



# Service delivery

Nottingham Business School reports on its involvement in a county-wide review of community risk and frontline fire service cover, involving public consultation

**I**N 2010, a review of frontline fire cover across Nottinghamshire took place which examined the risks and analysed data from five years' worth of incidents. The resulting report was presented to the fire authority in February 2011<sup>1</sup> and public consultation on proposals for service change arising from the review was carried out later that year.

Between 2010 and 2012, Nottingham Business School (NBS) at Nottingham Trent University and Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Services (NFRS) collaborated in the preparation and development of this service reconfiguration project, known as the 'Fire Cover Review'. This project arose out of

the Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) process, which was introduced by the 2004 Fire and Rescue Services Act and applied locally by the NFRS and the Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire Authority.

Fire and rescue authorities are required by the National Framework of 2008<sup>2</sup> to produce a local IRMP that sets out the authority's strategy for reducing the commercial, economic and social impact of fires and other emergency incidents. Each fire authority is required to produce a publicly available plan or strategy covering at least a three-year time span which, amongst other things:

- 'is regularly reviewed and revised and reflects up to date risk information and evaluation of service delivery outcomes
- demonstrates how prevention, protection and response activities will be best used to mitigate the impact of risk on communities in a cost effective way
- provides details of how the fire authority will deliver their objectives and meet the needs of communities'<sup>2</sup>

**Review stages**

- Stage 1** Review existing service and the current levels of risk to individuals and communities across the city and county
- Stage 2** Develop, test and appraise alternative options for the reconfiguration of services to meet this pattern of risk
- Stage 3** Publish and consult on the preferred option for the reconfiguration of services
- Stage 4** Assess the response from the public and other stakeholders and determine changes to the future deployment of the service
- Stage 5** Implement in accordance with the resource envelope available

Although the need to undertake this review predated the current financial crisis, the general election and the need for significant reductions in public expenditure in the UK, these factors undoubtedly made the circumstances within which the review was conducted more challenging and politically sensitive.

The broad aim of the collaboration was to investigate the practical implementation of the project in the current era of significant resource reduction; to identify, establish and disseminate good practice; and to generate recommendations for improving the process or its application in Nottinghamshire and throughout the country.

**Practical implementation**

Since 2004, all fire cover reviews that arise out of the IRMP process have to be based on a comprehensive recent local risk assessment that uses nationally accredited and approved models of risk assessment applied to robust and reliable local data and information sets. As part of the IRMP process, the government provided each fire and rescue service with a suite of software called the Fire Service Emergency Cover toolkit, which allows each fire service to undertake a risk-based assessment of their area using a common approach that has been tested and independently validated.

Independent researchers from NBS were appointed to ensure that the evidential base for the review would be robust and defensible in the light of any future legal challenges to service reconfiguration. They were also required to ensure



that the analysis and subsequent reconfiguration strategy were justifiable holistically at a county-wide level and reflected an appropriate balance, because of the multiple interdependences across different areas and aspects of the service.

**Review methodology**

A functionalist perspective was adopted by the NBS, with the relationship between the client and consultant considered as an arms-length, contractual and independent relationship, in which the needs of the client come first<sup>3</sup>. The authors were asked to ensure the objectivity of the evidential base, and to create confidence in and provide assurance of the process within established parameters.

In carrying out the appraisal, NBS had access to all key personnel within the fire authority; the NFRS and its consultants; and all the main local and





### Key Factors in Service Configuration

- |   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| • Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004                            | ◊ Community Resilience            |
| • Fire and Rescue National Framework                          | ◊ Health and Safety               |
| • Integrated Risk Management Planning                         | ◊ Working Time Regulations        |
| • Civil Contingencies Act 2004                                | ◊ Part Time Workers' Regulations  |
| • National Security   | ◊ Drivers' Regulations            |
| • Organisational Security                                     | ◊ Equalities                      |
| • Audit Commission - Rising to the Challenge/<br>Fire Futures | ◊ Alternative Crewing Models      |
| • Sustainable Communities Act                                 | ◊ Pre-Determined Attendance (PDA) |
| • Localism  | ◊ Economic Loss                   |
|   | ◊ The Regional Perspective        |

national data sets from systems that hold, analyse, process and report on the service's performance.

To arrive at a complete assessment, it was necessary to investigate and coordinate risk assessment and the deployment of current and

future resources across county boundaries. This was particularly important in Nottinghamshire's case because several stations and services, while situated close to the county boundary, were actually located in surrounding counties.



**••The level of detail provided and transparency of the process was far greater than in similar exercises examined 99**

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## Consultation proposals

Three options or packages of interdependent proposals were presented by the services, including a preferred option, and each package had three groups of proposals or recommendations, as follows:

- stations and appliances
- management capacity
- implementation Issues

The fire authority decided to consult on one package of proposals only, as it was not feasible to present a series of recommendations or options around individual stations or services. The reality is that for every action, there is a consequent reaction in the provision of fire cover - for example, changing the availability of one appliance or station has a knock-on effect on the next nearest appliance or station.

Rumours, misinformation, campaigns and use of the internet and social media were prominent features from the start. Consequently, NFRS adopted an open and transparent approach to information, using the open access part of its website as the main mechanism to rebuff misinformation and inform the public.

## Results of response

Home Office approved independent consultants, ORS, were appointed to facilitate, implement and report on the responses to the consultation, which proved the largest exercise ever undertaken by the service. They reported: 'While neither the popularity

nor the unpopularity of draft proposals can be a compelling consideration for the fire authority and NFRS in making decisions, there is no doubt that the results of the extensive consultation programme reported here were remarkably positive.

'In summary, the questionnaire survey showed absolute majority support for seven of the nine main proposals while the deliberative consultation (of 21 forums and focus groups) was supportive of them all.'<sup>4</sup>

## Comparison and conclusions

A comparison took place of the NFRS process with the 18 fire and rescue services elsewhere in England and Wales, based on the 'nearest neighbour' model, of which 17 were undertaking a review and compared publicly available information from their websites. This revealed that:

- in contrast to Nottinghamshire, all of them emphasised financial constraints as the basis for undertaking the review, rather than the safety of the public
- all provided much less information, detail and publicity about what they were doing, and why and how they were doing it.<sup>5</sup>

This was the largest and most comprehensive consultation ever undertaken by NFRS, and the first one in which the internet and social media played a significant part.

Accountability was promoted by the publication of progress reports, the evidential base and all documents relating to the review, as well as the

inclusion of union representation. This helped reduce organisational tension and any rumours and misinformation that inevitably arose.

The level of detail provided and the transparency of the process was far greater than in similar exercises examined in a comparative analysis of other IRMPs, due largely to the NFRS's open and proactive approach.

In addition, the general era of austerity and its constraints on public expenditure manifestly influenced and contextualised the attitude and response of public sector providers and the business community, and to a lesser extent the public and representative bodies.

Independent challenge and assurance of the first parts of the review were helpful to Nottinghamshire fire service and authority, which have commended the approach to other services and authorities.

The clear differentiation and demarcation maintained between the roles and responsibilities of the Nottinghamshire fire service and its fire authority have now been followed in government policy and guidance. Recommendations were generated for improving both the evidential base and the development of future medium- and long-term strategies

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