

Strategic review offers unique opportunity

Peter Murphy and Kirsten Greenhalgh of the Emergency Services Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University rise to Fire Minister Bob Neill's challenge

At the Harrogate Fire Conference Fire Minister Bob Neill claimed that there is significant scope to find efficiencies in the way fire and rescue services operate, and that an overly bureaucratic system had developed with "too much central government prescription" based on national standards and targets. He therefore challenged the Service collectively to take responsibility for the sector, and join him in a "strategic review" of the sector and the national framework.

Having worked with the Service at national, regional and local levels for many years we have been prompted by colleagues to contribute to this review. Our particular interest in performance management almost ensured that we 'took the bait' by trying to envision what should replace the previous performance management regimes of CPA and CAA. For our presentation to the Emergency Service Panel of the annual PAC conference in Nottingham this year we therefore researched previous public sector performance management regimes, attempted to identify the coalition government's current aspirations and suggested some key elements for the next regime for fire and rescue services.

It is generally agreed that despite being introduced later than in other parts of the public service (partially as a result of the national dispute) fire and rescue services have demonstrably improved their services and operations since 2003, under both CPA and CAA. Nevertheless the profile of improvements in other parts of the public sector, not least local government itself, suggests that there remains significant scope for further improvement in productivity and efficiency. The coalition government have, of course, announced the abolition of CAA and the Audit Commission; so assuming the public and the government still wish to know that public money is being efficiently and effectively spent, what could replace them?

Bob Neill's comments about the need for transparency and efficiency in effect mean the government is challenging the Service to produce a new regime that will still encourage improvements in service delivery, while reducing costs through productivity and efficiency savings at the same time as increasing local discretion



and control. We strongly suspect that the implementation of any new regime will also have to reduce costs by between 25 per cent and 40 per cent.

Research Findings and Lessons from Experience

Our current and previous research and experience increasingly suggests that the principles and key components of a national performance framework were in fact generally supported within the Service, but that their detailed design, their application in practice, and the over-emphasis on inspection by external agencies generated increasing resistance and distrust. In some places services often adopted a 'compliant' approach to parts of the regime as they could see little added value to parts of their operations.

We believe that a new regime could be delivered, by adopting, adapting and building on tried and tested techniques already successfully applied in previous regimes, rather than commissioning wholly new initiatives. If these are efficiently implemented they would reduce the burden on fire and rescue services whilst generating the necessary assurance demanded by both the government and the public.

Key Proponents of the New Regime

The collection of sufficient, quality assured and appropriately benchmarked performance information is an essential foundation for any system. An 'online' system of self assessment and the submission of evidence, similar to, but simpler than, the system developed to assess Primary Care Trusts under the two rounds of World Class Commissioning (WCC) should be devised. This included the submission of a limited number of mandatory and discretionary documents and key stakeholder views. It may for instance require the submission of key documents such as the IRMP but not 'input' documents such as workforce plans.

Self awareness has generally been regarded as a welcome key part of previous regimes and self awareness is a critically important precursor to improvement. The Audit Commission however have generally tended to over-emphasise the benefits of external inspection rather than

The authors believe that self awareness – a key part of previous regimes – is a critically important precursor to improvement



Community safety interventions (above, right) have improved Fire and Rescue Service performance, whilst a wide range of functions have been integrated into FRS duties, including rope rescue (above, left)

promoting peer reviews, despite robust and quality assured self assessments having been devised in the past and welcomed by practitioners in many sectors.

Past experience and examination of performance reports also suggests that annual universal assessments are disproportionate and are not truly cost effective. All local governance arrangements operate on four-yearly cycles. We therefore suggest bi-annual peer reviews similar to the former IDEa's improvement programme with the subsequent inspection panels modelled on the World Class Commissioning panels in health.

Similarly, the one aspect that all responsible commentators agree has to remain an annual feature of any regime is the annual audit of accounts and assessment of the use of public resources. This is currently undertaken by the Audit Commission and external auditors, although it is planned to pass to the National Audit Office in due course. Although there is much duplication in its current reporting, the latest 'Use of Resources' assessments used for the CAA are generally accepted as an improvement on previous regimes. The key innovation that must be retained from this version (in addition to the application of consistent definitions across all public services) is the prohibition of organisations transferring costs from one local public service delivery agency to another.

Finally, responsibility for the system of delivery and reporting of the peer challenges, the final assessments and any subsequent support for service improvement and organisational development should be allocated to the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency with the assistance of the Fire Service College supported by the LGA, the AC/NAO and CFOA. So, who should do what?

The fire and rescue services collectively (via the LGA, CFOA and the Fire Service College), should take responsibility for: establishing appropriate standards, performance indicators, and benchmarking; coordinating the peer reviews and external challenge panels; coordinating and public reporting of assessments and audits;

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dissemination of good practice while challenging underperformance.

The Audit Commission and subsequently the National Audit Office, together with external auditors, should take responsibility for the Annual Audit of Accounts and the annual Use of Resources assessments.

As Bob Neill suggested in his speech, central government should continue to assure itself of national and local resilience and the current system of emergency planning.

References:

Murphy, P& Greenhalgh, K. *The Performance Management Regime for Fire and Rescue Services in an Era of Austerity*, PAC Conference 2010 available on http://www.ntu.ac.uk/nbs/news_events/pac_2010/Programme/index.html

About the Authors:

Peter Murphy joined Nottingham Business School as the Programme Leader for Public Sector Executive Education in April 2009 having spent nine years as a senior civil servant in Whitehall and in the Government Office for the East Midlands. Prior to this he spent over 22 years in local government, most recently as the Chief Executive of Melton BC in Leicestershire. During this time he has been responsible for emergency planning at national, regional and local levels. He is currently the designated Non Executive Director for emergency planning at Nottingham City NHS.

Kirsten Greenhalgh is a Senior Lecturer in Accounting and Finance at Nottingham Business School. She teaches at undergraduate, postgraduate and professional levels in the area of Management Accounting and Public Service Delivery. Kirsten is a CIMA qualified accountant and holds an MSc in Information and Knowledge Management from Loughborough University for which her research concentrated on fire and rescue services. Prior to joining MBS 11 years ago she was employed for many years in both local government and the NHS.