

A strategic needs assessment for Nottinghamshire

Peter Murphy, Kirsten Greenhalgh and Craig Parkin from Nottingham Trent University, University of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service, report on their joint project

In a recent article the authors explored some of the new circumstances, organisational landscape and changing relationships that the fire and rescue services in the UK are currently confronting. They argued that while there are undoubtedly major challenges from the current era of austerity there are also some opportunities and consequential obligations on the service to respond proactively, positively, creatively and imaginatively to the challenges of austerity. One way Nottinghamshire FRS have responded to this challenge has been to work more closely with its two local universities not only in their traditional areas of teaching and research, but in a unique new initiative which integrates and embeds the three organisations' research and strategic analytical capacity into the guidance and advice that the fire and rescue service offers to the fire authority on some of its most crucial strategic decisions.

At the same time, a very traditional relationship has been transformed, initially through a simple consultancy project, into a much closer working relationship characterised by a much richer variety of collaborative projects. These are currently demonstrating the mutual benefits that greater trust and reciprocity between the institutions can bring to both academia and to practice.

The original consultancy project sought to 'quality assure' the evidence base that the service used for a comprehensive review of its Fire Cover Review (Murphy et al 2012). This was a comprehensive review of the configuration and deployment of all the authority's human and physical resources as a result of the Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) process introduced in the UK by the Fire and Rescue Act 2004. The Fire Cover Review (FCR) scrutinised the need for short term reconfiguration of the Service on the basis of the new arrangements of assessing risk to individuals and communities introduced by the Act.

Following this review, NFRS have invited the universities to contribute to the evidential base, the risk assessment and the formulation of medium and long term strategies for



Above: the new International Journal of Emergency Services
Right: Authors Kirsten Greenhalgh and Peter Murphy



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service reconfiguration and the deployment of resources which they have designated a strategic needs assessment. However, during this project the university researchers will become an integral and embedded part of the advice that the service provides to the fire authority.

The universities will help to create both the evidence base and the development of the strategy to be recommended to the fire authority. As it is the fire authority (rather than the fire service) that makes any decisions on the final form of the strategy, the academic independence and quality assurance of the research is maintained. In addition, all three parties wish to ensure that any knowledge, learning, good practice or public value that is created through the project is openly shared with both the local and national fire and rescue and resilience communities as well as by academics and researchers interested in the emergency services. This has effectively created a new and innovative dimension to the relationship between the fire service and the two universities, which the authors believe has mutual benefits to all three parties.

As Chapter 5 of Shane Ewen's excellent history of the British fire services 'Fighting Fires' makes clear, the UK Fire Service has been committed to operational research, education and training as the basis for improvements to the Service since its inception but particularly



NTU Newton Building and Buildings on Jubilee Campus Nottingham University



Fire and rescue services in action

since the professionalisation of the Service in the period 1880 to 1914 (Ewen 2010). It is very much from within this tradition that the current initiative arises.

IRMP Process in the UK

Prior to 2004, the fire services' modus operandi was still dominated by a reactive approach to the fire risks to local communities as FRSs sought to identify individual buildings or clusters of buildings with high levels of risk and/or potential impact (such as chemical plants or nuclear power installations) and plan for any potential incidents accordingly. Services would apply national standards based upon response times and services, buildings, appliances and activities would be designed and deployed accordingly.

The 2004 Act introduced a new system that comprehensively re-assesses the risks to people and communities across an authority's area and requires reconfiguration of services to prevent, respond and/or mitigate risks and the consequences of incidents. Henceforth FRSs had to plan to avoid, reduce and/or mitigate these risks through IRMP and to collaborate and coordinate their activities in various new community wide partnerships such as the local and national resilience forums.

The new responsibilities were set out in the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004 and the 2004 Fire and Rescue Services Act. This moved the focus and objectives of the service, both locally and nationally from individual incidents to collective community outcomes, prevention and preparedness. These duties and responsibilities were subsequently developed and published in a series of national frameworks for fire and rescue services, the most recent version of which was published in June 2012 (DCLG 2012).

Nottinghamshire's Strategic Needs Assessment project will, inter alia, compare NFRS proposals with those of other services in the UK, look at the latest developments in the National Framework and review related developments internationally.

Maintaining Academic Independence and Credibility
In undertaking this project the university

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researchers naturally wish to maintain their academic independence and credibility. This has only become feasible because of the recent changes in the relationship between fire and rescue services and the fire and rescue authorities in the UK introduced by the coalition government.

The latest fire and rescue framework and the coalition government's proposals for public service reform (Cabinet Office 2011) make clear that the fire and rescue service will henceforth be treated as a 'commissioned' service with the fire and rescue authority being clearly distinct in its responsibilities from the service itself. In other parts of the UK public services this has become known as the commissioner-provider split.

This role clarification highlights the changing roles and relationships between academics and practitioners and, more generally, between the organisations and between the service and the public. Uniquely, it will demonstrate the benefits (or inadequacies) of reciprocity in the co-production of local policy and service delivery between policy makers, academics and practitioners.

However, it should also help to illuminate the mutual dependence between emergency planning and emergency response at local (and national) levels and it will help investigate the limits of the current governments localism agenda in 'high profile - high risk' networked services that are the operating environment of many of the emergency services.

It is however very important to be clear what is involved and what is not and this is summarised in the table below which makes clear that neither the operational independence of the service nor the statutory obligations of the authority will be compromised.

How Will It Work In Practice?

The university researchers assisted by information from the service will scope and define the content of a strategic needs assessment for the medium and long term future. NFRS will provide access to databases and intelligence, both within NFRS and in the FRS national network and the combined team will then co-produce the assessment and a draft of proposals for public consultation for the fire authority.

It is anticipated that all working papers and documents will be placed within the public domain on the NFRS website and the team will publish and disseminate lessons and findings

What is involved and what is not involved

Yes V	No X
1. Building and improving the data, intelligence, predictive modelling and the analytical capacity available to NFRS/NFRA. 2. Strategic policy implementation and management advice. 3. Joint dissemination to policy makers, practitioners and academics.	1. Operational interference in the service which remains the responsibility of NFRS. 2. The transference of any statutory decision making from NFRA. 3. Responsibility or interference in either parties other roles in common partnerships or in other collaborations.



from the preparation of the strategic needs assessment and subsequent policy formulation at both academic and practitioner conferences. The fire authority will then take decisions on consultation arrangements for proposed policies as required by IRMP process, and determine their future strategy.

Benefits and Reciprocity

The project obviously provides the universities with an excellent opportunity for a unique longitudinal case study and will also help both NTU and NU refresh and review their public service teaching programmes. However, it should also provide the general public and the government with independent quality assurance and confidence in the safety and resilience of the services in Nottinghamshire, thereby enhancing the reputation of the county, the services, and the universities.

It should lead to the economic, efficient and effective use of public resources in the current challenging era of austerity and potentially have a wider impact as the project disseminates lessons and good practice throughout the fire and rescue services nationally.

A New Role for Academics?

The coalition government's 'third mission' for universities in the UK stems from a desire to secure benefits from public investment in higher education for wider communities rather than just for individual companies. It encourages universities to make contributions to government and civil society as well as to the private sector, assisting not only with economic performance but also helping to improve the quality of life and the effectiveness of public services.

Public sector academics usually have a desire to make a positive impact on public service delivery. This project facilitates academics co-developing their ideas with their counterparts in the service, sharing ideas openly, testing and validating these ideas in practice and finally publishing them as the impact of those ideas becomes apparent.

Going Forward

The developing relationship between NFRS,

The authors say the project provides the universities with an 'excellent opportunity' for a unique longitudinal case study

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NTU and NU has been triggered by a number of factors and circumstances that have been evolving at both the national and system levels.

There has undoubtedly been a significant loss of organisational support and infrastructure to locally delivered public services from the national level. The recent abolition of the Audit Commission has resulted in the loss of the largest operational research facility for public services in the UK. The government has withdrawn funding for the dissemination of good practice, organisational capacity building and central support for service improvement that was previously provided by the national Improvement and Development Agency and the Fire Inspectorate.

These changes have created a vacuum but increased the opportunities for inter-agency co-operation between NFRS and the local business schools. It was fortuitous that the individuals within this collaboration and partnership had worked closely together in the past and built a good working relationship based on high levels of trust, mutual respect and shared objectives, values and aspirations for the public services.

As a consequence, NFRS has an increased confidence and knowledge of what its local business schools can deliver. Key stakeholders had clearly derived increased confidence in the recent Fire Cover Review as a result of the Business Schools involvement (Murphy et al 2012).

We believe this is an area of opportunity for all higher education institutes and local fire services in the UK. The dismantling of the support and improvement infrastructure for driving improvement of the public services in the early part of this century will not be quickly (if ever) re-assembled in the current era of austerity. It is therefore incumbent on our higher education institutes and our local and national public service providers to form new and mutually rewarding collaborations to the benefit of our local communities. We believe we are doing that in Nottinghamshire.

References:

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