

A review of service reform in Scottish fire and rescue authorities

Key messages/Prepared for the Accounts Commission

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Key messages

Introduction

1. A National Joint Council (NJC) agreement in 2003 linked improved pay and conditions for fire and rescue authority (FRA) employees across the UK to a programme of service reform intended to promote a more targeted and risk-based approach to prevention and emergencies.

2. FRAs are now expected to give greater priority to improving the safety of communities by reducing the risks from fire and other emergencies, and to the training and development of their workforce.

3. In March and October 2004 Audit Scotland published two progress reports¹ on whether the intended benefits of modernisation were being delivered locally by Scotland's eight FRAs. Subsequently, the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 and accompanying statutory guidance, the *Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland*, provided the legislative framework for service reform and set out national priorities, objectives and guidance for FRAs.

4. Our October 2004 report concluded there was still a significant amount of work to be done before real change became evident on the ground.

5. In 2006, we undertook a further national study to establish whether Scottish FRAs are achieving the objectives of service reform, in particular whether Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) are effectively supporting the change in emphasis from intervention to prevention, and whether the progress of reform is reflected in the culture of the organisation.

6. We reviewed each FRA's performance in six areas: strategic management; fire prevention and risk management; financial management; workforce management; management of operational business; and communications.

7. In carrying out the study, we interviewed elected members, senior managers, operational firefighters and non-uniformed staff² in each of the eight FRAs. We also observed and attended meetings, reviewed strategies and plans, and analysed performance information.

8. The national report presents an overview of progress on service reform in Scottish FRAs, concentrating on the main areas of change. It draws together common themes from the audit work, illustrating the range of performance across the eight FRAs, and identifies good practice within individual FRAs and areas where further work is required.

9. The national report is supported by eight local audit reports for each of the individual FRAs. The key findings from the national report are outlined below.

Key findings

All FRAs have shifted significant resources into community safety and fire prevention. FRAs are developing a better understanding of the diverse communities they serve and have started to target their initiatives towards those most at risk.

10. The legislative framework requires each FRA to develop an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) setting out an assessment

of local risk to life and property and how the authority will deploy the resources to meet these risks. The first IRMP was to be in place from April 2005 and all FRAs successfully met this deadline.

11. The NJC agreement followed a period of industrial instability which included strike action in late 2002 and 2003. As a result, FRAs have been implementing their IRMPs in a difficult industrial relations climate. This has had an impact on the pace with which change is being delivered and there is some way to go for management and union representatives to develop and sustain productive working relationships.

12. Across Scotland good progress has been made in using the Fire Service Emergency Cover³ (FSEC) model and all FRAs have dedicated and trained personnel to support this work. All FRAs have used FSEC to run scenarios to review their existing service provision and consider:

- the optimum location of appliances
- relocating fire stations to ensure that resources are in the appropriate locations to cover high-risk areas
- changing operational working patterns.

13. The first full year of IRMP has delivered a number of tangible benefits. There has been a clear shift in resources from intervention to prevention, and the focus of risk prevention is now targeted on people rather than property. Approximately 94 additional posts in community safety have been created, as a result of departmental mergers and efficiency gains.

¹ *Scottish Fire Services: verification of the progress of modernisation*, Accounts Commission, March 2004 and *Scottish Fire Services: second verification of the progress of modernisation*, Accounts Commission, October 2004.

² The term non-uniformed is used to describe only those staff who are not subject to the NJC Scheme of Conditions of Service sixth edition 2004. We have used this term in the absence of any nationally agreed description for this group of staff. Some FRAs use 'support staff' and/or 'corporate staff'.

³ FSEC is a computer based analytical toolkit which assists each FRA in identifying and evidencing optimum levels of prevention and intervention resources.

14. All FRAs have instigated a wide range of targeted safety campaigns to reduce risks from fire, which are being delivered using operational crews, community fire safety personnel and partner organisations.

15. FRAs have developed a good understanding of the safety risks faced by their diverse communities and have started to target their initiatives towards high-risk and disadvantaged communities including older people, people with disabilities, new communities and minority ethnic groups.

16. Home fire safety visits (HFSVs) are an important element of community safety work. Their purpose is to raise awareness of fire safety in the home and increase smoke detector ownership within high-risk communities. HFSVs are starting to be rolled out across Scotland. In 2005/06, 90,620 households in Scotland received a HFSV. This represents 3.9 per cent of the 2.3 million households in Scotland.

17. All FRAs are working with their local community planning partners and community safety partners in areas such as anti-social behaviour, alcohol misuse and community safety, in order to reduce the risk from fire and other emergencies.

18. While FRAs are putting considerable resources into partnership working, more work is required to evaluate its effectiveness to ensure it is contributing effectively to their corporate aims.

It is too early to assess the overall impact of IRMP. Some benefits to local communities can be identified but FRAs cannot yet demonstrate a sustained improvement in reducing risk.

19. There is early evidence that progress is being made as a result of local initiatives to reduce fire risk to communities.

20. At a national level there is some evidence that the emphasis on prevention is delivering benefits, in particular the number of people killed in domestic fires fell by 27 per cent from 74 in 2004/05 to 54 in 2005/06, while the number of malicious calls reduced by eight per cent over the same period.

21. However, there is no clear pattern of improvement across Scotland in the first year of IRMP. Overall, the number of incidents attended by FRAs between 2004/05 and 2005/06 rose by 3.7 per cent (from 108,478 to 112,450). The number of primary fires and number of casualties per 10,000 population has remained unchanged in the last 12 months and the number of road traffic collisions and secondary fires increased by 3.8 per cent and 14.7 per cent respectively.

22. FRAs need to evaluate more systematically their community safety approaches to risk reduction, in order to ensure they are using their resources to best effect in their continuing efforts to reduce risks to people and property.

23. Part 3 of the Fire (Scotland) Act, which came into force in October 2006, places a statutory responsibility on the owners or managers of relevant properties to ensure the safety of people in their workplaces or other non-domestic premises in the event of a fire.

24. As a result of this new legislation, there will be a considerable initial increase in the number of premises which need to be inspected by FRAs, but further work remains to assess the resource implications required to implement the legislation fully.

Elected members in FRAs are not meeting their statutory duties relating to Best Value. In general, there is insufficient involvement in setting strategic direction and scrutinising performance.

25. We found elected members across all FRAs to be enthusiastic, committed and supportive of their FRA. They are active locally, visiting fire stations and attending community safety events.

26. However, elected members need to do more to demonstrate leadership and ensure local accountability in relation to FRAs. They should be at the heart of the decision-making process in their FRA, agreeing the political priorities for the service and setting standards against which performance improvement can be measured.

27. FRAs tend to rely on constituent authorities for member induction and development. This training is generic and not relevant to members' specific responsibilities on fire and rescue boards or relevant council committees, and does not cover issues pertinent to fire and rescue services.

28. Few authorities have undertaken any analysis of the training needs of their members. Although many elected members are highly experienced, addressing their development needs and recognising the skills of members is important in promoting their effective engagement and realising their full potential.

29. FRAs should use the opportunity provided by the 2007 local elections to introduce a development programme for members and, where applicable, review the existing structural arrangements of their board to ensure it supports the wider service reform agenda.

All FRAs have made improvements in the collection and monitoring of performance information. However, they now need to use this information in a structured way to manage performance.

30. All FRAs report on their performance against statutory performance indicators (SPIs) and have started reporting performance against a set of Local Performance Indicators (LPIs).

31. LPIs are a relatively recent concept agreed by the Chief Fire Officers Association in Scotland (CFOA(S)) to allow FRAs to benchmark their performance. A new suite of indicators was introduced on 1 April 2006. The LPIs and SPIs complement each other. Most FRAs are also now starting to introduce their own internal performance indicators to measure performance against strategic objectives.

32. We found that within most FRAs individual departments routinely collected volumes of detailed data on activity and the performance of specific services. However, this information is not structured and presented in a coherent, consistent manner that allows accessible management information on the performance of the organisation to be used by the senior management team and elected members.

33. Overall, while the collection of performance information is improving, use of this information to inform strategic decision-making, operational management and scrutiny of performance is variable.

34. All FRAs also need to improve their IT systems to underpin performance management arrangements. CFOA(S) is currently exploring the procurement of a national performance information framework.

35. Public performance reporting is generally underdeveloped. FRAs must ensure they are meeting the statutory requirements of Section 13 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 2003. This imposes a duty on FRAs to make arrangements for reporting to the public on the outcomes of their performance.

36. Existing public reports on performance tend to contain large amounts of contextual information and data on activity levels, such as type of incidents, but relatively limited information on the overall performance of the service against its strategic objectives.

There are good training and development opportunities for wholetime staff but equity of access is variable among retained, volunteer and non-uniformed staff. All FRAs have introduced a number of flexible working policies but there is a need for further progress in this area.

37. FRAs are required to deliver training and development for their staff through an Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS). IPDS is an overarching development strategy intended to encompass all fire and rescue service staff at every stage in their career.

38. A national approach to the implementation of IPDS was adopted in Scotland, coordinated by the Scottish Fire Services College. A partnership between the eight authorities, the College and the Scottish Qualifications Authority has enabled IPDS to be taken forward on a consistent basis.

39. Good progress has been made in implementing IPDS for all wholetime staff, with the Firefighter Development Programme and electronic personal development records system (PDRpro) being used

in wholetime stations. This provides a structured development framework for half the FRA workforce.

40. Progress in rolling out IPDS and PDRpro to retained and volunteer staff, who account for 39 per cent of the workforce, has been much slower and needs to improve. Overall progress in this area has been impeded by the lack of an IT infrastructure. All FRAs now have plans to improve IT access in retained and volunteer stations.

41. While IPDS is intended for all fire and rescue staff, all the development work to date has been designed for operational employees rather than non-uniformed staff. Training needs analysis and development frameworks for non-uniformed staff are limited and there are no clear career structures for them.

42. Non-uniformed staff comprise ten per cent of the FRA workforce but this is set to rise as authorities increase their recruitment of people with specialist skills. FRAs need to do more to identify their training needs on a systematic basis. Greater use could also be made of multi-tier entry to increase the diversity of middle and senior management. This would complement and enhance the existing skills base within FRAs.

43. We found that the majority of FRAs have introduced flexible working policies, such as part-time working, and are making greater use of pre-planned overtime for wholetime firefighters, which provides greater flexibility and overall a more efficient use of resources. However, there has been more limited progress in reviewing existing shift systems or introducing policies such as mixed crewing.

44. Over the next few years, the significant number of firefighters retiring presents a unique opportunity

for FRAs to review their deployment of staff and to introduce more flexible ways of working to enable them to meet service requirements with optimum efficiency.

The diversity of the workforce in FRAs is not representative of the communities they serve. FRAs are starting to embrace the equality agenda and have implemented a variety of initiatives to drive this forward.

45. The majority of the workforce in FRAs (88 per cent) are operational firefighters but only 3.9 per cent of firefighters are women. In total, 11.4 per cent of the FRAs workforce is female. Only 46 people from black and minority ethnic groups are employed by FRAs across Scotland, accounting for 0.5 per cent of the total workforce.

46. In the last two years, FRAs have begun to target recruitment towards under represented groups through 'positive action' campaigns and targeted advertising, but there is significant work to be done to increase the diversity of the workforce.

47. All FRAs have started to mainstream equalities and develop policies in response to legislation. FRAs have been active in establishing equality forums, developing Race Equality Schemes, delivering equality and diversity training, and carrying out Equality Impact Assessments on policies. Progress in this area has been variable however, and more needs to be done to embed these processes.

There is early evidence that good progress is being made in implementing the service reform agenda. However, FRAs need to make further efficiency savings in order to continue to deliver service reform within their existing resources.

48. Overall, FRAs can demonstrate changes to their service delivery since 2004 with a refocus of activity from intervention to prevention and from property to people, and there is some early evidence to suggest that this work is beginning to have an impact. However, progress is variable across the eight FRAs and more work is required across every area of service reform.

49. The Scottish Executive provided £47 million of transitional funding for the financial period 2004/05 to 2007/08 to cover costs associated with the NJC agreement. From 2008/09 FRAs will be expected to have made sufficient efficiency savings to cover the ongoing cost of the award.

50. All FRAs have made efficiency gains over the last two years through a wide range of measures, including the introduction of new equipment and changes in the deployment of staff. A major contribution to improved efficiency has been the implementation of policies in relation to automatic fire alarms (AFAs). FRAs who have implemented these policies have seen a reduction of up to 20 per cent in the number of appliance mobilisations. However, incidents as a result of faulty alarms still make up nearly a third of all incidents and there is scope for further work in this area.

51. FRAs need to continue their efforts to improve efficiency in order to continue delivering service reform within their existing resources.

52. Over the next two to three years, FRAs in Scotland will not only have to manage the ongoing process of service reform but also deal with new and challenging issues such as firefighter pension liabilities and the Scottish Executive's resilience review.

53. Firefighter pensions are unfunded and pension liabilities are an increasing risk for all FRAs. At 31 March 2006 the present value of scheme liabilities was £1.86 billion. The increasing cost of maturing pension liabilities is starting to have a significant impact on the revenue available for service provision, and this situation will worsen over the next couple of years as the large number of firefighters who joined the service in the late 1970s approach retirement. The Scottish Executive is currently reviewing a number of different options for funding firefighter pensions.

54. At a national level, HM Chief Inspector of Fire Services is currently leading a Scottish Executive review of Scotland's ability to deal with simultaneous major emergencies in consultation with all key stakeholders. The review will report to ministers in the summer of 2007, and will focus on how effective emergency response arrangements relate to the wider public service reform agenda.

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