

A framework for fire safety in Ireland

Pete Murphy and Kirsten Greenhalgh look at some of the proposals for the future of the Fire Service in the Republic of Ireland following the Keeping Communities Safe review

The first major in-depth policy document for many years on fire safety in the Irish Republic was published, appropriately enough on St Patrick's Day, by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG). This follows what appears to have been an open and mutually supportive exercise in policy coproduction between the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management (NDFEM) and the Republic's chief fire officers. Following articles in the May issue of *FIRE* on the recent restructuring of the Fire Service in Scotland, this issue focuses on the overhaul taking place in Ireland.

Keeping Communities Safe
 Keeping Communities Safe¹ is the output from a 2012 review of fire services and fire safety in Ireland. It aims to provide a comprehensive strategy to 'ensure the safety of the public in their homes and other locations, as well as worker safety in providing emergency services'. It is an 'integrated blue-print' for further development of the Service to be implemented between 2013-2015 and purports to be an evidence-led plan, based on international best practice with international expert validation provided by Strathclyde Fire and Rescue.

It develops the Irish Fire Services - National Development Framework 2010-2015² published in 2011 which itself followed the creation of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management in June 2009. This was intended to strengthen and provide central direction and leadership for fire services in Ireland and represents a dramatic and far reaching response to the era of austerity that the Republic's services finds themselves within.

Its primary aims are:

- To reform delivery structures, and set standards for effectiveness while introducing quality assurance processes
- To articulate the standards, approach and expectations for the local authorities who provide the fire services in the Republic, and
- To establish national outcome targets for the period up to 2015.

In order to do this it is proposing:

- Reconfiguring the current 30 services to 21 based on an extended 'shared services' approach

- Strengthening the regional structure to co-ordinate services and the provision of mutual assistance and support
- Introducing a risk management approach to emergency response that differentiates primary, secondary and tertiary categories for risks or threats to life
- Establishing new targets for the reduction of incidents, and
- Clarifying national and local responsibilities, committing the service to a new and innovative 'collaborative relationship' between central and local government.

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Policy Framework and the Central/Local Relationship

Fire services in Ireland are delivered by fire authorities as designated in the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. At national level, the NDFEM was created within the government in June 2009 to give 'central direction and leadership for the fire and emergency management services'.

The 2009 arrangements introduced a management structure with a clear mandate and visibility to develop national policy and to drive the achievement of value for money by local fire authorities, while not interfering with existing local political accountability for front-line service delivery. Under the system, responsibility for the day-to-day operation of fire services remains with the local authorities. However, the Directorate's mandate includes developing national policies and standards, and supporting and overseeing their implementation at local level to achieve a uniform and consistent approach.

The vision is of fire services which are effective in keeping people safe in their community and is a public service which is safe itself, well-managed, effective and efficient. It reflects the wider Action Programme for Effective Local Government³. The Irish government recognises that as well as being central to protecting existing infrastructure, an effective local government fire service is necessary for supporting and attracting further economic development and investment in communities.

In the Republic the Fire Service costs approximately €260m of revenue expenditure and about €10m capital expenditure per year

Fire Protection

with approximately 80 per cent of the revenue expenditure on staff. The aim is therefore to manage the available resources to achieve optimal outcome for the public in terms of their individual safety, and to minimise loss and disruption to society. Each fire authority is required, by statute, to prepare a fire and emergency operations plan and as a result of the recent review must prepare an updated or revised plan (commonly known as a Section 26 Plan) in 2013.

The new Section 26 plans will set out the authorities' approach to delivering the new service and targets of the national policy while annual service development plans will set local priorities and targets for change on an annual basis. The approach, from concept to completion, is illustrated in Figure 1 below, which also details the timescales. Responsibility for implementing the policy provisions of these documents rests with fire service management.

Irish Fire Service National development Framework
2010-2015
Keeping Communities Safe
2012

Review and development of Updated Section 26 Plans
2013

Local service Development Plans
2013, 2014, and 2015

Review and Completion Report
December 2015

Figure 1

Risk Management and Response
A holistic systems approach to safety management was used in the development and roll out of the major emergency management arrangements in Ireland. This had five stages and is illustrated in Figure 2 right.

As readers of this journal will know, the key objective is to reduce risk by an appropriate mix of fire prevention, fire protection and emergency response. The Irish approach, which was influenced by the Bain review and the introduction of the IRMP in the UK, was to identify and grade the nature of the different fire risks to communities through an area risk categorisation across five levels from very high to very low. A national assessment was developed between 2006-2008 and three years of activity from January 2008 to December 2010 were analysed to create the new model. The subsequent reports and maps produced by the model were distributed to each fire authority in July 2012. They essentially take into account:

- The nature of fire hazards
- The probable incident and extent of fires
- The character of the area and value of property likely to be damaged.

This determines initial pre-determined attendances and contingent Fire Service capability which should be available in each risk category.

Service Reconfiguration

Local government has provided fire services in Ireland for many years and there are 30 service delivery units for the 37 fire authorities, although there is considerable variation in scales of populations served by different services with 'shared services' arrangements in place in Dublin, Galway, Louth and Westmeath. Irish fire services have been pioneers in using the "shared services" concept and have also provided training, mobilisation and communications facilities on a regional basis for some years. A programme of joint procurement of fire appliances was established in 2011.

1. A single, national Fire Service
2. Regional service delivery
3. Shared service/multi-authority combinations

Figure 3

Four service delivery options were considered and are shown in figure 3 above with the expanded multi-authority shared services option being adopted. This is based on 14 single local authority services and seven combined or shared services generally serving populations that range from 120,000 to 210,000 but with much bigger services in the county of Cork and Dublin, and the Galway service serving 250,000. The new geographical configuration of services is shown on map 1, left.

Regional cooperation will also be extended based on two relatively minor amendments to the eight major emergency management regions which are considered well established and operational for inter-agency working and civil defence services. The new areas are shown on map 2, left.

Fire Service Roles Priorities and Targets
As in the UK, Irish legislation enables fire services to engage in a broad range of activities, and the nature of services provided have changed substantially as society has developed. The new framework suggests that activities should henceforth be divided into three categories, namely 'core services', 'discretionary services' and 'other situations'.

Core services are incident types that all fire brigades will have to respond to, while discretionary services are where there is local discretion, based on needs evaluation and local arrangements. Other situations are those outside the statutory responsibilities of fire services, usually where more appropriate services such as police, coastguard, or ambulance should respond. The fire service would not respond to these incidents other than if called in by the police to assist in specific ways. Each of the three categories has an indicative list of incidents which we will leave for others better qualified

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Figure 2



Map 1



Map 2

than ourselves to comment upon.

The framework sets national targets for the reduction of fire fatalities; smoke detector installation (100 per cent of domestic dwellings by 2017); chimney fires; and the overall incident and fire rates with the main emphasis being on reducing call outs to 'tertiary fires' which are incidents which pose 'little or no threat to life' and where property damage is 'likely to be very limited'. Each fire service has to assess its area and set relevant local targets to help meet the national targets and report on performance. Variations are of course anticipated but the objective is to reduce excessive deviations.

Fire services will report to the National Directorate on the extent to which they are engaging with the initiatives and achieving the targets. These will be summarised into an aggregate annual performance report on fire services, which will replace the current annual bulletin of statistical reporting. The Irish consider that it is neither feasible, practicable nor necessary to gather data for all aspects of service delivery in all authorities and that a more appropriate approach is to select a number of key performance indicators and to track trends over a period of time. Absolute figures and statistics are, in themselves, not necessarily the measure of success, but the trends over time are significant indicators.

Finally, the framework outlines the arrangements for dealing with large scale incidents and inter-agency collaboration. The arrangements for dealing with major emergencies in the Republic are set out in the 2006 Framework for Major Emergency Management⁴. The arrangements for inter-agency co-ordination and collaboration are embedded in the principal response agencies through the training and development work undertaken as part of the Major Emergency Development Programme 2006-2008, which introduced the regions shown in Figure 3 above. The arrangements have been deployed to manage the extensive flooding and severe weather emergencies of recent winters and can be deployed for interagency collaboration, even where a major emergency is not declared.

The latest framework sets out benchmarks, and the concept of 'lead agency' which gives both a mandate and responsibility for co-ordination of interagency activity. As with the Civil Contingencies Act in the UK it also provides clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities, including health and safety, of all responding personnel.

Comment

The new framework appears to have been the product of an open and mutually supportive exercise in policy coproduction between the NDFEM and the Republic's chief fire officers. This is a timely and historic innovation in policy and delivery reflecting the fact that the future services will be operating on the basis of mandated or statutory co-operation with

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mutual and several responsibilities allocated to all key stakeholders. This is also reflected in a change of title for the Service, which will henceforth be known as the Fire and Civil Protection Service.

It also reflects the international trend towards the use of risk-based approaches to responding and managing emergency service provision. Whilst the framework specifically addresses community safety, within both health and safety and building acts, it is not clear how the index of multiple deprivation or community profiles are used in the area risk categorisation process and the proposals for encouraging behavioural change on the part of the public appear to be very limited.

From an external perspective, the service reconfigurations, while undoubtedly a major political and operational change, nevertheless appear to be just the first step towards integrated regionalisation. It is not made explicit within the framework document why the extended shared services option was positively preferred as opposed to the drawbacks of the alternative options. We can only assume the operational risks involved and/or the political opposition to more significant reorganisation were significant factors in the decision.

The proposals for measuring, monitoring and managing performance appear fit for purpose, particularly with the proposed open transparent reporting and sharing of best practice. However, the Service does appear to have set itself some extremely challenging targets within some tight timescales. Given its current performance and the fact that the Service will be going through major reconfiguration, reaching these targets will be a major achievement.

Finally, it is a shame that in such an important, historic and ambitious document that the presentation and publication values are not what they might have been, with errors in both the narrative and the references and the use of relatively poor illustrative material some of which we have had to use within this article.

References:

1. *National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Services (2012) Keeping Communities Safe – A framework for Fire safety in Ireland.*
2. *National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Services (2011) Irish Fire Services – National Development Framework 2010-2015.*
3. *Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2012) Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government.*
4. *The Inter-Departmental Committee on Major Emergencies (2006) Framework for Major Emergency Management (now replaced by the National Steering Committee).*

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