

The benefits of fire peer challenge



Sector-led improvement

The benefits of fire peer challenge

Sector-led improvement has real momentum. The Local Government Association (LGA) and Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) have been working in partnership for a number of years, developing and shaping the approach to operational assessment and peer challenge.

Both the LGA and CFOA offer a range of direct improvement support which includes elected member training and development, sector-led improvement and the sharing of good practice.

[At the heart of our offer is the opportunity for an operational assessment and fire peer challenge at no direct cost.](#)

There has been an overwhelming response from the sector with every fire and rescue authority in England engaged in the process.

In 2012 we worked with over 33 fire and rescue authorities in delivering or planning their operational assessment and fire peer challenge. Feedback so far indicates that services find this a really valuable tool – but don't take our word for it. In this publication a number of chief fire officers talk in their own words about the difference it's made for their service.

Fire peer challenge is delivered by the sector for the sector. It is voluntary in nature and tailored to the needs of each service. We know that peer challenge is a proven tool for improvement.

From some of the early peer challenges we are now beginning to see the real added value of the process. Services are using the challenge in a variety of ways, tailoring it to their needs.



The following views from chief fire officers give a strong flavour of how services are using the fire peer challenge in different ways and the benefits they are deriving from this external perspective.

I hope you find this information useful and informative.

More details on the CFOA and LGA's peer challenge offer to all Fire and Rescue Services is available by visiting: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge or www.cfoa.org.uk

Councillor Kay Hammond
Chair of the LGA Fire Services Management Committee

Vij Randeniya
President, Chief Fire Officers Association

Strengthening operational response

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service

Cheshire has a strong track record of very good operational performance. We've worked hard over a number of years to drive down the number of fire incidents significantly.

I'd like to think the service has also been innovative through changing shift patterns, having long-standing partnerships with organisations like Age UK, investing significantly in training and the extensive use of advocates and volunteers to help achieve a very high level of home safety assessments.

In this context, we wanted the LGA's fire peer challenge to focus on our plans to further strengthen our operational response in the future.

At the time of the challenge in July 2012, we were just about to embark on our Operational Response Review. This aims to recast our response provision. This is a huge and challenging piece of work on which we wanted an external perspective. Getting it right and considering all the angles and nuances of this work is important and we wanted the peers to help us look at that.

We had some robust plans for the Response Review, but the peer challenge has also made us consider how the whole of this complex piece of work hangs together. It helped us look at the financial picture for the plan and how well the service had the capacity and skills to deliver it.

It's not often you get the chance for a group of professionals to look at a major piece of work and give some real challenge and insight, without charging thousands of pounds to do so.

The peer challenge made us reflect on our plan and examine how we were communicating it to staff, take another look at the financial implications and also look at core functions like Finance, ICT and HR to ensure they are 'fit for purpose' to support the delivery of the authority's ambition.

I also liked the flexibility of the peer challenge. We got the peers to look at issues like our IT provision and asset management. Crucial issues for us that lay outside the toolkit, but are really important to us. The LGA listened to what we needed and shaped the process around the issues that are important to us.

More important than the process is the outcome. One of the main outcomes from the challenge was the real confidence it gave us and our members in what we were proposing to deliver as part of the Response Review. The challenge also provided us with an assurance of how effectively we work together focusing on our core values which underpin everything we do.

Peer challenge has moved on in the last couple of years. I've also been involved as the lead peer on a peer challenge in another service, so I've seen it from both sides. Services working with the LGA are tailoring each challenge to the needs of each service and adding real value to their strategic thinking and enabled us to have challenging conversations back in our own services about how we're looking to improve the service.

At the heart of it for me, is the need to ensure what we do is strengthening the performance of the service and ensuring we keep local communities safe. Our peer challenge enabled us to have a second look at the work we're doing in this area.



Paul Hancock
Chief Fire Officer
Cheshire Fire and Rescue
Service



Helping us deliver on our ambition

Dorset Fire and Rescue Service

As we look to the future we recognised that having strong leadership and the right corporate capacity is critical for us. Dorset has been on a continuous improvement journey over many years and is a high performing service with many examples of excellent service delivery. The peer challenge recognised that we have some passionate, committed and enthusiastic people.

We have great ambition for the service. We wanted the LGA peer challenge to explore how people throughout the service viewed this ambition. It provided us with some great insights. How we manage cross-cutting programmes and overall how we manage complex programmes and projects are something we need to examine further.

While many major projects have been managed effectively, the peer challenge identified the need to allocate a specific individual or a mechanism to assist in coordinating the limited corporate resources required to deliver change.

Our people and key enablers like IT are central to Dorset delivering on its ambition. The peer challenge helped us look at our people, their skills and capacity and how well our IT is integrated and supports the organisation.

The challenge also gave us some reassurance. We are doing good work on training, having lead members on key areas like equalities and having strong and cohesive top senior managerial team and lead members.

It's always helpful to get confirmation of the achievements we've made and assurance that we're heading in the right direction and have clear building blocks on which we can build further.



Darran Gunter
Chief Fire Officer
Dorset Fire and Rescue
Service



Accelerating improvement

Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service

Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service have been undertaking a continuing improvement journey since a critical Audit Commission report in 2009. This journey has included significant changes to leadership, strategy and operational delivery. We wanted the LGA's peer challenge to complement our own operational self-assessment by providing external challenge to help identify progress made and areas that the service may wish to explore further.

We have found that since our demanding Audit Commission inspection in 2009 that sector-led external challenge has been really useful in checking we are on the right track, helping us to accelerate improvement and providing a vital catalyst to us brokering important decisions between members and officers.

We had a broad ranging peer challenge in 2012, which we used as a general 'healthcheck' as well as exploring important issues like leadership and corporate capacity.

We were pleased to have confirmation that we have achieved significant improvements over the last three years and made impressive progress towards creating a different culture with a strong focus on prevention and risk. The peer challenge also asked us to examine succession planning for our senior management team, building networks with other services to share learning and how ICT can better support the service's new ways of working. These are all really important in the service making further progress.

The peer challenge helped to identify a substantial number of operational issues for us to reflect on, including ensuring intelligence is valued and consistently used at all levels, that the work of the Community Safety Service is embedded across all parts of the organisation and that we are fully utilising intelligence to target home safety visits.

The main added value of the fire peer challenge for us is the ability to check our overall direction, the pace of our improvement and to get under the skin of the organisation.



Des Tidbury
Chief Fire Officer
Cornwall Fire and Rescue
Service



Working together

Shropshire & Hereford and Worcester Fire & Rescue Services

No one wants to preside over a service in decline. The current financial climate is placing demands on fire and rescue services which feel unprecedented. In this part of the world we have always had to be innovative. Managing services which are relatively small in terms of their resources but large in terms of the demands they place on us. Two large rural counties with dispersed communities responding to incidents will always be a challenge.

Seeking ways to build resilience in the services and continuing to examine if there are better ways of making local communities safer was one of the key triggers for both Shropshire and Hereford and Worcester to use the LGA's fire peer challenge process.

We wanted to challenge our current approach to strengthening services, whilst also exploring opportunities to work more closely together where it seemed practical and a sound business case could be developed.

We're both keen to protect the strong identity of each service. Where reducing resources can often be a driver for being more risk averse and retrenching we saw the peer challenge as an opportunity to be innovative, creative and provide energy for our current thinking.

In October and November 2012 we each had a peer challenge focused on how well we were equipped to meet these future challenges and to explore areas for greater collaboration in the future.

We each led the peer challenge in each other's respective service, with a team of peers from across different fire services. It was also important for us to get fresh ideas from outside the fire sector. We secured peers from West Mercia Police and the local business community to really challenge our thinking. We used these 'critical friends' to see under the bonnet of each other's service.

We know we're doing some really good things in each of our services, like meeting our challenging response targets, achieving high customer satisfaction ratings and working innovatively with local organisations like Severnside Housing and increasingly using the voluntary sector to support service delivery. The peer challenge confirmed all of this, but went much further.

The process has enabled us to really test our thinking around future collaborative work. We work together already – with joint occupational health provision, aligning our health and safety and training policies and responding to incidents across each other's county border - but if we are to take this forward more thoroughly the peer challenge identified the need to develop a clearer collective ambition. This means developing a more nuanced and unambiguous understanding of what both services' wish to achieve from collaboration. One which politicians can shape and sign up to.

Collaboration for us isn't about simply joining up the services. It's much more complex and subtle. Something which needs to be thought through carefully and needs political buy in throughout. Fundamentally this is about making our communities safer.

The peer challenge outcomes are feeding our strategic thinking in 2013, shaping the kind of services we will both want.

Although the detail of this is to be worked up, collaboration is not a magic bullet. It's clear that the future will mean both service's will have to be different kinds of organisations however closely we might work together. We need to build on our successes, but the peer challenge identified the stronger role IT will need to play in the future as well as the importance of building resilience in key service areas. This will make us stronger and leaner in the future.

The LGA's peer challenge brought challenging thinking to complement our own view of our organisations. It shed light on some of our thinking, enabled us as chiefs to get a more rounded view from across the services on how staff viewed our future plans and some of the practical steps we will need to go through to. Although we have a track record of being innovative across the two services, the peer challenge enabled us to re-examine our own thinking and bring a fresh perspective on these complex issues.

It's clear longer-term closer working between organisations needs to be thought through carefully. It's often difficult to get that high-level thinking into the service's and providing space for us to have the thinking time ourselves.

Using highly experienced practitioners from outside the organisation has been key to ensuring our strategic plans are well thought through and supported politically and operationally.



Paul Raymond
Chief Fire Officer
Shropshire Fire and Rescue
Service



Mark Yates
Chief Fire Officer
Hereford and Worcester Fire
and Rescue Service



Supporting service redesign

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service

Merseyside is in a strong position to meet the financial challenges for the future. We have credible political and managerial leadership, a loyal, committed and motivated workforce and a very strong track record in service delivery. Our new mission statement ‘safer stronger communities – safe effective fire fighters’ is understood and owned by everyone and has provided a new sense of clarity and purpose which staff can unite behind.

The challenges ahead, however, are considerable and in this context, we wanted the LGA’s fire peer challenge to focus on our organisational capacity and how that would impact on our plans for operational preparedness and response.

We have worked hard to improve our operational response planning and have a group of station managers who are overseen by a group manager who together have a very clear understanding of the objectives and standards that all fire stations in Merseyside need to work to.

Our back to basics approach has enabled us to demonstrate that the core activity of a firefighters role is as important at a corporate level as it is to individual staff.

This approach has played out well across all parts of our service. There is a high level of acceptance that we are going to continue to change over the coming years and a good level of consensus about how that can be achieved without compromising our operational response.

The peer challenge was very helpful indeed in confirming the legitimacy of our thinking around how we redesign our service to meet the financial challenge over the course of this and the next spending review. The peer challenge team also highlighted a number of areas to explore which will give us the opportunity to drive further improvement through our performance management processes.

We invested heavily in designing and scoping the approach to our fire peer challenge to ensure it met our needs. Using our Operational Assessment we identified key areas that were important to Merseyside, some of these were outside the scope of the toolkit – such as information technology and systems thinking. Throughout the LGA worked with us to build a team to address these areas and provide that added value.

As our peer challenge took place in November 2012 we are now working through the report to develop a prioritised action plan which will be published alongside the report in March 2013. This new flexible approach gives us the opportunity to ensure that the outcomes of the peer challenge fit into our business planning processes and inform our future plans and are not imposed on us.

Finally the peer challenge also provided us with an opportunity to reflect and celebrate our successes. This is equally important in challenging times and having external validation of our work with partners and the work we do with our diverse communities was encouraging.



Overall I was grateful to the peer challenge team giving their time and for their hard work in supporting Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service to deliver a high quality service to our communities.



Dan Stephens

Chief Fire Officer

Merseyside Fire and Rescue
Service

The fire peer challenge is one element of the LGA's offer to support sector-led improvement. For further details of what is available, including elected member training and development, sector-led improvement and the sharing of good practice visit www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement or www.cfoa.org.uk

You can find out more information about the operational assessment and fire peer challenge by visiting our webpages: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

This includes information on how the challenge is being used in different ways by fire and rescue services as well as what the sector has told us about peer challenge.

To book a fire peer challenge or discuss how it can be tailored to meet the needs of your service, please contact:

Gary Hughes

Programme Manager

Telephone: 07771 941 337

Email: gary.hughes@local.gov.uk



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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