

Resources and Fire and Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

13 July 2016

Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge 2013 Closure Report, and the Arrangements for 2016.

Recommendation(s)

That the Committee:

1. Receive, and endorse, the closure of the 2013 Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Peer Challenge Action Plan.
2. Receive, and endorse, the proposed arrangements for an Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge in November 2016.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge process was developed following the abolition of the audit and inspection regime and the national performance framework. The process is central to the shift that has been made to sector-led improvement and greater local accountability.
- 1.2 Fire Peer Challenge is delivered at no direct cost to the receiving Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA), and is managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. It is an opportunity for FRAs to assess themselves across a number of key aspects of service provision and allows FRAs to access independent input to support improvement, focusing on areas the FRA has identified as particularly seeking the input of peers. The ambition of the peer team is to help the FRA respond to its local priorities and risks in its own way and to the greatest effect.

- 1.3 The approach is based on the following principles:
- fire and rescue services are responsible for their own performance
 - stronger local accountability leads to further improvement
 - fire and rescue services have a sense of collective responsibility for performance in the sector as a whole
 - the role of the Local Government Association (LGA) is to help FRAs by providing the necessary support.
- 1.4 A Fire Peer Challenge team is usually led by a Chief Fire Officer, and will include an elected member, a representative of the LGA and a number of senior fire and rescue officers trained to undertake the Fire Peer Challenge process.
- 1.5 Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority received an Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge in 2013, with the on-site assessment element taking place November 4th – 7th. The Fire Peer Challenge team was led by Chief Fire Officer Dave Etheridge of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. This Fire Peer Challenge was the first since the formal conclusion of the investigations and court hearings into the Atherstone-on-Stour fire. One of the key areas that was requested of the Fire Peer Challenge team was to test the operational and organisational confidence of the Service in light of the Authority's progression since the tragedy.
- 1.6 The Fire Peer Challenge team submitted a final report containing 44 recommendations (expressed in the report as 'Areas to Explore'), which was presented to Cabinet in January 2014. These recommendations were formulated into a Fire Peer Challenge Action Plan (see supporting document 1). Monitoring of progress against the Action Plan has been undertaken by the Cross-Party Fire Working Group. At the Cross-Party Fire Working Group meeting on March 14th 2016 Area Commander Dave Pemberton presented a progress update reporting all actions within the plan signed off as complete.
- 1.7 It has been agreed with the LGA that Warwickshire receive another Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge in November 2016. The on-site assessment has been scheduled for November 22nd – 25th. Chief Fire Officer Mark Hardingham (Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service) has been appointed as the Fire Peer Challenge team lead. At the time of writing this report the other members of the team are yet to be selected.

- 1.8 The recent shift in responsibility for fire and rescue services to the Home Office has generated discussion over the future of the Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge process. The Home Secretary has made it clear that a key element of the impending Fire Reform program will be the introduction of a Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary style inspection and assurance process for fire and rescue services. However, it is the considered opinion of both the Chief Fire Officers Association and the LGA that the organisational learning and self-improvement nature of a Fire Peer Challenge process can co-exist with an independent performance audit process.
- 1.9 A significant element of the Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge process is the development and submission of a self-assessment by the receiving fire and rescue service. The self-assessment should provide an honest appraisal of where the receiving fire and rescue service assesses itself against a wide range of Key Areas of Focus (see supporting document 2). Capacity to oversee and co-ordinate the completion of the self-assessment has been secured by the allocation of resource from within Fire and Rescue, and the provision of support from the Resources Directorate.
- 1.10 The Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge process provides an opportunity for the receiving fire and rescue service to suggest specific areas for the Fire Peer Challenge team to provide special focus on. This opportunity, whilst not detracting from scrutiny of the complete range of Key Areas of Focus within the toolkit, enables a self-aware organisation to indicate areas in which specific learning and improvement may be achieved. After due consideration by the senior management team within Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service, in collaboration with the Cross-Party Fire Working Group, the areas proposed in section two of this report are presented for the committee's consideration.

2.0 Proposal

- 2.1 That the following areas within the Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge toolkit are suggested for specific focus by the Fire Peer Challenge team:

Operational Response

- Has the FRA clearly defined, planned and implemented a response strategy linked to its Integrated Risk Management Plan?
- Does the FRA have a robust process for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness and improving performance of its response activities?

Financial planning and viability

- Does the FRA have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?

Political and managerial leadership

- Does the FRA have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?

Governance and decision-making

- Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?

Organisational capacity

- Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

3.0 Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

- 3.1 Work on developing the self-assessment element of the Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge process has already commenced. This will be submitted to the Fire Peer Challenge team 6 weeks before the self-assessment; which has been arranged for November 22nd -25th 2016.

Supporting Documents

1. 2013 Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Fire Peer Challenge Action Plan – Final Update, March 2016.
2. Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge Toolkit – Local Government Association.

Background Documents

None

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Members of the Cross-Party Fire Working Group: –

Councillors Sarah Boad, Richard Chattaway, Jenny Fradgely, Mike Gittus, John Holland, Wallace Redford, Howard Roberts,