through established and effective procedures. The Peer Challenge Team wish to highlight the effective systems being developed by the operational intelligence unit which ensure that information from debriefs is fed into station based learning.
  36. There are close working relationship between blue light services in the West Midlands area.
  37. The new Brigade Response Vehicles (BRVs) initiative promises a good opportunities for efficiency savings in terms of both cost and response times. Further consideration is required for an appropriate vehicle design and the subsequent development of its structural fire fighting capability.
  38. Operational staff at WMFS understand the risks they face in the variety of conditions they find themselves in. They respond in a pragmatic way and are able to solve the problems they encounter in appropriate ways.
  39. The Service's Events Control Suite and the Multi-Agency Emergency Support Unit (MAESU) have made inter-operability more effective when dealing with

other blue light responders and the National Health Service, particularly in the first sixty minutes of an event.

40. There was evidence that operational crews received and acknowledged important information in isolation from other watch members and line managers. We suggest you consider how embedded the new operational procedures are, and what are the most effective tools which can be used to ensure this.
41. The system for site specific risk information (SSRI) requires a review to ensure that information about high risk premises is captured and disseminated, and the information is current and accessible. There was evidence to suggest that the information provided for the Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs) is not current or user friendly and as a result operational crews are not always using the information to inform operations.

# Prevention

## Strengths

- HSCs, Vulnerable People and Health & Wellbeing now a single strategy
- HSCs targeted at vulnerable groups based on quality not quantity
- There is a lot of information sharing and trust between partners
- HSCs are embedded with firefighters
- There is good partner engagement in prevention
- Safeside provides high quality premises for community safety
- Serious Case Conferences have influenced prevention policy.

## Areas for consideration

- New HSC points system is not fully understood by crews
  - Referral information could be improved from some partners for HSC targeting
  - The Local Authority Liaison Officer and Vulnerable Persons Officer roles are inconsistently aligned with operational teams.
42. The complementary strategies for Home Safety Checks (HSCs), Vulnerable People and Health & Wellbeing are now a single strategy. Which develops potential for greater efficiency in the number of single contacts needed to reach those groups, and means that resources in the organisation are targeted at a single end and not inadvertently working against each other.
43. The HSCs are targeted at vulnerable groups which is achieved through an assessment of the quality of their need rather than a quantitative target for the organisation.
44. Partners' report that they are able to share information between themselves and WMFS and that this is based upon high levels of trust.
45. The approach to HSCs and the reasons for them are understood by operational staff and are embedded with firefighters.
46. There is good partner engagement in prevention. Police and voluntary sector colleagues described how approaches to effective collaboration had improved community safety and reduced anti social behaviour; colleagues from housing organisations described shared work on home safety checks and handling automatic false alarms; health workers described data sharing on vulnerable people and there was also evidence of strong collaboration on road safety.

47. The Safeside building on the headquarters site provides high quality premises for community safety to be delivered.
48. The service is fully involved with partners and has initiated Serious Case Conferences. The outcomes from these have influenced prevention policy to change operational activity to enable improved targeting of vulnerable people. This approach has enabled external partners and staff across WMFS to understand the role of the fire service in supporting vulnerable people.
49. Whilst the principles of the new HSCs procedures are supported by operational staff it was reported that the new points system used is not fully understood by crews. This could be revisited to ensure it is embedded and used fully.
50. Referral information could be improved from some partners to be more specific so that it can be more easily turned into targeted HSCs.
51. The Local Authority Liaison Officer and Vulnerable Persons Officer roles are inconsistently aligned with operational teams across the whole service. A more consistent enactment of the roles would mean that the most effective use is made of each type of resource and best practice in these roles could be shared across the service.

# Protection

## Strengths

- Fully committed and capable personnel
- Strong partnerships add value
- Commercial Hot Strikes
- Good use of specialist officers which are highly valued by partners

## Areas for consideration

- Current RBIP system is not being significantly used
  - Audit system is reactive not proactive
  - The new RBIP being built internally by ICT has stalled
  - Other commercial IT solutions not fully investigated
  - Paper based audit process is onerous
  - SSRI collection is limited with no input from Ops
  - Ops crews do not undertake Fire Safety
  - Limited links between Ops & Fire Safety
  - There is a potential conflict of interest setting up Fire Engineers
52. The staff involved in the protection function at WMFS are demonstrating that they are fully committed to their work and by their outputs and outcomes are capable personnel.
53. There are a number of effective relationships with statutory partners such as Licensing, Building Control and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) with which the service delivers fire protection. These are seen by partners to add value to the delivery of services and the reputation of the organisation
54. The system of Hot Strikes for commercial premises is useful as it increases awareness of fire protection issues for businesses, should reduce the number and severity of incidents, whilst also helping the service understand the risk profile through the audits which are completed shortly after fires.
55. There is a good use of specialist fire protection officers which are highly valued by partners largely due to their level of expertise and experience.

56. The current Risk Based Inspection Programme (RBIP) system should be reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose. It is presently being used as a recording mechanism. It is not used to plan routine audits or inspections and does not update the risk profile of premises following audits. From this process it is difficult to ascertain the relative risk values of the premises within the Service. The next seven paragraphs of the report outline specific details which would be addressed through a review of the RBIP.
57. The present audit system is reactive and not proactive and would be improved by the introduction of a new fully functioning RBIP Management Information System that uses the national fire safety audit form introduced by CFOA.
58. The new RBIP being built internally by ICT has stalled. It would appear that the capacity of ICT to cope with the demands upon it has led to the RBIP project coming to a halt. The service should seek to address this problem so it can address the issues outlined above.
59. When the project team put together the system specification for the new RBIP there was a detailed and comprehensive document produced indicating that ICT develop it internally. The Peer Challenge Team saw no evidence that other commercially available information technology solutions were investigated which could have delivered a more efficient and timely solution.
60. The present paper based audit process is onerous. The present audit form is one sheet and requires the inspecting officers to remember in totality the articles of the Fire Safety Order, then to write all the breaches out by hand before entering them onto the computer RBIP system, which then needs the risk levels amending. A review of this should seek to deliver a more efficient system.
61. The Fire Protection SSRI collection is limited and appears to have no input from operational staff. The part D of the national audit form is the SSRI collection form, the WMFS version is a one page form which is only completed by Fire Safety Officers. Once complete it then goes to the risk intelligence team who at a later stage enter it onto the IMASS system on the MDT's. Operational crews do not undertake fire safety visits so do not ever complete the SSRI form, the crews do not see the information until it is placed on the MDTs and as we have said elsewhere have questionable buy-in to the use of the information on the MDTs.
62. The Peer Challenge Team were given to understand that Operational crews do not undertake Fire Safety and that they stopped undertaking basic fire safety visits some years ago to concentrate on HSCs. An alternate procedure WMFS may wish to consider would be to train crews to undertake evening visits on pubs, clubs and bars, etc. and then to undertake simple follow-up visits from Fire Safety Officers on low to medium risk premises, thus freeing up more time for Fire Safety Officers to undertake audits on higher risk premises.
63. There are limited links between Operations & Fire Safety. The two could be more effectively linked so that information from fire safety inspections could be

passed to firefighters to update their awareness of fire ground risk, and that operational experiences could be captured and then in turn influence policy.

64. There is a potential conflict of interest with WMFS creating the role of Fire Engineers as a source of income generation as the service is then in the position of being both the enforcer of fire safety but also providing solutions to fire safety issues. The service needs to assure itself that it has procedures in place so prevent any allegations of a conflict of interest. This conflict would be the subject of legal challenge should they then have to take a case to court.

# Health and Safety

## Strengths

- Reduced level of accidents
- Sickness levels have been reduced
- ROSPA Award

## Areas for consideration

- SSRI information on appliances is limited, out of date and not user friendly for operational staff
- Further understand the low level of recorded near-hits

65. There has been a reduced level of accidents at WMFS.

66. The level of sickness absence has been significantly reduced which is commendable.

67. The Service has the Royal Society Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) Award.

68. As the Peer Challenge Team have mentioned elsewhere in this report the SSRI on appliances is often limited, out of date and not user friendly for operational staff. This leads to firefighters not using this information to inform operational activity and is therefore a risk to their health and safety. WMFS should consider reviewing the process for the provision of risk information to ensure that;

- Risk information is fully disseminated and understood
- The outcomes are regularly tested and
- Opportunities for group discussion and further confirmation is provided where necessary.

69. The number of recorded near-hits is low, being almost the same as the number of accidents/injuries and much lower than expected safety event ratios. WMFS should investigate the cause of these relatively low levels, with a view to increasing the amount of information and opportunities available to predict and prevent future accidents and injuries.

# Training and Development

## Strengths

- Good commitment to operational training
- Command and control training for middle managers is very good
- Arrive To Perform concept could become notable practice
- Strategic training group is highly valued
- Training records are electronic and competence based
- Alignment of training to operational imperatives (e.g. high rise)

## Areas for consideration

- Arrive To Perform framework needs reviewing to ensure all staff can demonstrate competence including Watch and Crew Commanders
- Member development uptake could be significantly improved
- The profile of training for green book staff could be raised
- Ensure that the number and scale of exercises are clearly linked to the risk profile
- Modern methods of building construction do not appear in the training curriculum for operational staff

70. The service has a good commitment to operational training of which there is a wide range of opportunities for staff.

71. The command and control training for middle managers is very good. It takes place in a custom built suite to a high specification and enables the participants and trainers to fully develop their understanding and skills.

72. The Arrive to Perform (A2P) concept, where crews are deployed to resolve a realistic incident whilst being independently assessed for competence, has the potential to become notable practice. A2P Assessments provide both training opportunities and vital feedback for individual and team development. There is potential to develop the concept to match current operational risk and to include all operational staff members.

73. The Strategic Training Group is highly valued by managers from different functions because they see it as effectively bringing together training needs with training delivery.

74. The training records of staff are electronic and competence based.
75. The Peer Challenge Team saw that there was the alignment of training to operational imperatives such as that around high rise dwellings.
76. Whilst the Peer Challenge team praise the Arrive to Perform framework, the reliance on a self-referral procedure has created an 'invisible tranche' of staff members who do not attend assessments. The referral procedure could be reviewed to ensure that all staff, particularly watch and crew commanders, demonstrate competence.
77. The uptake of Member development could be significantly improved and the service may want to revise its approach to seek to include more members in the process. It would also be worth considering working with member development officers further in individual authorities to collate member training information in order to avoid duplication allowing the service to provide service specific training to members.
78. The profile of training for green book staff could be raised as it appeared to the peer challenge team that there is no formalised training programme for green book staff. This would address any perceptions that they are any less value to invest in by the organisation and would ensure competencies are being developed across all staffing types and underpin the value of support staff to the organisation.
79. The service delivers 104 15-20 pump exercises a year. The team suggest that WMFS should ensure itself that the number and scale of exercises are proportionate to risk. Thereby ensuring staff take these exercises seriously and that they develop the specific skills necessary for operational activity.
80. WMFS should amend their training curriculum to include the subject of modern methods of building construction. This should deliver improvements to firefighter safety at incidents which involve modern buildings or buildings under construction.

# Call management and incident support

## Strengths

- Mobilising system is modern and effective
- Call challenge procedures have led to a reduction in mobilisations to unwanted fire signals
- Staff morale in Fire Control is good.

## Areas for consideration

- Phase II of control collaboration project not fully appreciated
- Review the use of Talk Groups to reduce costs.

81. The mobilising system is modern and effective.
82. The call challenge procedures have led to a reduction in mobilisations to unwanted fire signals. This demonstrates that the work of the call management staff and the training they have received is driving efficiency.
83. The staff morale in Fire Control is good.
84. The Control Staff are not fully aware of the plans for Phase II of the control collaboration project and the attendant implications.
85. WMFS should review their use of airwave talkgroups with a view to reducing transmission/data costs. In particular WMFS may wish to explore a system for the allocation of talkgroups to individual incidents.

You will want to take the time to reflect on the report and consider how to take things forward. The LGA and CFOA encourage you to publish your report and any associated action plan on your website.

### **Contact details**

For more information about the Fire Peer Challenge of West Midlands Fire Service please contact Marcus Coulson, the LGA Challenge Manager:

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For more information on peer challenges or the work Local Government Association, please see our website <http://www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenges> or telephone 020 7296 6600.

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