

# Operational assessment and fire peer challenge

Fire peer challenge

# Fire peer challenge

## Overview

Fire peer challenge is a constructive and supportive process with the central aim of helping FRAs/FRSs improve. It is not an inspection nor does it award any form of rating category or score. It is undertaken from the viewpoint of a critical friend. The peer challenge will help FRAs/FRSs to meet the challenges facing a modern FRS.

The peer challenge approach has been successfully delivered by the LGA in over 160 local authorities and all 46 English FRAs have had a peer challenge over the last three years.

Complementing self assessment with external challenge by undertaking a 'sector delivered' peer challenge once every three years provides chief fire officers and their chairs with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust. It also helps support sector improvement through the development of officer and Member peers and the sharing of notable practice.

Peer challenge is fit for the future, it is forward looking, flexible in its application and appropriate in terms of the resources required to both deliver and receive it. The fire peer challenge approach is flexible in terms of timing in that FRS's 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 FRS individually and will not cover all the KAAs but will focus on the specific areas as identified through the outcome of the OpA self assessment.

In addition to reviewing the FRS OpA, fire peer challenge will focus on leadership, corporate capacity and how the FRS meets the diverse needs of the communities they serve, because these are key factors in performance and improvement and it is understood that a focus on equalities and diversity by all FRS's is a core element of a high performing organisation.

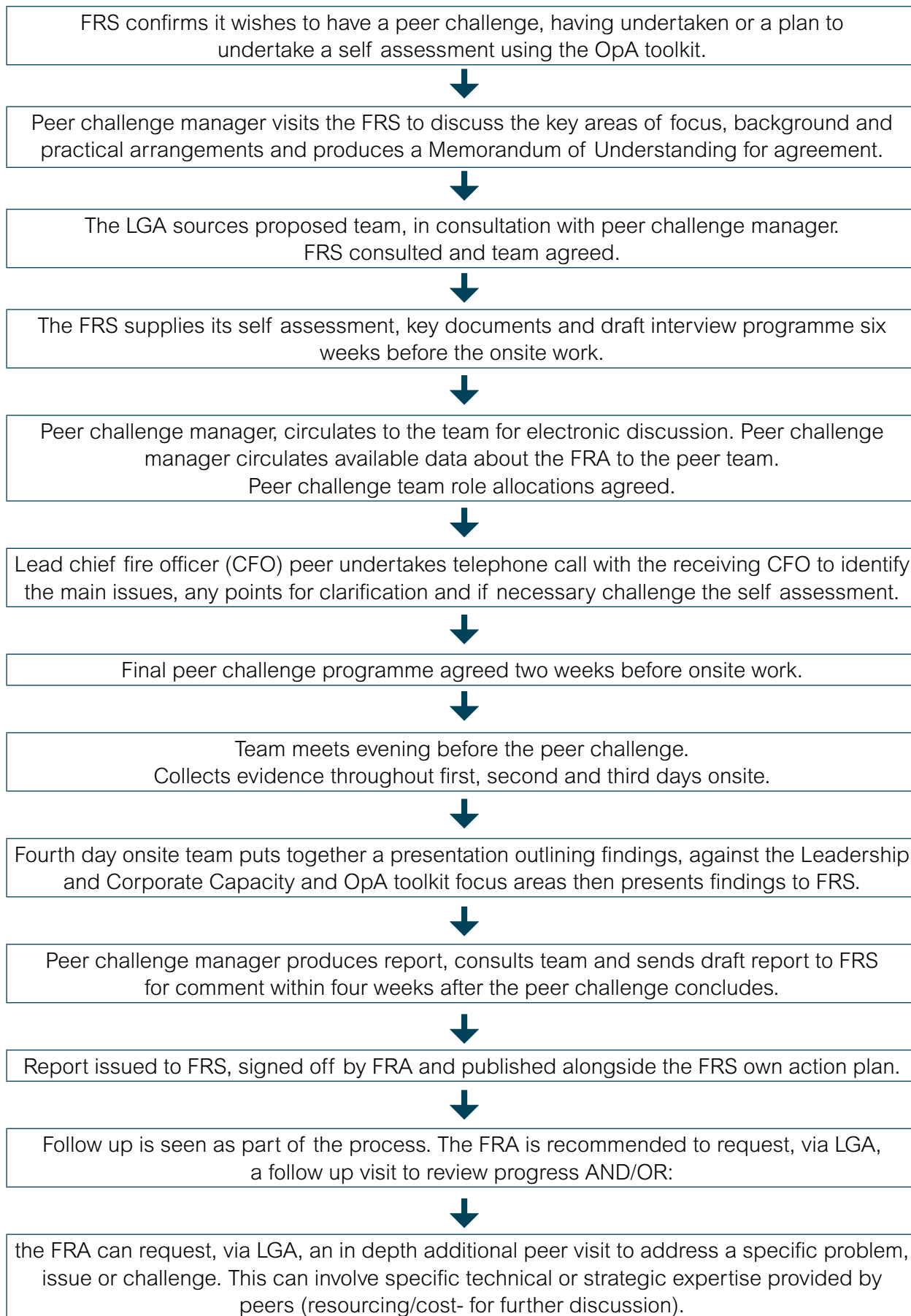
Therefore the fire peer challenge will consider equalities and diversity through the OpA self assessment but will not replace self assessment or peer challenge using the FRS Equality Framework.

The peer team will also consider the six core questions under the theme of Leadership and Corporate Capacity:

- Understanding of local context and priority setting: Does the FRA understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
- Delivering outcomes for local communities: How is the FRA delivering outcomes for the local community, and is it performing well?

- Financial planning and viability: Does the FRA have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
- Political and managerial leadership: Does the FRA have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
- Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
- Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

## How a peer challenge works



## The peer challenge team

A standard fire peer challenge team is made up of six people:

- the team will be led by a serving chief executive/chief fire officer
- a further two officers from FRS and/or from other public sector organisations with specific expertise at group manager or equivalent level and above
- a FRA member peer
- an officer from another public sector organisation external to the FRS (optional)
- an LGA programme manager to act as peer challenge manager
- The peer challenge manager will act as the first point of contact for the authority.

Should a FRA's specific requirements make it necessary, the number of people on a peer challenge team can be amended, for example to focus on a specific area in more depth or to bring in expertise from another sector such as local government. There may also be occasions when, for the purposes of gaining first hand experience of a peer challenge, the LGA requests permission for another LGA member of staff to participate.

## Peer team role descriptions

Each of the peer team is expected to:

- Undertake pre-reading in advance of the peer challenge: Peers will be sent a set of information and documentation that they will need to read before meeting up with the peer team the evening before the peer challenge.
- Attend and participate in an initial peer team meeting: The peer team is required to meet the evening prior to the peer challenge. Peers are required to share initial impressions and views from the pre-reading, and prepare for the onsite phase of the process.
- Facilitate interviews and discussion whilst onsite at the FRS: A timetable of activity will be arranged in advance, including meetings, focus groups and site visits. Peers are expected to gather information via these and share key findings with the peer team.
- Draw on their relevant skills, knowledge and experience: Peers are expected to demonstrate specific know-how and share examples of best practice from their own experience to provide insights into how the FRS is performing and how it might accelerate the achievement of its ambitions.
- Analyse and quantify key messages throughout the process: Peers need to recognise and incorporate different stakeholders' perspectives, gather, analyse and communicate information in order to suggest realistic and credible solutions to challenges.
- Actively seek out and gather areas of notable or good practice from the receiving FRS. The benefits of being a peer are to learn from each other and from the receiving FRS.
- Work with others in the peer team to develop and deliver a feedback presentation: The presentation will normally be led by the peer challenge lead with input from other peers in the team.
- Provide written evidence on their relevant KAAs in report format to contribute to the draft feedback report within agreed timescales: Peers will be asked to comment on the draft report developed by the peer challenge manager on behalf of the team.

- Participate in the evaluation of the peer challenge: An evaluation of each peer challenge will be undertaken. Peers will be expected to contribute to this by self-assessing their performance and contribution.
- Undertake additional or specialist roles on the peer team: Some peers will be recruited to the team to undertake a specialist or additional roles – such as peer team leader, or an expert adviser role.

## Peer competencies

In carrying out the roles and responsibilities listed above, peers are expected to display the following competencies and behaviours:

- developing others by sharing learning and providing a supportive and non-judgmental environment, and demonstrating a personal commitment to continual development and learning
- work effectively with others in the peer team to achieve a common purpose through valuing the contributions of others and recognising and including diverse viewpoints
- providing challenge by being able to positively and constructively challenge individuals and groups in an effort to help them to improve; peers should be able to perform the role of a 'change agent' sensitively and inclusively
- planning and communicating effectively by analysing requirements and coordinating activity and priorities and providing evidence to support ideas
- political and organisational awareness by understanding the local context and overcoming political and organisational differences to work collaboratively with different stakeholder groups.

## Individual team roles

### Peer Challenge Lead

The chief executive/chief fire officer will take on the role of peer challenge lead. In addition to the standard peer role they will also be responsible for:

- making contact with the receiving CE/CFO prior to the onsite activity to identify the main issues, any points for clarification and if necessary challenge the self assessment
- leading the team whilst on-site and ensuring a positive and professional relationship within the team and the FRS
- providing the overall lead on the Leadership and Corporate Capacity area and, working with the LGA peer challenge manager, writing up the presentation slides and initial notes to feed into the draft report
- agreeing to lead on one other KAA and writing up the presentation slides and the initial notes to feed into the draft report
- actively seeking examples of notable and best practice and sharing these at the final feedback session
- determining points of judgement arising from the peer challenge
- presenting the final feedback to the FRA/FRS
- contributing to and having the final sign off for the report.

### **Peer Challenge Member Peer**

In addition to the standard peer role the peer challenge member peer is responsible for:

- providing specific political input into the peer challenge and ensuring positive and professional relationships with the respective FRA elected members
- leading on and providing input into the peer challenge on the followings areas:
  - community leadership mandate
  - political leadership and governance
  - professional and political relationships within the FRA
  - liaising with the lead peer on the Leadership and Corporate Capacity area
  - writing up the initial notes on the relevant findings concerning political leadership, governance and community leadership
  - contributing to the final report.

### **Peer Challenge Officer (x 2)**

In addition to the standard peer role the peer challenge officer is responsible for:

- providing specialist and expert input into the peer challenge
- agreeing to lead on two KAAs and writing up the presentation slides and the initial notes to feed into the draft report
- actively seeking examples of notable and best practice and sharing these with the team
- providing written evidence to contribute to the final report.

### **Peer Challenge External Officer**

In addition to the standard officer peer role the peer challenge external officer is responsible for:

- providing specialist external input into the peer challenge
- agreeing to lead on a specific area and to write up the relevant presentation slides and the initial notes to feed into the draft report
- actively seeking examples of notable practice and sharing these with the team
- providing written evidence to contribute to the final report.

### **Peer Challenge Manager**

The FRS will be assigned a peer challenge manager by the LGA within a few days of commissioning a peer challenge. Their role is:

- to manage the overall peer challenge process
- to identify and agree the peer challenge team with the FRA/ FRS
- to support the FRA/FRS in preparing for the peer challenge, including conducting a pre peer challenge meeting and liaising over the timetable and documents
- act as coordinator, facilitator and adviser and working with the peer challenge lead to guide the team through the peer challenge
- to input advice to the peer challenge.
- to collate all the notable and good practice identified by the peer team
- to work with the lead peer to draft the feedback presentation.

- to collate the initial notes and to draft the final report, process it through the relevant quality assurance procedures and liaise with the team and FRA/ FRS
- to ensure that the team jointly use their skills and experience to provide insights into how the FRA/FRS is performing
- to initiate the overall evaluation of the peer challenge and ensure timely and appropriate feedback is given to peer team members
- oversight of the quality assurance framework for the peer challenge to ensure quality standards are maintained and continuous improvement of the peer challenge offer.

## Preparing for a fire peer challenge

### **Self assessment**

Any FRS requesting a peer challenge should have completed, or should be intending to complete, a self assessment using the OpA Toolkit, and this will provide focus for discussions with the peer challenge manager in setting up the peer challenge.

The self assessment is an important improvement tool for the FRS and should be an accurate and honest representation as to how the FRS is currently performing against the KAAs. It should be submitted to the peer team as part of the supporting documentation at least six weeks prior to the onsite activity.

The self assessment will guide the peer challenge team on the key areas of focus for the peer challenge and will be worked up with each FRS individually and will focus on specific areas as identified through the outcome of the OpA Self Assessment.

The peer team will not cover all of the OpA KAAs during the peer challenge but will focus on the key areas as identified and will undertake a light touch review of the remaining areas.

The FRS is not required to complete a detailed self assessment against the six Leadership and Corporate Capacity themes. However, it may wish to reflect on these themes in a forward looking way, and reflect them in the narrative, as discussion of the themes will form part of the peer challenge.

The self assessment should be concise and include a narrative which should cover the Leadership and Capacity core questions plus include an introduction and overview of the FRS to give the context to the peer challenge.

Although it is necessary to highlight policies and strategies as set out in the KAAs, it is vitally important to give examples of the outcomes achieved.

The self assessment should be signed off by the chief fire officer and chair of the FRA.

Examples of self assessments are included on the LGA and CFOA websites.

### **Peer challenge manager's initial visit to the fire and rescue service**

As soon as the peer challenge has been commissioned, the peer challenge manager will contact the FRS to visit the lead officer for the peer challenge and the peer challenge coordinator. The purpose of this visit is to:

- discuss the motivation and aims for the peer challenge, and the thoughts of members and officers about it
- develop the peer challenge manager's understanding of the key issues facing the FRS, including any sensitive issues they may need to be aware of



- discuss the key areas for the peer challenge to focus on and the team requirements
- consider the peer challenge guidance, discuss the process and look at the arrangements that will need to be made to facilitate the work of the peer challenge team including: base room, workshop rooms, documentation, timetable and publicity.

Following this visit the peer challenge manager will produce a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that will clearly articulate the areas of focus and the agreed approach.

### **Documentation**

**Six weeks** prior to the peer challenge beginning, the FRS will need to provide peer challenge team members with the self assessment and core documentation in electronic format. This also needs to be made available in hard copy in the team's base room while they are on-site.

It will also be useful to have in the base room examples of newsletters, magazines or publicity materials leaflets produced by the FRS.

We are trying to reduce the burden on FRS and want to reduce the amount of paperwork and documentation required. We have developed a suggested list of core documents which is available in Appendix 1.

The FRS should also provide details of the other documentation to evidence their self assessment so that the peer team can request these when required. This information should be provided as a tabular list.

### **On-site timetable**

In discussion with your peer challenge manager, it is the FRS's responsibility to draw up a timetable for the peer challenge that enables the team to gather evidence in the key areas of focus, and the Leadership and Corporate Capacity themes. This needs to be agreed at least two weeks in advance of the on-site work. This is often the most challenging part of the peer challenge process and the FRS must devote sufficient resources and priority to have the timetable finalised within the two week deadline.

### **Publicity**

Prior to the peer challenge the FRS will receive electronic copies of a "What's it all about" leaflet to distribute to staff, partners and elected members. This leaflet provides details of their forthcoming peer challenge and an example is contained in Appendix 2.

### **Transparency**

CFOA and the LGA encourages all FRA's to publish their reports and associated action plans and the FRS/FRA will need to think through in advance the timing and format of publication.

# Practical arrangements

## Peer challenge team base

The peer challenge team will have a room to use as a base for the time they are on-site, which should be located in the main headquarters of the FRS and large enough to accommodate the team. The room will be available for the sole use of the team members, with all interviews and focus groups being held elsewhere. It will be private and lockable, with keys for team members going in and out at different times. It will also be accessible to the team after hours.

The room will be equipped with the following:

- a telephone
- a computer with access to the Internet and the FRS's Intranet and email system
- access to a high speed, good quality black and white printer
- two flipcharts with marker pens and replacement paper
- a central meeting table providing adequate room for each person on the peer challenge team
- Wi-Fi facilities if available so that the peer team can access their own email/network.

The team will require around 250 large-sized post-it notes, for use in the team base room and during workshops and focus groups. Notebooks should be provided for all team members. A box of biro pens and some blue tack, plus access to a nearby photocopier, will also be required.

## Catering

The FRS should make arrangements for light refreshments to be available to the peer team in the room or nearby, accessible at any time throughout the day and evening. The team should also be provided with lunch each day in the team base room. The team will need to work together over lunch in the privacy of their base room.

LGA will liaise with each of the team members in advance and notify the FRS in good time of any specific dietary requirements they may have.

# Onsite

## The Onsite Peer Challenge Process

The core of the peer challenge takes place during the four days on-site at the FRS. The OpA Toolkit provides the framework for the peer challenge. The team will be seeking information that allows it to make explore current strengths or progress and areas that the FRS may want to explore. The process is a dynamic one and requires a high degree of flexibility throughout the peer challenge.

The approach to the onsite element is flexible and the purpose is to enable the team to get the best understanding of the FRS it can, in order to help advise on areas for improvement. The team will ensure that the onsite element is positive and will work in partnership with the FRS to structure it to the best effect.

There is not a standard approach to the onsite element and receiving FRS are encouraged to think creatively in order to maximise the input of the peer team

Prior to the visit each team member will have reviewed the self assessment and core documentation provided by you. The team will generally work in pairs in different sessions.

The team will work in three streams and the peer challenge manager will allocate team members to each activity. The FRS will arrange the timetable into three streams.

Information gleaned on-site is reviewed on a daily basis and compared to the KAAs, enabling gaps in information to be identified and covered during the remainder of the onsite activity. This may require additional meetings not foreseen in the original timetable to be arranged at short notice. On the final day, the team reviews the information it has collected then reports back its key messages and recommendations on areas the FRS may want to explore further.

The FRS should note that all information gleaned by the peer challenge team during the process is absolutely non-attributable to individuals. This will be explained at the beginning of every session the team undertakes.

### **First day morning**

The FRS coordinator should meet the team upon arrival to show them to their base room, inform them about the facilities that have been provided and address any immediate queries that they may have. The team will then go into private session and prepare for the peer challenge.

This will be followed by an introductory meeting and a presentation delivered by the chief fire officer. This meeting is usually attended by other key officers and the chairman or portfolio holder.

This is an important opportunity for the FRS to set out what it wants to achieve from the peer challenge and highlight the main successes and challenges facing the FRS.

### **Remainder of first, second and third days**

As referenced, the approach is flexible and FRAs are encouraged to consider how to get the best from the peer challenge. The team will spend time gathering evidence to enable it to compare the FRS against the agreed focus areas and key elements of the KAAs. A peer challenge consists of taking into account the views of a wide range of stakeholders. To gain these views the peer challenge team will hold a series of one to one conversations, group/team discussions and focus groups with leaders, senior managers, frontline staff and partners. There may also be observations of relevant meetings. Interviews can be undertaken by either one or two people. Workshops and focus groups will need two members to facilitate them.

The focus areas of the FRS being reviewed will lead the peer challenge team as to who is actually seen. The timetable should be developed to focus on the relevant areas from the following suggestions:

#### **Suggested Interviews**

Chief executive (CE)/chief fire officer (CFO)

Members of Corporate Management Team (CMT) with the reference for the seven areas of the OpA (this will overlap)

Operational level managers with reference to the key areas of focus from the OpA

Head of human resources

Chairman/portfolio holder/council leader/leader of opposition

Members of the FRA – all parties

Key strategic partners from police, ambulance, Local Resilience Forum, the relevant local authorities (chief executive or director level), local partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships

Fire Brigades Union (FBU), Retained Fire fighters Union (RFU) if appropriate, officer's representative body, and any other recognised representative body

CEs/CFOs from neighbouring FRS's

### **Focus Groups**

Fire fighters – this can be combined with a station visit

Retained fire fighters – this can be combined with a station visit

Area managers

Group managers

Control staff – this can be combined with a visit to the Mobilising and Control Centre

Staff from range of departments relevant to the specific areas of focus from the OpA, eg health and safety, training and development

Partners delivering prevention activity with the FRA in the community – voluntary sector, police, health, local authorities

Partners working with the FRA on protection – the business community and local authorities

Scrutiny Members

### **The peer challenge can include:**

- visit to at least two fire stations
- visit to the Mobilising and Control Centre
- visit to any key community facility to demonstrate prevention outcomes
- visit to the Training Centre if appropriate.

**N.B.** When organising the programme all sessions must start and end at the same time in order for the peer challenge team to share learning etc. The following should also be noted:

- Allow up to 60 minutes for interviews – with 30 minutes for telephone interviews.
- Allow 1.5 hours for workshops with no more than 15 people in each. Members of the peer challenge team will facilitate these sessions and they need to be done by at least two members of the peer challenge team.
- Some interviews (with partner representatives) can be by phone.
- The timetable will be agreed between the FRS and the peer challenge manager

Whilst on-site the team should have the option to observe any additional relevant meetings already scheduled to take place, eg fire authority, CMT, meetings with partners or internal improvement planning meetings. These should be noted on the timetable. The team may only stay for part.

### **Interim Feedback**

The timetable should accommodate a half hour slot for interim feedback to the CE/CFO on a daily basis. There should be also be time allocated for a run through of the presentation with the CE/CFO at lunchtime on the third day.

This meeting is an important part of the process and should be scheduled as late as possible at the end of each day.

The meeting will be attended only by the lead CFO peer, the CFO from the FRS and the LGA challenge manager.

#### **Fourth day**

The team will go into private session to assimilate the evidence gathered during the process and use this to compare the authority to the KAA's. The conclusions will then be summarised into a presentation for delivery to the authority that afternoon. The peer challenge team presents its findings to an audience of your choosing, however, it is suggested that this session is attended by the senior management team and the FRA chair or portfolio holder. There will be opportunity for people to raise questions and discuss the findings.

#### **The report**

The peer challenge manager will write the report based on the agreed feedback from the team. A draft of the report will be provided to the CE/CFO no more than four weeks after the peer challenge for comment and discussion before the report is finalised.

CFOA and the LGA encourages all FRA's to publish their reports and associated action plans and the FRS/FRA will need to think through in advance the timing and format of publication.

The final report and action plan should also be shared with the Fire and Rescue Authority.

#### **Follow up visit**

As part of each fire peer challenge we encourage all FRS to arrange a follow up visit.

This visit is flexible and can be arranged at a time that suits the FRA. It can be used to help deliver key messages from the fire peer challenge to wider Members or staff, as a session to support and challenge the FRS with improvement planning or to address a specific area of expertise.

The peer challenge manager will liaise with FRA to schedule the follow up session and to ensure the appropriate team members can attend.

#### **In depth visit**

If a FRA requests this, in discussion with the FRA the LGA will liaise with the peer challenge team, specific FRS contacts and CFOA to support the delivery of an in depth visit.

The focus of the in depth visit will be informed by the outcome of the OpA and fire peer challenge and will be agreed with the receiving FRA. Its aim will be to help the FRA move forward on a specific issue and will facilitate the involvement of subject matter experts.

There may be additional costs/resources implications.

#### **Additional support for FRAs**

Further information to be supplied by LGA once revised offer to councils/FRAs is finalised.

#### **Benchmarking**

CFOA and LGA are working together to ensure that comparative data is available in an accessible format on the LG Inform website. The intention is that nationally published data will be available in an accessible format so that FRAs will be able to routinely compare themselves with others; this information will be invaluable in day to day management and decision making, but also for the peer review process.

This work is ongoing and FRAs can access the current data at:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform>

**Notable practice**

Notable practice is identified through peer challenge, and is collated and signposted on the LGA knowledge hub website. Following evaluation it is the intention to improve the signposting to, and accessibility of this information. Notable practice is available at:

<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/fireandrescueservicenotablepractice>



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