

# Peer challenge needs an independent Fire Inspectorate

**Pete Murphy** and **Kirsten Greenhalgh** question whether peer challenge is sufficient on its own to ensure continuing improvement, maintenance of standards and public confidence in the Service

The recent publication of the independent review of the LGA/CFOA peer challenge programme extols a fire sector that has matured in its approach to sector led Service improvement and has enthusiastically embraced peer challenge. While this is good news and justifies congratulations all round we question whether peer challenge alone is sufficient to maintain standards in the Service.

In March this year a team from the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff Business School published their evaluation of both the Fire Peer Challenge Programme and the Corporate Challenges for Local Authorities. The final report for the fire sector makes particularly encouraging reading as it acknowledges a sector that has embraced the initiative, benefited from the experience and shown commendable collective responsibility and leadership in implementing it.

## Peer Challenge in the Fire Service

Thirty-five peer challenges had been completed by April 2014 and CFOA anticipate that every service will have completed one by the end of 2014. Unlike the local government corporate challenges all fire and rescue authorities so far have published their reports on their websites and responded to the suggestions for improvement.

The fire peer challenge complements and is integrated with the Operational Assessment Tool (OpA), and the Cardiff team were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the peer challenge methodology, the OpA toolkit and the impact of the programme in helping the sector with self-monitoring and improvement. Although they did not look at the OpA itself the report constitutes a considerable indirect endorsement of that process.

The OpA and the peer challenge was viewed by an overwhelming majority of responders as a positive experience with more than three quarters (79 per cent) reporting that the benefits of peer challenge outweigh its costs, and more specifically:

- 88 per cent saying it provides a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement



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- 88 per cent saying it provides councillors and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust
- 82 per cent saying it is an effective way of ensuring the sector as a whole improves and
- Over 70 per cent saying it is a robust and transparent mechanism for providing challenges to fire and rescue services and the sector as a whole.

Overall it has therefore been an undoubted success for individual fire services and for the sector as whole.

## Government & Politics

Not surprisingly, for a relatively new initiative, the authors provide a number of recommendations for the development of the process (See below), and a plea for continued commitment and ownership from the LGA/CFOA as well as individual fire services. The current intention is for each service to be offered a challenge every three years and both the LGA and CFOA have committed themselves to producing a detailed action plan to respond to the evaluation's findings.

This all seems a very long way from the sector's reaction to Sir Ken Knight's Review last year and the authors and CFOA both agree that this type of process is an important element of the sector-lead approach to improvement.

### Recommendations

- More clarity is provided on the appropriate balance between the organisational and operational focus.
- Some flexibility within the process to allow variation in duration the team spends on-site as determined by the content of the OpA and the specific focus for the challenge.
- Incorporation of the learning from across all fire services while updating the OpA. Including the potential for a further focus on transformational change, efficiency, innovation and collaborative working.
- Widening the composition of the team to include members from outside the sector where this is likely to help a service respond to its local priorities and issues.
- Ensuring that reports are robust and comprehensive and reflect the feedback provided.
- Formalising the current arrangements so that services may receive additional follow up support from members of the peer challenge team where there is demand and resource capacity.
- Ensure that where performance data exist, this information is used.
- Improving the dissemination and signposting to good practice across the sector so that all services can share learning on issues which are relevant to them.

It is not, however, the whole story and nor is it sufficient, on its own, to assure the maintenance of high standards, the improvement of services and the confidence of the public. A review or challenge process is, in our view, a necessary but not sufficient process for the maintenance of professional standards, the safeguarding of the service's reputation and the public's support.

In conceptual terms we have previously argued that a comprehensive self-assessment using validated standardised data and definitions should be followed by a robust peer challenge or peer review and the resulting assessment and action plan independently assessed and validated by acknowledged and credible external agents. Historically this latter element

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was provided by HM Fire Service Inspectorate but in more recent years was subsumed into the remit of the Audit Commission in 2007. The Audit Commission temporarily provided this quality assurance, and to a lesser extent credibility, to the public (if not always to the service) before the latter was abolished.

### Fire Service Inspectorate

To retain public confidence and ensure standards are maintained it is, in our view, absolutely essential that we re-establish an independent Fire Service Inspectorate and preferably a constitutional link to the monarchy, rather than the government of the day. Her Majesty's Inspectorate had a resonance with the public and the Service, and that is difficult to replicate.

The continuing squeeze on resources, the reduction in comparable 'quality assured' information and performance data across services, and the relaxing of public reporting requirements under the current coalition government's localism regime all help to create an environment in which it is tempting for either services or authorities to allow standards of prevention, protection and response to deteriorate or stagnate. Is such a view unjustified? Why else would the research team need to recommend that 'where performance data exist, this information is used' or ensure that 'reports are robust and comprehensive and reflect the feedback provided'?

Peer Review is the evaluation of work by one or more people of similar competence to the producers of the work (peers). It constitutes a form of self-regulation by qualified members of a profession within the relevant field. Peer review is now widely employed across many fields and industries (not least academia), to maintain standards of quality, improve performance, and provide credibility.

Peer challenges are a subset of the peer reviews that were developed by the former Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) Enterprises in 2006-2007. In both the local government and the fire sectors, peer reviews originally used a specifically designed diagnostic tool to help organisations identify strengths and weaknesses against established standards and benchmarks. In the past these standards and benchmarks were often drawn from independent and external audit and inspection models that used widely established and agreed professional and national standards and co-produced and agreed performance indicators.

Peer challenges are narrower, more specific, evaluations. They do not automatically review existing or previous performance against established criteria but rather aim to be forward looking and 'start from a position where services have already identified the issues where they would most value assistance'.

In the recent fire services peer challenge (although not in the case of the corporate





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challenge to local authorities) this potential inadequacy has been partially mitigated because the challenge process has been integrated with the Operational Assessment Process. As a result the Cardiff team found that in practice, while the teams approached their task as ‘critical friends’, they also provided a robust examination of the operational services and the Service’s self-assessments upon which they are based. However, they also found that there is at least some potential for ‘gaming’ in the system and as one respondent put it “there is an opportunity to put all your good stuff into the Operational Assessment and leave out your weaknesses”.

It would be politically naïve to call for the re-creation of parts of the Audit Commission, although some believe this will come in time (Timmins and Gash 2013). There is, however, an overwhelming and urgent need to re-establish a credible independent agency within the fire sector to help to maintain standards, to focus the drive for improvement and to safeguard the Services’ reputation and reassure the public.

The theoretical absorption of the role within the remit of the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor in DCLG has convinced neither the public nor the sector’s key stakeholders, although this is not a criticism of the current incumbent Peter Holland. The current arrangement is simply institutionally incapable of facilitating the open and accountable independent scrutiny that modern fire services need to maintain credibility with the public.

The government needs a Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor in the DCLG with real practical experience. The sector needs the role of HM Chief Inspector de-coupled from DCLG and its independence reassured. The peer challenge

process needs to be complimented and supplemented by a credible external watchdog.

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