

# Operational assessment and fire peer challenge

Introduction



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## Background

Since 2009, the Local Government Association (LGA), in partnership with Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), has successfully delivered peer challenge in all 46 Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs) throughout the UK, taking as a starting point self assessments carried out using the Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge (OpA) toolkit.

In the new policy landscape with the abolition of the inspection and regulatory regime and the national performance framework, there is a shift to local accountability for performance and self-regulation. This fits well with the governance of Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs), and the sector-led approach to improvement.

This document presents the revised Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge process. This will remain the 'industry standard' improvement tool to provide elected members on fire authorities and chief officers with information that their operational service delivery is efficient, effective and robust, as well as providing a view on organisational effectiveness.

The process has been updated in 2014 to take account of detailed evaluation carried out by Cardiff University for LGA and CFOA, as well as views from the Fire Service Management Committee and a sounding board of CFOA members. This sector wide research indicated that the process is broadly fit for purpose, and that the operational focus is valued; but that the process required updating to take account of changes within the profession, and also to reflect the challenges facing FRAs as they manage reducing budgets whilst seeking to improve, thrive and innovate.

The evaluation found that the process:

- provides a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement (88 per cent)
- provides councillors and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust (88 per cent)
- is an effective way of ensuring the sector as a whole improves (82 per cent)
- is a transparent and robust mechanism for providing challenge to the sector (79 per cent and 71 per cent).

Recommendations from the evaluation have been taken into account in updating the process and toolkit. The full evaluation is available at:

[http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/publications/-/journal\\_content/56/10180/5998282/PUBLICATION](http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/publications/-/journal_content/56/10180/5998282/PUBLICATION)

The OpA toolkit is set out in Section 2.

## Aims and objectives

The Fire and Rescue sector has a strong and long standing commitment to sector-led improvement. As part of this, the CFOA developed the concept of OpA in 2009, in partnership with the LGA and the CFRA. This process, which has a strong operational focus, comprises a self-assessment and external peer challenge and is designed to allow a “whole system” look at how a FRA leads, prioritises and delivers the interrelated functions of prevention, protection, preparedness and response in a way which is rooted in:

- a deep understanding of community risk
- the allocation of resources in accordance with that risk
- the marshalling of partnership resources to assist in managing the risk
- a high regard for operational good practice and the health, safety, welfare and development of all FRS staff.

The OpA and Fire Peer Challenge process is designed to:

- form a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement within the Fire and Rescue Service, and
- provide elected members on fire authorities, and chief officers, with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery, and their organisational effectiveness, to ensure they are efficient, effective and robust.

The OpA and Fire Peer Challenge will:

- assist the FRA to identify its service’s strengths and areas to explore
- inform the FRA’s strategic improvement plans
- deliver a robust process for assessing operational performance
- complement and not duplicate any national requirements for financial audit, including the value for money judgement
- be used as a tool to assist FRAs in the identification and dissemination of notable practice
- be flexible in design, and simple in delivery.

The sector-led peer challenge process has been updated to take account of learning from the first three years of the programme, and the outcome of an evaluation conducted by Cardiff University. The overarching principles of peer challenge remain – that it is an effective way to help councils and FRAs strengthen local accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services.

The Fire Peer Challenge is a voluntary process that is managed by and delivered for the sector. It is NOT a form of sector-led inspection and is a mechanism to provide fire authorities and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery, and their organisational effectiveness, to ensure they are efficient, effective and robust.

The offer to each FRA is to have a peer challenge at a time of its choosing. As with previous rounds of OpA and Fire Peer Challenge, these will be delivered by the sector and at no cost to the receiving authority.

This guidance manual is designed for FRAs which are considering an OpA and Fire Peer Challenge. It is not intended to be prescriptive, but to impart the benefit of eight years of learning from peer challenges undertaken by the LGA and the professional and technical advice of the CFOA.

If you decide to use OpA and Fire Peer Challenge, please feel free to do so in a way which fits with your own approach to service improvement, so that you can take the most benefit from the process.

### **Changes to the peer challenge process**

The peer challenge process has been updated following evaluation, and continues to provide an additional level of external challenge and improvement by bringing together a peer team, using the best peers from across the sector, to help each FRS to respond to its local priorities and issues in its own way.

The offer to each FRS is to have a peer challenge at a time of its choosing. These will be delivered by the sector and at no cost to the receiving authority, although there is recognition that this comes at an opportunity cost to FRAs in the provision of peers.

In addition to reviewing the operational elements of the self assessment, the Fire Peer Challenge will have an increased focus on leadership, governance, corporate capacity and financial planning, and how the FRA delivers outcomes for the communities it serves, because these are key factors in performance and improvement. These six key themes in terms of leadership and corporate capacity have been given additional prominence in the toolkit alongside the operational Key Assessment Areas.

The Fire Peer Challenge will engage with all areas of the self assessment, but will focus on specific priorities and challenges for the FRA, which will be worked up with each FRA based on the outcome of their self assessment.

The Fire Peer Challenge approach is flexible in terms of timing in that FRAs will select a time that is best for them and in terms of the emphasis as the Fire Peer Challenge will be worked up with each FRA individually and will focus on specific areas as identified through the outcome of the OpA self assessment.

The Fire Peer Challenge will also consider equalities and diversity through the OpA self assessment but will not replace self assessment or peer challenge using the FRS Equality Framework.

As a result of the evaluation, additional follow-up peer support may be available to FRAs which identify a need for this through their OpA and peer challenge process. This could focus on particular difficult challenges a FRA is facing, and provide advice and support to the leadership team in addressing these issues. This additional work is by negotiation with the LGA.

[More detailed guidance on the Fire Peer Challenge is available in Section 3.](#)

The Fire Services Management Committee of the LGA approved the partnership approach between CFOA and LGA to develop the already established OpA toolkit and Fire Peer Challenge process to meet the needs of the fire and rescue sector.

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