



**CFOA**  
Chief Fire Officers  
Association



# **Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service Fire Peer Challenge (Follow-Up Visit)**

## **Report**

**March 2017**

## Introduction, Context and Purpose

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) commissioned a Fire Peer Challenge in 2015. The team was invited back to provide some feedback on the progress NIFRS has made on the back of the original Peer Challenge. As was the case with the original peer challenge, the process was not one of inspection and the team was invited as 'critical friends' by NIFRS.

Once again we found everyone to be open, honest and frank and we are grateful for this.

Background reading was provided to the team in advance and a timetable of on-site meetings over two days (2-3 March 2017) were undertaken by the team. The team met with a cross-section of officers and having assimilated and discussed its findings provided a presentation to the NIFRS Board, Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and officials from the Northern Ireland Department of Health who sponsor NIFRS. This presentation was delivered on 9 March 2017.

There were a number of areas on which the team was asked to focus its feedback. These were:

1. NIFRS Integrated Risk Management Process (IRMP)
2. Organisational development
3. People
4. Operational Risk Management
5. Community Risk Management
6. Governance/Leadership Capacity

The team covered all of these themes under 3 interlinked headings allowing the feedback to reflect some of the natural crossover which exists between the six headings. These were:

1. Governance/Leadership Capacity
2. Integrated Risk Management Processes
3. Learning and Organisational Development

## 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 the second visit to NIFRS was:

- **Lead Peer** - David Etheridge (Chief Fire Officer, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and President of CFOA)
- **Officer peer** - Steve Apter (Interim Deputy Commissioner of London Fire Brigade)
- **Officer peer** – Grahame Mitchell (Area Manager, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service)
- **Review Manager** Ernest Opuni (LGA)

### **3. Detailed findings**

#### **3.1 Governance/Leadership**

The Board of Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service demonstrated maturity and growing confidence through bringing challenge and accountability to the service. Although the Board is still four members short, the existing board membership have a strong and comprehensive ownership and understanding of the risks associated with their responsibilities as the designated Fire Authority of Northern Ireland. The use of the organisational risk and performance framework has resulted in the board fully understanding the complexities of running a modern day Fire and Rescue Service but in particular the capacity and resource challenges. Within the organisation there was significant evidence that the leadership and functional managers are incredibly self-aware and there is a growing level of confidence and empowerment. There was strong evidence of professional pride and increased passion in the service which is greatly assisting the cultural change journey which the service is now on. This has been improved by the decision of the board to move away from temporary promotions to permanent secondments into key positions within the organisation. This move has reduced the level of risk aversion and increased the level of decision-making which has led to particular progress around the audit recommendations which have reduced from approximately 700 to 100. This direction of travel has also been complemented by the appointment of the new Chief Fire Officer.

As an organisation there is a strong outward looking feel both with stakeholders within Northern Ireland but also utilising the expertise of other associations such as The Chief Fire Officers Association via the working groups. This approach has brought tangible benefits to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and also enabled good practice and innovative ideas within the organisation to be promulgated within England.

Going forward, the CLT should work with, and present to the board, a joint vision encompassing the future aspirations of the service. Through the ongoing use of the resources to risk review and the outcome of the IRMP the joint vision should also include the use of the estate. This would cover to cover such matters as integration and sharing with other agencies, collaborative opportunities with other public and voluntary organisations and promoting community use of public assets.

The restructure of Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to include the centralisation and central delivery of functions includes the submission of a significant number of business cases relating to ongoing projects and business improvements such as ICT. CLT should work with the board of Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to fully understand the capacity challenges and the project and programme management needs that will be required should all of the projects and business cases come through fruition as hoped. The service has been extremely successful through using the IRMP process to ensure that both from an operational and community risk management it has the right people, in the right place, with the right skills. This ethos should be extended to the professional supporting staff and Headquarters projects going forward.

There is a significant improvement in the governance and leadership of Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service since the review team previously spent time within the service in 2015. One very encouraging comment the Peer Review team received from

a staff member was that the Service is now moving from 'permanent management to permanent leadership' and credit should be given at all levels as to this cultural change.

### **3.2 Integrated Risk Management Processes**

NIFRS have developed a very strong resource to risk culture. This move is a key strength and a foundation to moving towards the way that NIFRS conducts business. A tangible move for the organisation over the past two years from a data rich output driven organisation to one that is now more intelligence led and focussed on outcomes should be commended. An example, the Peer Review team would like to highlight was the move from variable crewing to day crewing enabling resources to be relocated to meet a prevention strategy in areas of reduced cover from retained duty personnel. All of this is underpinned by a strong and defensible risk profile methodology; we see this approach as potentially nationally leading good practice.

The understanding and management of risk across Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is extremely high and there is a clear and demonstrable link from the IRMP being delivered through prevention, protection and response strategies.

Furthermore projects and outcomes are being delivered through the proposal set out in the IRMP and whilst some of these are early in development and not yet embedded there is strong evidence that the IRMP risk methodology is driving out sustainable improvements. That said, the senior team at Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service need to be mindful that there exists some single points of failure with the reliance on highly skilled individuals providing some cause for concern.

NIFRS are beginning to build a more flexible and agile approach to risk and in particular emerging risks and threats; this is evidenced through the introduction of national interagency liaison officers in close collaboration with England Fire and Rescue Services. Risk Management is an evolving process and whilst the methodology we observed is robust, thought must be given to ensure the ongoing development of risk management to ensure that the process becomes fully embedded to support future risk critical decisions. A key issue identified by the team relates to the challenges around data sharing. The organisation should prioritise the ongoing requirement to improve its data sharing capability and whilst we recognise that challenges exist, evidence shows there are a variety of ways to achieve that outcome. We should suggest the development of those relationships with agencies be prioritised.

The Peer Review Team were impressed with approach being taken by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in building its volunteering capacity. However, what has been developed now needs to be delivered and once delivered it will bring capacity in targeting those at great risk.

### **3.3 Learning and Organisational Development**

NIFRS have worked hard in recent months to ensure that their thinking and service strategies extend beyond the usual 12 month financial window associated with the annual financial settlement. This was clearly evidenced by the fact that the service now has a very clear and realistic HR strategy which runs to 2019. This strategy is wide ranging and demonstrates that the service is able to position the workforce

development side of the building blocks associated with the delivery of the Integrated Risk Management Plan.

Whilst the Service is subject to an Annual Financial Settlement, which can be amended in each year and is late in its announcement, it has now created a comprehensive strategy for revenue resources up to 2020. This is a very forward looking strategy which contains a series of assumptions which will enable the service to continue with the implantation of the outcome of the resources to risk review and the deployment of resources including the rationalisation of the estate.

The service now benefits from the creation of a solid performance management system which, whilst its use is immature, will potentially encourage the professional development of support staff. The performance management system has the potential to provide an increase in the speed and implementation of the organisations priorities by ensuring that the objectives set for key functional managers directly relate to those contained within the delivery plans and the organisational risk register.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service benefits from an incredibly energetic and enthusiastic estates management who, whilst consists of a small team, are extremely self-aware. The estates management team are working hard to reduce the high level of outstanding works whilst taking every opportunity to improve facilities on the estate. This was particularly evidenced through the implementation of the IRMP projects around moving from variable to day crewing which has included the refurbishment of a Fire Stations.

The business services organisation was relatively new in its inception during the 2015 visit of the Peer Review Team. This service is now embedded and is viewed as a helpful friend, in terms of their delivery and support for the services operational needs. There was clear evidence that Business Services Organisation (BSO) is listening to the service and helping to deliver against areas of great need including supporting of the creation of business cases, and in particular the implementation and identification of the appropriate IT strategy for the service. The service is seeking to use the expertise of the BSO to a greater extent by adding additionally responsibilities. This has the potential to produce added capacity and resilience to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service which can be utilised to increase the pace of projects and programmes going forward.

The technical service and fleet management is very effective with a clear vision around further improvements to support service delivery. The Peer Review team were particularly impressed by the vision around the 'one stop shop approach'. This will not only ensure that the level of maintenance and support that the service receives will increase but it also has the potential to deliver a collaborative approach with other blue light services. This collaborative approach therefore has the opportunity to lead to more efficient and effective services and promote further intra and interoperability. The employee engagement strategy has been greatly improved by the employment of an external consultancy to provide the latest thinking around effective communication to stakeholders. Whilst still new and has been subject to a small trial, the employee engagement strategy appears to be comprehensive and effective. This includes stakeholders such as The Fire Brigade Union as well as individual teams and its use will become more vital going forward, particularly as the outcome of the IRMP process and resource to risk review is implemented.

The service has significantly engaged with several working groups of The Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA). This was particularly evidenced through the suggested approach around the management of Incident Command. The current policy which has been created appears to be thorough and professional and the Peer Review team believe that it has the potential to be industry leading. However, whilst the policy is an extremely good foundation, the implementation of it will need to be effectively resourced to ensure that its delivery is embedded and consistently applied across all staffing groups.

Real fire training is taking place within Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. However the measurement of it and the subsequent reporting to the board is quantitative rather than qualitative. The effective delivery of risk critical training within Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is fundamental in assuring firefighter safety and the board and the Corporate Leadership Team being able to clearly demonstrate the delivery and discharge of their corporate responsibilities under Health and Safety Legislation and to drive down the risk to their employees to as low as reasonably practicable. Back in 2015, the Peer Review team had significant concerns and strongly recommended that the issue of risk critical training be addressed by the service. Whilst progress has been made in this area there is still a significant period of time before the new tactical firefighting facility will be available to NIFRS at Desertcreat. The Service should review their current real fire training provision and consider options (including the use of a mobile unit) that could be implemented quickly, to ensure that prior to the new facility at Desertcreat, all staff can receive comprehensive real fire training which will enable them to demonstrate competency. The Peer Review team also believe that this will increase the confidence of the staff and also will ensure that the board and CLT are able to clearly articulate their approach to ensuring that their health and safety responsibilities have been appropriately discharged.

## 4. Concluding Headline messages

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service should be congratulated in terms of the way that they have embraced the LGA Peer Review Process and utilised the outcome of the report dated 2015 to drive service improvements and change. It is clear that NIFRS has used the original peer challenge as a means of transforming the Service

The outcomes of the report have enabled the service to reset their relationships at all levels. This is both internally and externally and includes the relationship with their hosting governmental department, the Department of Health.

The pace of reform and cultural change is exemplary and Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service should receive great credit for the creation of significant foundation stones from which they will continue to transform their Fire and Rescue Services for the communities that they serve. In certain areas the team consider what NIFRS is delivering to be industry-leading. This is particularly the case in terms of

1. The quantity and quality of what NIFRS is delivering and
2. Strategy, policy and procedure

In conclusion

- NIFRS can demonstrate significant improvement and positive direction of travel since July 2015.
- The Service has in place the key building blocks for the future. These relate to service delivery, financial strategy, asset management ideas and Workforce Development Strategy.
- NIFRS has produced a very strong intelligence and evidence-led IRMP
- 'Form follows function'. The NIFRS structure is under active consideration for the future around the 11 local government geographic districts.
- There are long term plans in place around training provision including Incident Command and Breathing Apparatus RC training. However there are short-term challenges about which NIFRS is aware in relation to delivery and maintenance of skills.

## 5. Contact information

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

Ernest Opuni – Peer Challenge Manager

**(Local Government Association)**

E-mail – [ernest.opuni@local.gov.uk](mailto:ernest.opuni@local.gov.uk)

Mobile - 07920061193

Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

[www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)