Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service Fire Peer Challenge

Report

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1. Introduction and Executive Summary

Introduction

This report and presents the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA's) Fire Peer Challenge at Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) in November 2012.

The OpA self assessment process is designed to:

- form a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement within the Fire and Rescue Service, and

- provide elected members on fire authorities and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust.

The sector led peer challenge process is part of the LGA's approach to self-regulation and improvement which aims to help councils and FRAs strengthen local accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services. Peer Challenge is a voluntary process that is managed by and delivered for the sector through the use of peers as 'critical friends'. It is not a form of sector led inspection but instead, a mechanism to provide fire authorities and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it meets its operational purpose, is efficient and effective and provides value for money.

Structured into what the peer challenge team saw as key strengths and areas for consideration, the report provides the team's findings the key focus areas of:

- Leadership, Governance & Corporate Capacity

- Operational Preparedness and Response

- Prevention

- Protection

- Support Services review

Using the same structure, It also provides overview information on the other OpA areas of:

- Community Risk Management

- Health and Safety

- Training and Development

- Call Management & Incident Support

As part of the peer challenge process MFRS asked for a challenge of their arrangements for ICT. This work falls outside the scope of the OpA and whilst reported separately is briefly commented on within this report.

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 19 – 22 November 2012 and consisted of a range of on-site activities including interviews, observations, focus groups and visits to fire stations and community projects. The peer team met with a broad cross-section of elected members, staff, front line firefighters, stakeholders and partners.

During the time in MFRS the peer team were well looked after. Everyone the team met was fully engaged with the process and open and honest. Prior to the on-site visit, the peer team undertook background reading to familiarise itself with MFRS. This included the MFRS OpA self assessment and supporting documentation.

Executive Summary

MFRS is in a strong position to meet the financial challenges for the future. It has credible political and managerial leadership, a loyal, committed and motivated workforce and a very strong track record in service delivery. The new mission statement 'safer stronger communities – safe effective fire fighters' is understood and owned by everyone who contributed to the assessment. Importantly, it has provided a new sense of clarity and purpose which staff can unite behind.

Operational competence and focus on response is very strong. The level of High, Medium and Low risk categories currently applied in MFRS mean that operational response standards are ambitious but challenging. The introduction of a new Automatic Fire Alarms (AFA) policy has reduced calls by up to 20%. The challenge team saw excellent processes for assessment, monitoring and debriefs ensuring on-going learning from incidents. The team was also impressed with MFRS's ability to undertake frequent large scale exercises and we highlighted that its response to the riots in August 2011 should be used as a national case study. Prevention is intelligence-led with a good balance between the central team and now a greater devolved responsibility for the delivery of community safety activities to district and station managers. This has enabled staff locally to better use the knowledge of their community and provides them with greater ownership over activities locally. Partnership working is exemplar at both strategic and operational levels and the team saw many excellent examples of this. Partners enjoy and respect MFRS as a partner and praise its 'can-do' attitude and its responsiveness. There is a high awareness of the Service's diverse community and the challenge team saw some good examples of the use of equality impact assessments.

Staff and members are aware of the financial challenges ahead and, while they welcome the FA's lobbying efforts to minimise cuts in revenue grant, they have a strong sense of realism and are aware of the likelihood that MFRS, in line with many other FA's, will have to make further cuts. With the abolition of the previous inspection regime and with it the notion of 'excellence' as defined by national performance indicators and targets, it is important that MFRS moves forward and defines for itself what excellence means within a world of less resource.

There has been a clear brief to Heads of Services to prepare two scenarios (baseline and professional judgement) of the service required starting from a zero budget approach. The process is clear and systematic and considers all areas. However, a fundamental challenge to MFRS is whether Departments have sufficient data to enable a considered and systemic analysis of demand and the impact of changes in services on other services to make fully-informed decisions about service changes.

MFRS is continuing a root and branch review of its support services with a view to delivering efficiencies. A more systemic analysis of support services will require investments but are likely to result in larger, more considered savings in the long run.

2.   The Peer Challenge Team

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 for MFRS was:

- Jon Hall – CFO, Gloucestershire FRS – Lead Peer
- Cllr Sian Timoney – former Chair – Luton and Bedfordshire FRS
- John Mills – DCFO – Hertfordshire FRS
- Steve Makepeace – ACFO – South Yorkshire FRS
- Nicholas Bailey – Superintendent – Cheshire Police
- Henry Cressey – Head of IT – Cambridgeshire FRS
- Anne Brinkhoff – Programme Manager - Local Government Association

3. Leadership, Governance and Corporate Capacity

Strengths

- **Clear and definite sense of 'we are all in it together'.**

The sense of a united team working together was apparent from all of the interviews, station visits and focus groups undertaken. All staff are very aware of the financial challenges ahead and its implications on service changes. However, they are keen to work collectively to ensure that service changes are made in a way that does not affect the strong brand, identity and delivery of services.

- **Clear demonstration of mission, aims and core values**

The new mission 'safer stronger communities – safe effective fire fighters' together with aims and core values is well understood by staff and members of the FA. It is clear and purposeful and its focus on the core activities (or 'back to basics' as the challenge team frequently heard) provides clarity for staff.

- **The Principal Officers and Members of the Fire Authority are highly visible**

Leadership is very visible and direct. There is a strong presence of the CFO and his leadership team and staff appreciate this highly. They trust the Principal Officer team to make the decisions in the best interest of the FRS while being highly aware of the financial pressures. Similarly, there is a strong presence and recognition of F&RA members. For example, the Chair of the Authority has made himself available by being present at Headquarters three days per week. This move has been welcomed by the workforce. Members are engaged in all aspects of the Service, including station visits after Fire Authority meetings. In all areas of the Service staff felt informed and included in briefings from the Principal Officer team.

Members are well supported in fulfilling their roles. There are many training opportunities and members have individual training plans which are drawn up following 1:1 discussions with the training and development officer. This enables good governance.

- **Strong new leadership of the Service has resulted in positive relationships with all staff and representative bodies**

There was a clear recognition by the representative bodies that relationships had improved considerably under the leadership of the new CFO and his team and the changed political leadership. They feel that their views are valued and considered. The representative bodies are engaged in discussions with the PO team earlier, more regularly and in a more effective manner than in many other Services. The result of such an approach is that all fully understand the challenges ahead.

Of particular note and an element of good practice are the Strategy Days which include Fire Authority members, the PO team, Representative Bodies and Council Leaders coming together to map out future challenges and discuss how MFRS can respond to these.

- **Workforce have huge respect for and faith in the CFO and his team**

The CFO has worked at MFRS for many years and is well known by others who work there. He is highly respected by his workforce and the Peer Review Team were impressed by the way in which staff spoke of their loyalty to and absolute faith in the PO team.

- **Principled and clear political leadership**

The members of the Fire and Rescue Authority have pledged to fight against the budget cuts proposed by Central Government. However they are still aware of the need to plan for a new budget should their efforts be in vain. This strong voice trying to protect MFRS is welcomed and applauded by the workforce as a demonstration of unity. It is important for staff to know that Leaders are doing all they can to protect services and jobs from those proposed cuts. However, responsible Leaders need to develop a viable option for business continuity in a timely manner that allows a considered approach to budget reductions within an understanding of wider implications. This is a difficult balance to strike.

- **Clear, consistent and effective communication (eg strategy days)**

The peer challenge team saw strong evidence of effective communication. Examples are high quality monthly newsletter (Hot News), regular e-mail alerts, a range of forums across the Service to share information and knowledge and good use of the FRS's intranet. Without exception staff, members and partners were able to articulate the shared vision and aims of the service as well as discuss the plans for the future in a changing financial climate.

- **Positive and effective partnerships that are highly valued**

Partnership working is a significant strength and the challenge team engaged with many highly enthusiastic partners during the course of the week. Examples were the multi-agency bonfire teams, the involvement in the Princes Trust or the FireFit physical activity programme. We were impressed with the new Fire Fit Hub, co-locating a new Fire station with a community and leisure centre in one of the most deprived wards in Liverpool. The energy, reliability and 'can-do' attitude of MFRS as a partner was a theme that ran through many of our conversations. Partners are keen to continue to work with MFRS and see its contribution as invaluable to tackle crime and disorder, youth welfare and promote healthy and cohesive communities. The breadth and variety of work undertaken by MFRS with partners from Local Authorities, Health, Voluntary Sector and others is a great credit to the Service and a demonstration of effective partnership working.

Areas to explore

- **Independent scrutiny – consider bringing in LA to establish trusted scrutiny**

Although MFRS has a system of regular scrutiny committees, this is exclusively from within the FA and lacks robust external challenge. This is understandable, given the political composition of the FA. MFRS could consider bringing in external partners,

for example from the local authorities, to develop scrutiny further. More independent scrutiny would provide the FA better assurance about performance and policies. The team acknowledges that the decision to invite a peer challenge team into MFRA demonstrates its openness.

4. Operational Preparedness and Response

Strengths

- **Operational planning**

MFRS has 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 MFRS need to work to. The geography of Merseyside enables regular operational exercises to be carried out at the training centre. This improves operational ability and also improves consistency of operational practice. The planning for the 'Bonfire Period' included good examples of community safety and public reassurance and the reduction achieved in nuisance incidents of bonfires was impressive. This was largely achieved because of coordinated and multi-agency pre-planning. Site Specific Risk Information and other key information is collected jointly by operational crews and fire safety protection officers. Fire safety protection is seen as having a beneficial effect in pre-planning and their expertise plays a key role in information gathering.

- **Assessment and Monitoring**

The Station Managers who form the Operational Performance Team are clearly very effective in ensuring that all operational crews have a clear understanding of MFRS expectations. Assessment is carried out both at a Station level and at operational incidents. The group meet each day to discuss any items that may need to be addressed and feedback is provided to operational staff in a very clear manner. The ability to undertake medium and large scale operational exercises is impressive and plays a large part in assessment and monitoring. It could be seen as good practice by other FRS's but probably few could achieve.

- **Use of MDT's and officer laptop PC's**

Good use is made of Mobile Data Terminals (MDT) on fire appliances and relevant and timely information is made available to operational staff through both laptop PC's for officers and MDT's in fire appliances. There is also a future plan to extend the use of the MDT's to include additional information including data from partner organisations.

- **Operational response**

The High, Medium and Low risk categories currently applied in MFRS mean that operational response standards are a challenge. There has been very good progress made in reducing demand through the introduction of a new Automatic Fire Alarms (AFA) policy that has reduced calls by up to 20%. Operational crews have clearly welcomed and responded positively to the shifted focus on to their competence and operational preparedness. Operational crews said that with the time and effort expended in this area there can be no excuses for poor performance. The back to

basics approach has enabled MFRS to demonstrate that the core activity of a firefighters role, is as important at a corporate level as it is to individual staff. This has played out well across all parts of MFRS. There is a high level of acceptance that MFRS is going to continue to change over the coming years and there does appear to be a good level of consensus about how that can be achieved without compromising operational response. Staff in MFRS's Mobilising & Communication Centre (MACC) are positively engaging with operational crews and this has helped build understanding about each other's roles with good effect across MFRS.

- **Debriefing**

Active debriefing takes place very effectively across a range of operational incidents. Lessons learned are used within the Operational Performance Team and are shared across the Service. The debriefing process also links back into operational training and training programmes are adjusted. Effective communication systems are in place to ensure that debriefing is proactive and corrective where necessary. It is clearly well received.

- **Standard operating procedures (eg high rise)**

Standard operating procedures are written in a clear manner. They are all made available to operational crews through the MDT's and the risk critical information is clearly available as primary information at the front of each document. There is also a strong link between the Health and Safety manager and operational managers ensuring that procedures are effective and pragmatic. Operating procedures are taken as guidance and provide sufficient flexibility for operational staff to deal with unusual or complex incidents effectively.

- **Effective joint working (eg Riots in 2011) – could be a national case study**

There is the potential to produce a case study that looks at the joint working during the riots in 2011. Pre-planning and a flexible approach assisted by the dynamic use of Airwave radio communications meant that joint working was effective and very well co-ordinated. The Street Based Intervention teams have also had a positive effect both in terms of supporting communities following the riots by providing highly visible reassurance and also proactively dealing with low level anti-social behaviour in known hot spots.

Areas to explore

- **How MACC is used to support operational activity**

There is the potential to use MACC staff during the periods between operational calls. A system that automatically provides operational staffing availability could be explored and that would also reduce the need for MACC staff to phone each fire station on change of shift. There are areas that MFRS is aware of that need to be more effectively coordinated and more effectively project managed. Items mentioned generally required ICT investment and involvement

- **Try to ensure all Operational Commanders, and in particular the District Managers, are included in operational issues**

All managers that spoke to the team were clearly positive about the changes that have already taken place and more specifically the focus on operational competence has played a key part in supporting that view. There are some managers who may need more time to see the tangible benefits of the new structure and they should be fully engaged in the programme of change. They have a clear sense of passion and purpose but there was some concern expressed that some reporting lines and areas of responsibility still need some clarity.

- **Changing rotas and rosters needs to be inclusive**

Changing rotas is seen by some staff as the 'golden egg'. Staff are clearly engaged in the process of change and it is accepted that this issue above all others will create one of the biggest discussions in MFRS. The use of additional voluntary hours and payments is not supported by everyone, but those who do work it use it to maximum effect and are positive about the opportunities it brings. Views were also expressed about the part-time firefighters having primacy to cover additional voluntary hours not simply because of pay but also to improve their operational knowledge, understanding and experience.

5.   Prevention

Strengths

- **Use of Fire Service Direct and customer insight modelling in partnership with Liverpool John Moore University**

The prevention service is data led, making effective use of the Service's customer insight model and its Fire Service Direct call centre. As these systems become embedded and more widely used, the benefits of having robust data sets down to household level available on the MDT and will assist crews and prevention advocates to target vulnerable people with community fire safety interventions and pre planning on route to incidents.

Targeting of high risk homes, places and people is having a positive impact on reducing incident rates. The customer insight project has utilised numerous data sets providing the users with robust information on whom and where to target resources. This will become more important as finances and resources reduce.

The introduction of targets for Fire Service Direct staff has generated valuable income for the centre. A slight area of concern is that staff are required to make twelve calls per hour and achieve nine actual sales per day, if this was to increase then the brand of MFRS could be tainted by a sales driven culture.

- **Targeting of high risk homes and people will be enhanced by the Portal system**

The introduction of the Portal has proven very popular with staff and managers; it provides quick and easy access for managers to check progress of remotely managed teams. It also assists staff to record all areas of work and monitor progress against agreed targets. Further development of the system is planned, which will only serve to improve transparency and efficiency.

If a self serve element is added then front line staff and managers can call up reports and information about their community or area of responsibility. A development of this kind may inform and speed up decisions taken a local level while reducing workloads for HQ based staff.

- **Operational training time and CFS interventions are well balanced with work routine**

The task of balancing workloads for front line staff has benefitted from a structured work routine that places a balanced emphasis on the need to maintain the operational competence of staff and deliver targeted community safety interventions. Front line staff were very positive about the rebalancing of priorities to include safety critical training, they appeared committed to completing training activities and community safety workloads with equal importance.

- **District Plans are linked to the Integrated Risk Management Plan, Police plans and Local Authority plans and are designed using Equality Impact Assessments**

The emphasis placed on locally designed plans that assist the organisation to achieve its aims and objectives is a sensible approach that has engaged managers at all levels in the planning process. The removal of targets by senior managers is empowering middle managers and junior officers to agree local targets that are included in watch based plans designed to deliver reductions in incident rates. This is supporting a culture of ownership and responsibility for local performance among stations and junior officers. The proactive and consistent use of the Equality Impact Assessments has also informed the planning process and given confidence to local managers that their activities are being delivered in the areas of most need.

If green book staff are to take a significant share of any initial reductions in staffing level, this may impact on the current ability of the district managers to deliver plans which have been agreed with partner agencies. The peer challenge team heard an important message that any proposals for changes in services need to highlight the impact on partners and ultimately the local communities that will be affected.

- **Central team delivering a wide range of services**

The centrally based Community Safety team has a range of staff delivering some innovative programmes within schools and communities. Partnership working is at the core of the team's thinking, with many interventions delivered by multi agency teams. Having a police officer permanently seconded to the team has assisted with breaking down barriers and smoothing the way for improved levels of data sharing and joint working. A good example of this was the tagging of vehicles delivering fireworks into the area by police staff, which could then be tracked to the point of delivery allowing multi

agency teams to target retailers and prevent illegal sales of fireworks. Road Traffic Collision Reduction activities are gathering pace with managers now having a seat on road safety boards.

The Incident Investigation Team investigates accidents, fires, road traffic collisions, arson and carry out the role of the coroners officer when requested. This is another example of the multi agency approach working effectively.

The central team also coordinate the delivery of youth engagement activities such as LIFE courses, Princes Trust, Street Based Teams and School Fire Liaison Officers, all designed to reduce antisocial behaviour and improve opportunities for young people.

- **Multi agency team on the Wirral - Police, Local Authority Youth Offending Service Voluntary Sector supported by advocates delivers real efficiency of scale**

The team developed on the Wirral has members from numerous agencies all working in unison to improve community wellbeing. The speed of response to emerging issues has improved with the communication links and trust developed by team members. Having the community team based on a fire station has assisted with including operational staff in the planning process and given them access to partner agency staff. Having dedicated advocates responsible for area such as reducing anti social behaviour and schools liaison is proving useful. Data sharing protocols have also been set up with Social Services, GP Consortiums and the Probation Service.

Areas to explore

- **Data sets could be made available for district teams on a self serve basis**

If reports could be developed and made available to front line staff via the portal to be accessed as and when required it may increase efficiency, especially if this is a request from a partner agency.

- **Strategic managers to take the lead on the Road Safety Partnerships**

A more decentralised approach to allocating high profile positions on key partnerships will enable managers to influence more effectively. For example, encouraging senior managers sit on the Road Safety Partnerships would provide access to senior road safety engineers and Highways Managers who may not always see the benefits of educational activities over engineered solutions.

- **Potential to devolve more community safety staff to districts**

As the success of the district based teams is starting to become apparent, there is potential to devolve even more staff to the District Manager. This would increase the capacity locally to design and deliver targeted prevention and protection activities.

6.   Protection

Strengths

- **Centrally based team with a mix of Grey and Green Book staff**

The mix of operational and corporate staff provides a degree of resilience within the department, which could be developed further allowing corporate staff to apply for managerial posts traditionally held by operational officers. Operational officers may move out of the department on promotion or redeployment to operational roles where as corporate staff generally stay in post maintaining the skills within the team.

- **New enforcement policy**

The policy developed by the Protection Team will shortly be presented to SMG for consideration and authorisation.

- **Inspecting officers start the SSRI and pass this to crews via MACC for operational visits to take place**

The link between Protection and Response is delivering improvements in firefighter safety. Inspecting officers record information about premises and where appropriate inform operational crews via MACC. Operational crews then utilise the initial information to complete a Site Specific Risk Inspection on the premise. This in turn improves firefighter knowledge and safety and informs pre planning prior to any incident happening.

Areas to explore

- **Instigate a review on inspections and design a risk based inspection programme**

A risk based inspection programme takes time to design and implement but the benefits of such a system once in place can be significant. The inspections of premises that are deemed to be higher risk or regularly not compliant receive a higher degree of scrutiny while others who are always compliant can be visited less frequently. This type of system could deliver a greater degree of control over where and when inspecting officers are deployed, which may provide efficiencies in the longer term.

- **Provide officers with clear focus around identifying new premises**

Inspecting officers could be encouraged to identify new premises that may require inspecting while out on their normal duties. This could potentially reduce community risk and increase firefighter safety.

- **Develop/Purchase a suitable IT system**

A system that allows mobile working offers economy of scale when the current costs of travel, administration and office space are off set as potential savings against the cost of developing the system.

- **Mobile working for inspecting officers**

Mobile working allows inspecting officers to work from any location with an internet connection. Completed work is uploaded to the system while new work is simultaneously downloaded for the officer's attention and completion. A system of this nature could remove the need for officers to be in the office allowing more time spent inspecting premises with potential reductions in travel costs and CO_2 emissions.

- **Train operational crews to complete low risk assessments**

Operational crews could be trained to a slightly higher level of competence, allowing them to carry out the more straight forward inspections. This type of approach also improves the local firefighters' knowledge of their risks and building construction, improving firefighter safety at incidents.

7.   Support Services Review

Strengths

- **Clear terms of reference for Directors, Area Managers and Heads of Departments to carry out assessments, leading to clear proposals in anticipation of grant reductions**

The terms of reference prepared for managers in relation to reviewing their departments and achieving consistency in decision making were clear and instructive. Support was provided to ensure consistency of approach and that the proposals were viable.

The proposals prepared are based on a zero based budgeting model, asking what is the minimum we need to deliver a function. This is a good basis for a root and branch review of what support services are required and how they contribute to the overall purpose and mission of the service.

- **Criteria for decision making based on agreed risk based approach**

Within the terms of reference the adoption of a risk based approach gave guidance in the identification of staff roles and functions. This was used by managers to ensure that there was a consistency of approach in identifying potential reductions in posts and possible savings, seeking to minimise the risk to the operational delivery of the service.

- **Staff feel well informed by the senior management team**

A consistent theme of the whole peer challenge was the view held by staff that they had been kept informed directly by the senior management group. Whilst they understood that the details of any changes could not be known before the expected announcements, they were aware of the lobbying the CFO and Authority had made on their behalf and had ultimate faith that the management group would make decisions that had least impact on service delivery.

It is however worth mention that the levels of resilience within the staff unions (Unison and Unite) are stretched and moving forward if this is not addressed the service may

find itself hampered in communicating fully through any potential collective consultation processes.

- **Staff feel able to feed back their ideas if required**

As part of the successful communication carried out by the senior management group, staff not only felt informed, but also felt confident that if they had concerns or ideas that may assist the situation they would be listened to. It is testimony to the faith held by staff for the CFO in particular, however that they could not give an example of when they had needed to do this.

This may be a further indication that non FBU staff are not getting the full level of support that might be expected from a union in this current climate.

- **Recognition that frontline services are the priority**

In spite of the personal position of many non uniform staff their loyalty to the organisation, its mission and the value placed on their frontline colleagues who they support was incredible. The comments regarding the desire to work for MFRS and their recommendation of it as a good place to work are testimony to a values led organisation. There was however a wide recognition and acceptance that frontline services need to be maintained, but that to deliver they do need support from them and so there needs to be some recognition of the whole Service delivering the mission.

- **Drive to minimise compulsory redundancy by keeping voluntary severance options under consideration**

The Fire and Rescue Authority and Strategic Management Group have publicly shown their desire to avoid any compulsory redundancies. Many staff reported that they believe that this is a genuine desire, but accept that it may not be one that is deliverable moving forward. It is however recognised that the Service have sought to minimise the risk of compulsory redundancies by keeping the voluntary severance scheme options under consideration for as long as possible and that they set aside reserves for any staff who wished to take advantage of this scheme. This has been appreciated by staff who recognise that the organisation is not obliged to do this and see it as a further example of the values the organisation has in relation to the treatment of its staff.

Areas to explore

- **Greater understanding of the systemic impact of proposals**

Whilst Heads of Department have reviewed their own departments, with the support of their managers, the level of cross departmental review appears to have been a peer challenge meeting to assess inter-departmental impact.

Whilst it may be the case that Managers understand their departments' function, there is no evidence that they have been reviewed as part of the whole process. This should start with an analysis of the operational demand on prevention & protection and the functions required to support that process in the most purposeful and efficient way.

As a consequence the review seeks to do what is currently done but with less resource, there does not appear the level of scrutiny and understanding of how they deliver against the mission as a whole. As a consequence there are areas of duplication, (e.g. call taking, performance management data, IT systems, prevention activity) and no evidence to show how the proposed changes will impact on the delivery of service, only a statutory compliance.

- **The same logic and rigor in reducing demand on front line services might be applied to certain support service areas s**

MFRS has overseen tremendous reduction in demand for its emergency service over the past decade. This has been achieved by understanding this demand, understanding the root causes of this in the widest context from building design to the impact mental health has on the likelihood of being a victim of fire. With this understanding the Authority has designed its Service to deliver prevention and protection activity, as well as effective resources to tackle those situations that may face them. There is in built learning and de-briefing to ensure that efficiency and effectiveness is maintained and improved upon.

The same level of understanding, delivery and evaluation can and needs to be applied to support services. This will improve the service provided and demonstrate areas where waste activities can be removed.

- **Support services might be improved by ensuring that the processes currently used are made as efficient as possible and in particular identifying when capacity potentially increases (eg MACC; demonstrable reduction in 999 calls compared to no change in relation to other non-operational areas of business)**

Examples of processes that appeared to show scope for improvement in utilising capacity within the organisation appeared in the MACC where use could be made of their down time capacity to carry out quality checks and audit carried out by other areas of support service.

The example of 999 calls reducing is evidence that demand is being addressed, the volumes of non-999 calls into the organisation however are increasing. This was seen in the Fire Service Direct, where it is anticipated that calls regarding 'bleeping smoke alarms' will rise from approximately 12,000 this year to 16,000 next year. All these calls will represent a call on the time of your staff and potentially dissatisfaction if not responded to in line with the organisation values.

This could be achieved through:
- o Analysis of non-operational demand on the organisation
- o Review business processes end to end

Other Key Areas of Assessment

8. Community Risk Management

Strengths

- **Better sharing of risk data with other agencies**

The sharing of data has improved and should continue to do so with the introduction of the customer insight programme. The data is allowing intervention to be focused on delivering services to those in most need. Setting intervention criteria that is based on robust data sets has also delivered efficiencies by targeting homes or individuals who are known to more than one agency.

- **Fire Support Network carry out low risk Home Fire Safety Checks as well as house clearances and loft decluttering**

The establishment of a Social Enterprise such as Fire Support Network, operating under the brand of MFRS but working with and through volunteers is an example of good practice nationally. Fire Support Network are able to complete low risk Home Fire Safety Checks very cost effectively. This allows community fire safety staff and operational crews to focus on targeting the more vulnerable people in their communities. The removal of unwanted items from peoples homes especially lofts reduces the fire loading and allows the occupiers to move around the home more freely and in the event of a fire happening provides a safer environment for firefighters to operate in.

- **Common North-West Regional IRMP and response standard**

This is an innovative work stream and if an agreement can be reached it will assist with joint working across the region especially when fire service boundaries do not match local authority boundaries.

- **Protection department inform staff of premises that require SSRI**

As stated within the protection report, making the information gathered by inspecting officers available via the mobile data terminal has improved data available to operational crews, generating more detailed site specific risk inspections and operational tactical planning by watch based managers.

- **Use of the mobile data terminals is increasing and assisting crews with preplanning on route to and at incidents – FF safety**

Adding more information to the mobile data terminals is informing the officer in charge of potential risks present at the premises and in the surrounding area. Further development of this system is planned down to house level, which will only serve to enhance firefighter safety and operational effectiveness.

- **Caldecott Guardians referring over 65's to MFRS**

This is a really positive example of how working with partners can help with the sharing of information about people who under normal circumstances are fit and well and not vulnerable by age. The situation can change following a stay in hospital where they may be in a more vulnerable state on returning home. Providing the fire service with details at this stage allows the home fire safety check to be completed in homes that may not have been targeted previously.

Areas to explore

- **Further develop the mobile data terminals to support community safety activity**

Colour coding of homes to inform operational crews when targeting communities and attending incidents is planned. When completed this will be a useful addition to the system.

- **Develop IT systems to allow end users to self serve**

Improvements in the speed data can be retrieved would assist front line staff and deliver efficiencies, allowing analysts to carry out more in depth analytical work.

- **Fire Support Network would like to be used more – perception is they may be seen as competition.**

This is an area that should be investigated, if the perception is true then a potential rift could begin to detract from the good work carried out by the Network.

9. Health and Safety

Strengths

- **Leadership commitment to the improvement of the Health and Safety demonstrated in the mission**

The Principal Officers and Senior Manager Group have revisited the mission for Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority to make direct reference to 'safe effective fire fighters'. This places safety at the forefront of the Service's delivery and recognises that safe and strong communities cannot be achieved if fire fighters are unable to do their role.

- **Strong leadership demonstrated by the DCFO as Chair of Health and Safety Committee**

Having set the mission statement it was imperative to see this turned to action and at a strategic level this is clearly seen with DCFO chairing of the Health and Safety Committee. There is a clear governance structure linking strategic with operational delivery and a clear direction on addressing identified problems, actions and delivery on time.

- **Introduction of Grey Book officer as lead for health and safety**

The recent change from the lead health and safety officer being Green Book to a Grey Book officer is seen as a key factor in the delivery of the mission regarding safe effective fire fighters. This has ensured a strong operational focus, with an officer who has the passion and commitment to deliver the strategy set by the DCFO and a decision supported by frontline staff, in demonstrating the real commitment to health and safety.

- **Demonstrable increase and emphasis in operational training reducing the risk especially for front line staff**

The decision to increase the training across the Service and greater emphasis on daily and weekly audits provides the means by which the strategy on health and safety can be delivered. Officers are able to train in procedures, learn processes and understand the tolerances of equipment ensuring that the risk of injuries in the operational environment is reduced.

- **Auditable processes on the OSHENS system to track health and safety actions.**

Key to the delivery of improvements and learning in relation to health and safety is the MFRS use of the OSHENS system to record and track identified risks. The system is well established and ensures that actions are tracked and turned around in a prompt fashion thereby reducing the risk to the wider organisation.

Areas to explore

- **The submission of near miss forms appears to be lower than expected**

As an organisation that has health and safety at the core of its mission, the use of 'near miss' forms submitted by the frontline are essential to provide further learning. The health and safety team acknowledge that at present there are fewer than expected forms and that submissions need to increase. The challenge team suggests that needs to be an understanding of patterns of submissions to identify risk areas and also to learn whether the submission of near miss forms correlate to environments which are safer for fire fighters.

- **In a period of job insecurity where sickness is a factor, staff are choosing to not call in sick but are taking leave.**

In anticipation of reduced budgets and the possibility of redundancies, staff are concerned that sickness levels may be used as a criteria for selection. The peer challenge team heard that as a consequence some staff are choosing to come into work, when perhaps it would be more sensible recover at home, or they are taking annual leave instead of sick leave. The Service needs to satisfy itself that they are not placing undue pressure on staff to come to work, with the consequence that

performance is reduced through low morale or in connection with frontline staff directly impacting on the safety of them and their colleagues.

10. Training and Development

Strengths

- **Training Development Academy is a place that staff now enjoy attending**

Front line operational staff are very complimentary of the culture that now exists at the Training and Development Academy. They commented on feeling valued and being in a learning environment rather than feeling they were being put through a series of tests designed to find failings.

- **Increased operational development and training is making staff feel valued**

The decision taken by SMG to refocus on operations has given operational officers confidence to spend time delivering quality training and development for their staff. Firefighters believe their operational competence is important to senior managers and is now being catered for, which has encouraged them to engage in the new culture.

- **Management Development training is structured and well managed by the Workforce and Organisational Management Team**

The team have a structured programme of development programmes available to operational and corporate staff. If people ask for management development prior to promotion, a number of schemes are available which include coaching, mentoring and specific trainings and workshops. Recruitment is performance led and individuals who are highlighted as having potential to progress are fast tracked through the development system.

- **Well supported FA members – individualised member training plan**

MFRS has a structured and systematic approach to supporting FA members. Following from 1:1 conversations with the training officer, individual development plans are provide for fire authority members. This ensures that their particular development needs are highlighted and catered for. In addition, MFRS provides a suite of training and learning events for FA members and encourages its members to visit fire stations This is highly valued by FA members.

- **Good support for staff at risk of redundancy (eg mentors, redeployment policies)**

There is good support for staff who are at risk of redundancy. This includes redeployment within MFRS where possible encouraging high performers to stay with the organisation. Staff at risk are offered additional training enhancing their chance of securing a job elsewhere. A job club is planned to be opened at the Training and Development Academy.

Areas to explore

- **'permit to work' (fit to ride) requires direction from SMG**

The Training and Development Academy requires strategic guidance from SMG on future direction and product development that will meet the needs of the organisation in the coming years.

11. Call Management and Incident Support

Strengths

- **Very experienced staff**

The staff in the MACC have a great deal of experience and are clearly well motivated. They contribute very effectively to the operational response arrangements within MFRS. The control room manager is also highly experienced and is using that to great effect in seeking further performance improvements.

- **Robust call challenge process in place**

MACC have a very clear, robust and effective call challenge process and use 'text back' to alert rogue callers that should they continue to make malicious calls then firm action will be taken through their mobile phone provider.

- **Good performance and performance management**

The performance in the control room is very effective and performance charts are made visible to all staff via the notice board. This creates an element of internal competition between the control room staff that further enhances performance. MACC staff are clearly focused on their role and are very clear in the part they play in operational response.

- **Staff feel more valued and included and are looking forward to the new facilities**

There has been a tangible shift in the staff who work at the MACC. They clearly feel more valued and also have a clear understanding of their role within MFRS. Their positivity and their professionalism is a credit to MFRS.

Areas to explore

- **Better work with the Highways Agency (eg strategic road network cameras)**

Consider making contact with the Highways Agency to access the strategic road network CCTV system. This should be easily available and will assist call management and improve communications between MFRS and the Highways Agency. It may also

has the potential to have a positive effect on call attendance to incidents on the road network and also assist operational crews.

- **Improve understanding between MACC and operational staff**

The awareness programme that has started informally should be encouraged as it is already showing improved awareness and understanding between operational crews and the MACC staff.

- **Large screen technology**

Comments were made by the MACC staff that they would welcome the return of the large visual display. The reasoning appears sensible as it is not just for the use of MACC staff but also provides visual information to supporting officers during large scale or complex incidents. There are examples of how this technology is used in other FRS's.

12. Organisational Culture

To assist the peer challenge team's understanding of the organisation's culture, the team asked individuals to complete a short survey. Participants were asked to rank twelve statements from 'excellent' (score of 10) to 'very poor' (score of 1).

The questionnaire was completed by 87 individuals, including F&RA members, uniformed and non-uniformed staff. Of these:
- 8 (9%) work at strategic level or were members of the F&RA
- 27 (31%) work at tactical level
- 19 (22%) work at operational level
- 33 (38%) did not indicate at what level they work

Table 1 below shows the average scores of all respondents to the survey with the two highest scoring statements highlighted in 'green' and the two lowest scoring statements highlighted in 'red'.

Staff highly value working for MFRS and recommend this to others. At times of significant financial uncertainty this is a real strength and shows that there is a lot of good will among staff. It is a good basis from which to move into more uncertain and challenging territory, but managers must remember that good will and trust will need to be earned and that they must continue with open and timely communication and engagement with staff. Partnership working is seen as another key strength, mirroring the strong endorsement MFRS received from its partners.

Working together across the Service and delegation of decision making were statements that received the lowest scores (albeit still high at 7.3 and 7.5 respectively). Effective cross-service working is a challenge in a large FRS such as Merseyside whose area covers five Districts. The recently established decentralisation of services such as prevention and community safety, where service planning is now delegated to Group or Station Managers, will aid quicker and more responsive decision making. At the same time, Group Managers must ensure that they share good practice and foster cross-service links. The Service has a well developed intranet and a good infrastructure of cross-Service networks to ensure that learning is shared. With greater decentralisation it is important that these existing mechanisms are well used in future.
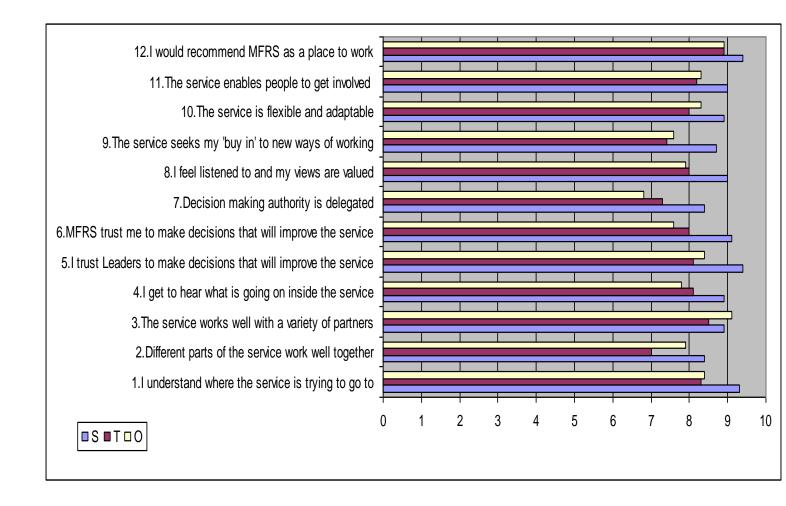
Table 1: Average scores – all survey respondents

1. I understand where the service is trying to go to	8.4
2. Different parts of the service work well together	7.5
3. The service works well with a variety of partners	8.7
4. I get to hear what is going on inside the service	8.0
5. I trust MFRS' Leaders to make decisions that will improve the service	8.3
6. MFRS trust me to make decisions that will improve the service	7.8
7. Decision making authority is delegated	7.3
8. I feel listened to and my views are valued	7.9

9. The service seeks my views to get my 'buy in' to new ways of working	7.5
10. The service is flexible and adaptable	8.1
11. The service enables its people to get involved in major pieces of work	8.1
12. I would recommend MFRS as a place to work	8.8

Table 2 below shows average scores of respondents to the survey broken down by individual positions within MFRS, ie operational, tactical and strategic. While the sample size is small and care must be taken not to generalise findings, there some points worth noting:

- Overall the variance in scores among staff working at strategic, tactical and operational levels is relatively low. In many ways this is very positive as it indicates coherence in staff perceptions across rank and position.

- With the exception of statement 3 (effective partnership working) respondents working in a strategic position have consistently scored questions more positively. While this is self evident it, however, confirms an important general point that senior managers need to seek and listen to perspectives of more junior staff when seeking to understand organisational climate and culture

- Statement 7 (delegated decision making) scored lowest among staff working at strategic and operational levels and second lowest among staff working at tactical level. While decision making has been decentralised, for example in the Community Safety work, the challenge team heard that this could go much further. This might be something MFRS may wish to explore further.

- Statement 2 (different parts of the Service work well together) scored lowest among staff working at tactical level. It is the responsibility of middle managers to encourage cross organisational working. MFRS may wish to explore this comparatively low score so that it does not become an organisational bottleneck.

- Statement 3 (partnership working) scored highest among staff working at operational level. This indicates the active involvement of front-line staff in initiatives with partner agencies. The challenge team had ample evidence of this.

- The variance in scores among staff working at strategic, tactical or operational levels is lowest for statement 12 (recommend MFRS as a place to work). Respondents feel that MFRS is a good place to work independent of the rank or status you have within the organisation. This is a very strong endorsement of the leadership and organisational management.

Table 2: Average scores – broken down by position within MFRS

13.   Conclusion and contact information

Throughout the peer challenge the team met with enthusiastic and committed officers and staff. It is clear that Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service has come a long way and made significant improvement. There is enthusiasm and confidence for the future and the peer team believe that by harnessing this and by applying prudent planning assumptions MFRS can continue on its improvement journey.

For more information regarding the Fire Peer Challenge of MFRS please contact:

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