

Evaluation of the Operational Assessment and fire peer challenge programme

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The LGA and CFOA commissioned the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff Business School to undertake an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the Operational Assessment and fire peer challenge programme. The Centre is internationally recognised as a leading site for local government research. The most recent independent assessment of research quality in UK universities rated the Centre's work as 'world leading' and praised its engagement with policy-makers and practitioners.

The LGA and CFOA would like to thank the report's authors Dr James Downe, Professor Steve Martin and Dr Heike Doring, Centre for Local & Regional Government Research, Cardiff Business School:

<http://business.cf.ac.uk/research/groups/centre-local-andregional-government-research>

Executive summary

The fire peer challenge has been designed by the Local Government Association (LGA) in partnership with the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and is an important element of its sector-led approach to improvement. The process complements and is integrated with the industry standard Operational Assessment Toolkit (OpA).

Our independent evaluation assessed the effectiveness of the fire peer challenge methodology and the OpA and the impacts it had in helping the fire sector to improve. Three main types of evidence were used:

- interviews with those involved in the fire peer challenge across a sample of ten fire and rescue services (FRS)
- an online survey sent to all FRS that had completed a fire peer challenge to examine impacts
- the results of a feedback survey that the FRS complete following a fire peer challenge

The operational assessment is seen as working well and helping to contribute towards service improvement.

The sector as a whole has matured in recent years to the point where services are much more willing to identify areas for improvement and keen to use OpA as a learning process.

It is important to scope the fire peer challenge carefully so it is clear what a service wants to get from the process and to prepare accordingly.

The success of the peer challenge depends very much on how a service approaches it. To be effective it requires honesty, openness and a willingness to learn.

The process stands and falls by the quality of the team. The expertise and experience of team members has been very strong. There is the right balance of expertise including frontline operational experience, capable senior fire officers, and an experienced councillor.

The style of the team is important in helping to drive change. Teams were generally open in their approach while providing an appropriate level of challenge.

The reports were said to provide a fair reflection of the organisation's strengths and areas for improvement and were based on strong evidence.

All fire and rescue authorities have published the report on their website and responded to suggestions for improvement.

The most important area of impact was in providing reassurance that services were on the right track. It also had a positive impact on a service's self-image and staff morale.

Councillors found it valuable to have an independent, external view of their service.

Three-quarters of survey respondents reported that the fire peer challenge had led to improvements in the way the service is run. The process has helped to improve the quality of services, the way performance is managed, how priorities are set and led to changes in organisational development.

The process has helped fire and rescue services to reflect upon the way they work with partners and engage with the public.

Fire peer challenge is highly valued by the sector as the benefits are seen to outweigh the costs. It provides independent challenge, feedback on how a service can improve, and a valuable opportunity for networking with experienced staff and councillors from within the sector.

We have made a number of recommendations for the LGA and CFOA to consider which could further improve the process. These include:

- Being clearer on the balance between the organisational and operational focus for the peer challenge.
- Introducing more flexibility within the process so that there is variation on duration of on-site activity which is determined by the content of the OpA and the specific focus for the challenge.
- Reflecting on the learning from across all fire services and update the OpA accordingly. Including the potential for a further focus on transformational change, efficiency, innovation and collaborative working.
- Continue to discuss 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.
- Continue to ensure that reports are robust and comprehensive and reflect the feedback provided at the end of the visit.
- 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.

1. Introduction

The fire peer challenge has been designed by the Local Government Association (LGA) in partnership with the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA). It builds on previous experiences of peer challenge and is an important element of its sector-led approach to improvement. The process complements and is integrated with the industry standard Operational Assessment Toolkit (OpA). It emphasises that fire services are responsible for their own performance and is underpinned by three key design principles:

- stronger local accountability leads to further improvement
- fire and rescue services (FRS) have a sense of collective responsibility for performance in the sector as a whole
- the LGA's role is to help FRS by providing the necessary support.

Fire peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector and each fire service is offered a peer challenge once every three years.

The LGA and CFOA commissioned the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff Business School to undertake an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the fire peer challenge programme. The evaluation was designed to:

- evaluate the effectiveness of the fire peer challenge methodology and the Operational Assessment Toolkit
- assess the overall impact of fire peer challenges in helping the sector with self-monitoring and improvement.

2. Methods

The evaluation is based on three main types of evidence:

- a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the chair, chief fire officer (CFO) and the officer who was most closely involved in the fire peer challenge in a sample of ten¹ fire and rescue services (FRS)
- an online survey sent to senior officers and councillors in each of the FRS that had completed a fire peer challenge by the time of the study
- the results of a feedback survey that the LGA sends to FRS on completion of a fire peer challenge.

The ten case studies in which we conducted interviews included a range of different types of services (including county, combined and metropolitan fire authorities) and two (Surrey and West Yorkshire) that had helped pilot OpA and fire peer challenge. Interviews were conducted by phone on a non-attributable basis using a topic guide which covered all of the key aspects of the process and its impacts. Each interview was taped and the key points recorded in contemporaneous notes.

The online survey was sent to multiple respondents in each FRS that had completed a fire peer challenge. It focussed on the second issue that we were asked to evaluate – the impact that fire peer challenge have in helping the sector with self-monitoring and improvement. We received 24 completed surveys from 17 (74 per cent) fire authorities² who had undertaken OpA and fire peer challenge.

1 Bedfordshire and Luton FRS, Cheshire FRS, Cornwall FRS, Hampshire FRS, Hertfordshire FRS, Merseyside FRS, Staffordshire FRS, Surrey FRS, West Yorkshire FRS, Wiltshire FRS.

2 The survey used a five point Likert scale. For ease of reporting, we have gruped the 4='tend to agree' and 5='strongly agree' into agree.

3. The Operational Assessment

We did not examine the quality of the Operational Assessment (OpA) process but it was clear that services see it as a very important contributor to service improvement. One interviewee explained its importance as follows:

“We will have an OpA every three years and this leads into our integrated risk management plan (IRMP). We repeat this process every three years and can clearly act on the areas for improvement each time. It’s all linked to organisational development.”

Overall, the OpA was viewed as working well. Interviewees welcomed the opportunity it gives them to look at how they were performing and felt that it provides a fair and balanced assessment of their service’s performance.

They agreed that the seven key assessment areas (community risk management, prevention, protection, response, health and safety, training and development, call management and incident support) were the right ones to focus on. All seven were seen as important determinants of effective service delivery, and the process helps officers to ensure that the service is working well operationally and provides councillors with valuable reassurance on performance.

All of the ten case studies took the OpA process very seriously and devoted a lot of time to preparing it. One interviewee explained that:

”It was a big piece of work taking a number of weeks.”

The OpA was also seen as complementing the peer challenge. A large majority (83 per cent) of the respondents to our survey reported that it had informed the focus of the peer challenge. Interviewees echoed this:

“If you look at the OpA and our challenge report, you’ll see good links there.”

“A robust self-assessment provided a process for the team to probe and it made the challenge rounded.”

There were concerns that it would be possible for services to manage the OpA in order to obtain a favourable report if they chose to do so. None of interviewees admitted to this kind of ‘gaming’, but one officer explained that while his service wanted to learn as much as they could from the process,

“It was also an opportunity to show off the good parts of our service.”

And another reported that:

“There is an opportunity to put all your good stuff into the OpA and leave out your weaknesses. I’m sure that some fire services follow this strategy.”

However, the overwhelming view was that the sector as a whole has matured in recent years to the point where services are much more willing to identify areas for improvement and keen to use OpA as a learning process.

Nearly all survey respondents (96 per cent) agreed that the OpA had helped them to undertake an honest appraisal of our performance. Interviewees in one service reported that they used to be very insular in the past, but were much more open now and had the confidence to use the OpA as a tool for learning rather than trying to impress others. The CFO explained that:

“It’s all about having the confidence to admit weaknesses and it doesn’t hurt to say we need to be better here.

Reflecting on the sector as a whole, a leading councillor told us:

“I think the sector themselves are responsible enough to say these are the areas we need help with moving forward. Can you bring new ideas? Can you help us develop these areas?”

Overall, interviewees were satisfied that the OpA is fit for purpose and their suggestions for improvements involved fine-tuning rather than any radical change in the process. They suggested that:

- peers could do more to observe performance first-hand by observing training exercises
- the OpA should give more attention to the quality and effectiveness of a service, rather than relying on process measures
- it is important that OpA reflects the increasing importance of the wider community safety role that services are encouraged to play
- the LGA and CFOA should do more to facilitate sharing of ‘best practice’ which is highlighted from the OpA process across the sector.

4. Preparation

The CFOA and the LGA have laid out a clear explanation of how the process works, the roles and responsibilities and the practical arrangements (eg sample timetable) in the OpA and Fire Peer Challenge Toolkit. Interviewees told us this guidance and their discussions with the LGA lead were very helpful in enabling them to scope the challenge, set clear expectations and make sure all the necessary preparations were made.

The peer challenge process is designed to be flexible and some interviewees suggested that it is important that the LGA and CFOA continue to make it clear to services that they can tailor the process to their own particular needs. They also emphasised the importance of being selective since it is not possible for peer challenge to cover all of the areas included in the OpA in sufficient depth through the peer challenge process.

For this reason, each service needs to be clear about what it wants to get from a peer challenge and to design it accordingly. This means deciding which issues are the priorities and focusing on these. One service which sought to address five issues from the OpA acknowledged that with hindsight this had been too many and that:

“The more focus you have in a challenge, the more that you will get out of it.”

Our survey and interviews showed that all services had clear ideas from the outset about what they wanted to get out of their fire peer challenge. Some, including the two services that volunteered to be pilots, participated at least in part because they wanted support a sector-led approach. Many case studies expected the process to provide what one interviewee described as:

“An external perspective on the work we are undertaking and to provide reassurance that our self-awareness was accurate and appropriate.”

Or as another interviewee explained:

“It was an opportunity to highlight areas where we wanted an arms-length view. We wanted to know whether we were robust enough. We had done the internal challenge and now wanted some external challenge to provide some reassurance.”

The focus of the challenge was often determined by a service's recent history of performance. For example, services with a history of performance problems saw the peer challenge as an opportunity to receive an independent review of their improvement journey. At the other end of the

performance spectrum, services hoped it would enable them to stay at the leading edge. As one interviewee put it:

“We have the ambition to be the best fire and rescue service. Therefore, we are almost constantly looking at how we can improve, how we can do better.”

Services adopted a variety of approaches to deciding what the challenge should focus on. In most cases, the chief fire officer played a decisive role and they were usually informed primarily by a combination of their own knowledge of the service, the challenges it faced and the completion of their OpA. All services reported that the decision to have a challenge was supported by councillors and the wider management team. We didn't find any cases where the process could be described as being member led.

Preparations were often overseen by the member of the senior management team who had lead responsibility for strategy, planning or resources working with a small team (typically one or two officers). Some services deliberately kept the preparation process tight knit because they did not want to distract other staff from their 'day jobs'. However, some took a more inclusive approach. For example, one service convened a meeting to bring together officers from all directorates to discuss what areas needed further development so that they got the best value from the process. Another realised that its approach to call handling was in need of development and canvassed ideas for improvement based upon experiences elsewhere.

The timing of the process is important and services appreciated the flexibility they have to decide when to conduct their OpA and have a peer challenge. One timed the visit to challenge and validate their improvement plan. Another used it to provide an external perspective on new ways of working which had been recently introduced. It was often the chief fire officer who determined the timing of the challenge:

“I had been in post for just over a year and felt it would be a good time for an external view on the measures I had implemented to change the strategic direction of the organisation.”

5. The process

The aim of the OpA and fire peer challenge is to be forward-looking. It should ask how a service could move forward and offer ideas and 'notable practice' on how to improve. In contrast to previous inspection processes, fire peer challenge starts from a position where services have already identified the issues where they would most value assistance. These issues are examined during the peer challenge along with all the key assessment areas.

The success of the peer challenge depends very much on how a service approaches it. To be effective it requires honesty, openness and a willingness to learn. One councillor explained that he:

“Learnt through previous inspection processes that if you tell the truth, you learn more, so let’s get better ideas from others.”

The process was seen by respondents as one designed to help them. This meant that staff engaged positively with the process and tried to get the most out of it. As one interviewee told us:

“We’ve identified these issues. We want you to have a look at them...Give us some fresh, new ideas, some things that you know have worked elsewhere or are being tried elsewhere and actually give us this check of, ‘I know you’re doing this but have you thought of doing that?’”

Peer challenge teams approach their task as 'critical friends' but they also provide a robust examination of the service. We heard that they did not take the OpA and other documents at face value; they asked challenging and searching questions. As one interviewee explained:

“The team asked for evidence and I had to run around and find it. There were some instances where the information could not be found. It was not a cosy experience and I wouldn’t want it to be.”

The current iteration of OpA and peer challenge coincided with a change in the national approach to sector improvement with the removal of national performance indicators and the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA)/comprehensive area assessment (CAA) approach which had previously been delivered through the Audit Commission.

Interviewees saw this regime as having been too bureaucratic. The OpA and peer challenge is less 'resource and document hungry' but it does still take time to do it properly. We found that the level of investment varied between services. Some had written long and detailed self-assessments; others had decided to adopt what they described as a 'lighter touch' approach. For example, in one case

the chief fire officer had set a limit of 20 pages for the self-assessment so that it didn't take too much time and resource. One service spent about seven to eight months preparing for the challenge. In another service,

“We had a middle manager co-ordinating the process, working three to four days a week for months leading up to the challenge, so approximately £10-15,000 in salary costs.”

A third told us that it took several weeks of preparation with about 25 people involved at different points in the process. One service had uploaded all background documents electronically and invited members of the challenge team to review these and pose questions in advance of the visit.

Preparation for the peer challenge is important as this is the service's investment in the process. The amount of time and resource invested will though depend upon the needs of each service. The aim should not be to try and impress the challenge team, but to be clear about what the service want to get out of the process and where it needs help to improve.

6. The team

The fire peer challenge process stands and falls by the quality of the team. As one chief fire officer told us:

“The process is only as good as the people.”

The evidence we have gathered suggests that the expertise and experience of team members has been very strong. All survey respondents agreed that the team conducted the challenge in a professional manner. Nine out of ten reported that the team had understood the issues facing the service and had the right skills and expertise.

Interviewees in the case studies were also complimentary about the make-up of the team. Team members were described as being very capable and professional. Most services felt that the team that had visited them had the right balance of expertise including front-line operational experience, capable senior fire officers, and an experienced councillor.

Fire service professionals appreciated the fact team members had experience of working in/overseeing fire and rescue services. We were told, for example, that a chief fire officer leading a team would be able to distinguish the routine complaints which happen everywhere from genuine concerns. This contrasts with Audit Commission inspectors who often had no first-hand expertise in the sector and might have taken everything at face value. As one officer put it:

“We were looked at by a highly qualified team from authorities that we could relate to.”

There were a few cases where a support officer attended a challenge with their chief fire officer. As well as providing some support to the CFO, they improved their awareness of how other services were performing and it was described as being a very useful personal development opportunity.

There were a few instances where team members were seen as relatively new to the process and still finding their feet. Some team members were said to have problems understanding different governance arrangements (for example where a fire service sits within a council directorate which has wider responsibilities beyond fire).

Interviewees reported that challenge teams were well prepared, insightful and got to grips with the issues very quickly, although there was one example where a team had apparently struggled to understand the rationale for specific community activities. It is important, therefore, that peers understand how different organisational structures work and take the opportunity to explore and if necessary challenge the evidence base for a course of action.

Three-quarters of survey respondents agreed that their service had a clear idea of who it wanted to form the fire peer challenge team and many had worked with the LGA to identify an appropriate team leader. This makes sense because the relationship between the team leader and the chief fire officer is an important one:

“We did not want a CFO from a small rural shire. We have a very diverse community so we wanted someone on the team who understood the community we serve.”

Another service had a chief fire officer from a service with different governance arrangements to their own because they saw some value in learning from someone with a different background.

The Knight Review³ concluded that ‘for the process to be meaningful and inspire confidence, services should not be able to continue to choose the review team’ (2013: 65). We understand this concern and the public perception that the relationship between the service and challenge team may be seen as too ‘cosy’. And it was an issue that was highlighted by several interviewees. One chief fire officer told us:

“The only problem with the fire challenge is that you shouldn’t be able to choose your own review team ... The ability to select the team potentially undermines the objectivity of fire challenge.”

However, if the leader of the challenge is not the right fit for the service, it is likely to lead to frustration and a lack of understanding. In most cases, the selection of the team was an iterative process where names were provided by the LGA and fire and rescue services offered their views on suitability. We believe that the LGA should continue to discuss the composition of the team with the service and then work to deliver the most appropriate team for each peer challenge. It is also important to recognise the important role played by the LGA manager in being the independent steward for the process. They bring expert knowledge from experiences conducting other challenges and help to counterbalance any accusations about the closeness of the service to the team.

On the political side, the majority of councillors explained that the key criterion for an effective member peer was their level of experience. This meant that having a peer from a different political party was fine, although some councillors expressed a preference for someone from the same political party.

In all but two cases, chairs of fire services valued the input and experience of a fellow politician. Several case studies reported that it was important to get the right peer member and for them to be able to get on well with the chair. This is something that needs to be taken into account when designing a team (although we recognise that the pool of member peers with significant experience of the fire service is relatively small compared to other peer challenge programmes).

The style of the team is also important in helping to drive change. We heard that teams were generally easy going and open in their approach which provided a positive experience. There were good team dynamics and extensive discussions amongst the team where they tried to triangulate information. 84 per cent of survey respondents agreed that the team provided an appropriate level of challenge. One interviewee summarised by saying that:

Peer challenge works best if there is humility: humility in learning from others... If there is ever a problem, then this is because people give

³ Knight, K. (2013) Facing the Future: Findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England, HMSO, London.

advice without this humility attached to it.”

Peer challenge teams are largely made up of serving fire officers. For the ongoing success of the fire peer challenge, fire and rescue services have the responsibility, to the sector as well as their own organisation, to continue to encourage their officers to join peer challenge teams.

While there have been successful examples where external peers have joined the team, half of our survey respondents thought that the process could be improved by having wider representation from outside the fire sector on teams. There was strong support across our case studies for widening the expertise within teams where this was appropriate to the focus of the challenge. Interviewees mentioned the police, and representatives from the private and voluntary sector. The advantage of ‘outsiders’ was, we were told, that they came without preconceived ideas of how the fire service should operate and could bring new ideas that have the potential to quicken the pace of improvement. According to one interviewee:

“The report lost value because it lacked fresh eyes looking at the service. The people on the team had their own idea of how to run a service and we heard a lot about how things worked in their service. It would have been better if we had representatives from other sectors to give an independent view.”

The LGA should continue to promote the benefits of having external peers on the team.

7. Reporting

The reports were described as being ‘good’, ‘pretty balanced’, ‘positive and helpful’. Nearly all survey respondents (96 per cent) said that the report provided a fair reflection of the organisation’s strengths and areas for improvement. Three-quarters agreed that the report was based on strong evidence.

Interviewees were happy with the tone of reports and most were content with the level of detail in the report. However, nearly a third of officers (30 per cent) suggested that the report could have been more challenging. In some of the case studies, we were told that the meeting at the end of the challenge often provided challenging feedback but the written report pulled its punches. One interviewee described the report as being:

“Too short, too light and did not provide enough on value for money.”

Another felt that:

“The report was too generic, too broad brush, too loose. You could take [Name of service] off the front of the report and replace it by any other fire service.”

It is important, therefore, that the report provides an honest reflection of the team’s findings so that the process is transparent and sufficiently challenging to help services improve.

Almost all respondents (96 per cent) said that the report did not contain any surprises. This should not necessarily be seen as a weakness of the process. If a fire service is self-aware and conducted a thorough OpA, then this should not be the case. As one officer said:

“There was nothing surprising in the report. I would have been horrified if there was.”

Moreover, there was a significant amount of learning which takes place through informal discussions. This was seen by some as being more valuable than the formal report as it was an opportunity to pick the brains of a good quality team and to talk ‘off-record’ as well as to network. For example, one service was considering building new fire stations and changing how they staff them. Members of the team had recently been through this change and were able to pass on their experiences.

Our case studies revealed that the team often provided examples of good practice along the lines of ‘why not look at this and see if you can learn from this good practice’? This stops the service wasting months of officer time researching for information when a FRS has already implemented something successfully. The majority felt that more examples of good practice could be shared during the fire peer challenge but also after the process.

Most respondents (92 per cent) said that their service accepted the findings from the peer challenge in full (the other 8 per cent had accepted them in part). Similarly, 92 per cent reported that their service had developed an action plan in response to the report. Those which had not done so had picked out the main issues from the report and put them into their service plan.

In contrast to the corporate peer challenge in local authorities, there is no formal opportunity to have a follow-up visit within the fire peer challenge process, although we did hear of a few examples of continuing contact. In one service, a member peer was asked to return and present the report to the whole authority. In another, a two-day 'away-day' was set up so that two services could discuss different approaches to officer-member working and performance management.

We found mixed responses on the idea of a follow-up visit. For some, this was unnecessary as it is up to the service to determine what to take forward and when. This was supported by an interviewee who suggested that:

“The peer challenge supports the findings of the self-assessment and as part of the process of self-discovery leading to continuous improvement there is no further need for contact.”

Each service has senior managers who should be able to respond to issues within the report as well as councillors scrutinising performance. A follow-up visit would require further investment in time by members of the peer challenge team.

A number of fire services thought that a follow-up visit could have significant benefits. It would not be necessary for all services but a light-touch visit could help to ensure that areas for consideration were implemented. As one officer admitted:

“Since the fire peer challenge, action and effort relating to the identified areas of improvement has diminished and a follow-up would provide more focus.”

The LGA and CFOA could therefore consider formalising the current arrangements so that services may receive additional support from members of the peer challenge team where there is demand.

Services have taken different approaches to sharing the findings. In one, staff gathered to hear the messages from the team first-hand. Their one disappointment was not getting a score ('fair' or 'good') on the final slide. In another service, the report was shared with senior staff only but the chief fire officer has used the headline findings as part of two briefings to staff.

The Knight Review⁴ suggested that 'Review reports should be published together with an action plan as a matter of course' (2013: 65). To date, all fire and rescue authorities have published the report on their website and we believe it is important that this continues. Just over half have communicated the report with partners or to residents (56 per cent). While the process is not explicitly aimed at providing reassurance to the public, the report would help those members of the public interested in understanding the key issues facing the organisation.

4 Knight, K. (2013) Facing the Future: Findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England, HMSO, London

8. Impacts

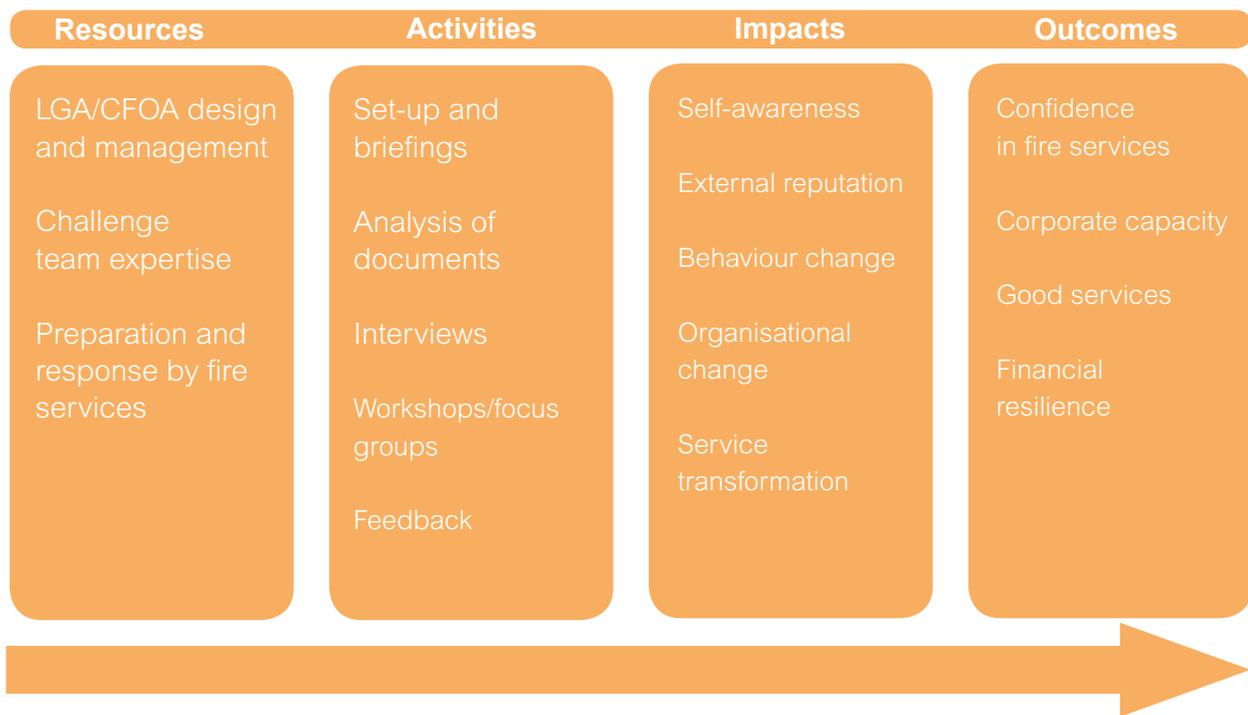
8.1 Defining impact

As part of the corporate peer challenge evaluation (Downe et al. 2013)⁵, we developed an impact assessment framework which identified four components of the peer challenge process: resources, activities, impacts and outcomes (Figure 1). We have used this framework to analyse the impacts of fire peer challenge.

Resources – The LGA and CFOA, challenge teams and participating fire and rescue services all contribute important resources to the fire peer challenge. The LGA and CFOA designed the process and now promote the offer to the sector. LGA managers liaise with fire and rescue services to schedule peer challenges which addresses their needs. The members of the team are a vital resource, offering a blend of experience and expertise tailored to a service’s needs. Fire services themselves invest time and staff resources in producing the OpA, hosting the peer challenge and learning from and responding to the team’s recommendations.

Activities – These include a set-up meeting and preparation, analysis of documents, onsite activity involving interviews and focus groups with staff, councillors, partners and stakeholders, verbal feedback, and a written report to fire and rescue services.

Figure 1 Impact assessment framework



⁵ Downe, J., Martin, S.J. and Doering, H. (2013) Supporting Councils to Succeed: Independent EvLUtion of the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge Programme, LGA: London.

Impacts – Our analysis of corporate peer challenge suggested that there are five key areas of impacts which are all equally relevant for fire and rescue services.

The process encourages:

- greater self-awareness
- improved external reputation
- behaviour change
- organisational change
- service transformation.

Outcomes – Given the resources invested and the activities carried out, these should lead to impacts and ultimately to outcomes. As with councils, however, it is difficult to establish a direct causal link between the impacts of fire peer challenge and better outcomes. This is because it often takes time for better outcomes to become apparent and there are so many other factors which influence outcomes beyond the fire peer challenge. It is also difficult to measure an outcome such as increased confidence in the fire service. The rest of this section examines the evidence relating to the impacts column.

8.2 Self-awareness and external reputation

The most important area of impact was in providing reassurance, in particular to chief fire officers and chairs, that services were on the right track. More than three-quarters (79 per cent) of survey respondents reported that the challenge provided reassurance about the authority's overall direction of travel. It did not always provide as many new approaches/ideas as services would have liked (only 41 per cent reported this) but often helped to accelerate existing plans for change/improvement (50 per cent agreement).

Officers from the case studies reported:

“What it did for us: rather than giving us anything new, it reinforced the direction we were travelling in, it’s quite a positive and complimentary report.”

”It has confirmed to the service that our cultural change programme has delivered the results we thought it had.”

“The fact that it provides a focus for ensuring we self-assess the service in an open and robust way and lends weight to any priority areas.”

Providing reassurance to fire and rescue services is important, but our evidence clearly shows that an increased emphasis on providing new approaches/ideas could help to further improve the process. It should be recognised, however, that this may be a ‘hard ask’ as the fire sector is a relatively small community and existing networking should mean that ‘good practice’ is widely known.

The process provides value for services performing at different levels of performance. For those who may be struggling, it can help to give ideas on the way forward or reassurance that they are on the right track. For well-performing services, it is an opportunity to continue their improvement journey. As one chair admitted:

“Maybe we have got a little bit too comfortable.”

More than half of survey respondents (56 per cent) said the fire peer challenge had an impact on the service’s self-image. For one service whose performance is improving, previous peer reviews had focused on where we could get more help. This peer challenge:

“Focussed on areas where we were creating some ground-breaking work and this has raised the levels of confidence within the service.”

Where the report was positive, sharing the key findings with staff and having the chance to celebrate success had helped with morale.

“We took the headlines from the report to all levels of the organisation and you can see the shoulders go back and the head up for all staff, including fire fighters. It has improved morale.”

It is difficult to know the impact of a positive report on those beyond the service, but two-thirds of respondents thought that it had improved their service’s reputation in the sector.

8.3 Behaviour change

Around a third of survey respondents (34 per cent) thought that the process identified issues that they were aware of but which had been difficult to address without an external stimulus. As a result, the process led to changes in the way that some people worked and operated in the short-term which is likely to have medium-longer term benefits.

Nearly half (46 per cent) of respondents reported that the fire peer challenge had positively affected scrutiny by councillors, 37 per cent said it had influenced member-officer relationships, and 26 per cent that it had led to changes in approaches to member development.

The case studies showed that councillors found it valuable to have an independent, external view on their service. Officers valued the way in which challenge teams had brought to councillors’ attention the fundamental issues facing their services. Examples included the scale of the financial challenge they faced and the need to improve governance arrangements. Officers said that teams had reinforced some of the messages they had been giving councillors and this external validation was a powerful means of highlighting the need for action. According to one officer:

It was a chance to gather any concerns and ensure that they were all on-board for the change. Are you robust enough? Have you thrashed everything out? It was helpful for an outsider to ask these questions.”

In another service, the challenge changed the way in which councillors were engaged in going forward. More priority is now put on getting all councillors engaged in the change process from the earliest stage by improving their understanding of detail and the possible implications.

8.4 Organisational change

Three-quarters of survey respondents reported that the fire peer challenge had led to improvements in the way the service is run. The perceived impact on various areas of service performance varied:

- quality of our services (cited by 66 per cent of survey respondents)
- organisational and workforce development (65 per cent)

- priority setting (54 per cent)
- performance Management (50 per cent)
- staff engagement (42 per cent)
- public engagement (29 per cent).

Some interviewees reported that the challenge process had more impact on corporate issues than on operational matters. One explained that they had dealt with some serious operational issues over the last few years (eg training/development, recruitment etc.) and therefore would have been surprised if there were any weaknesses in these areas. It was on the governance, corporate capacity and resourcing side of the business, where they felt they were weakest.

Nearly half of survey respondents (46 per cent) believed that the fire peer challenge had had an impact on their approach to partnership working. For example, in one service, the team highlighted that they had involvement with too many partners and were over-committed. This made the service reflect on how to get more value out of partnerships and to improve the way in which meetings were ran. In another, the team had reported that partners felt the service was not sufficiently engaged with them. The chief officer valued the way in which partners had used the challenge process to say things which they would not have wanted to say directly to him.

The evidence from the LGA's feedback survey suggests that some fire peer challenges have identified important staffing issues. For instance, in one service, there was a recommendation to allocate an individual to coordinate the service's corporate capacity to deliver change. In another service, the report suggested that the service examined succession planning for senior management staff.

The preparation for the peer challenge visit helped organisations to realise that they needed to be clear about their future improvement plans and to outline this in different formats that are readily understood. One interviewee explained:

“We had to think ‘they are only here for four days, how can we show what we do and why we do it’.”

8.5 Service transformation

Fire peer challenge has helped FRS to shape priorities and to ensure that they are focusing on the areas of highest risk. In one service, it was the business community where they felt they could make the biggest difference in the longer term. In another, it helped them to re-evaluate the number of home fire safety visits they were doing which was lower than their peer group.

The OpA is seen as working well. It was described by one officer as being:

“Robust, constantly improving, and the end result is extremely useful...OpA has improved the knowledge that brigades are or are not performing well, and help them change for the better.”

In another service, the OpA model is seen as an internal assessment tool, so they use this to assess their own performance rather than waiting for a periodic review by a third party.

Services received detailed advice on particular parts of the service where they requested support. So, in one service, the team picked up things on call handling which needed improvement eg training, movement of managers, which has focussed their minds on this issue. Fire safety was

the main area for improvement in another service and the team suggested good practice in other services who were managing their resources in a different way. Officers appreciated that information was given on services with notable practice in specific activities, so they could follow-up on this after the challenge. Some issues such as making greater use of IT in supporting new ways of working were prevalent across a number of services.

It is also important to recognise that learning within the peer challenge is often a two-way exchange and that ideas for service transformation are not simply given by the challenge team but are also pick up to take back to their own organisations.

The fire peer challenge does not seem to have had a strong impact in financial areas. Only 25 per cent agreed that it had impacted on financial planning, 17 per cent thought that it had impacted on their use of resources (eg buildings, IT, etc.) and just 8 per cent on the service's procurement processes. A third agreed that it had some impact on the way the service responds to the cuts. The most positive result was that 55 per cent agreed that it had a positive impact on their service's efficiency/transformation programmes.

Given the current difficult financial environment, a few services suggested that it would be helpful for there to be more emphasis on efficiency and innovation, collaborative working and the challenges of working with a reduced budget (and associated examination of financial data). These issues could be reflected in a revised OpA.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

The OpA and fire peer challenge is viewed by the majority of respondents as having been a positive experience.

The process provides an independent assessment, feedback on how a service can improve, and a valuable opportunity for networking with experienced staff and councillors from within the sector.

It had delivered external validation which many FRS have valued and is seen as being credible by the sector, mainly because of the calibre of the teams it attracts.

The results from our survey show that the process is highly valued by the sector with nearly all respondents (96 per cent) agreeing that it helps to maintain the reputation of the sector. Other indications are equally positive. Respondents reported that OpA and fire peer challenge:

- provides a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement (88 per cent of survey respondents)
- 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 mechanism for providing challenge to fire and rescue services (79 per cent)
- a robust mechanism for providing challenge to the sector (71 per cent).

More than three-quarters (79 per cent) reported that the benefits of fire peer challenge outweigh its costs and 56 per cent said that the impact has been more positive than previous inspection regimes. The peer challenge process aims to be about learning and examining how services are delivering for their communities. An important difference is in the approach. Respondents found the peer challenge to be more open and honest than the previous regime which meant that services found it easier to follow up on recommendations. We heard that the inspectorate provided useful input on operational issues and a minority of interviews missed the operational assurance they provided. The majority felt, however, that the re-introduction of an inspectorate would be an unnecessary and retrospective move so long as services were engaging with the OpA and peer challenge process properly.

There were some constructive criticisms of, and concerns about, OpA and the fire peer challenge, and some useful suggestions for improvement.

The highest level of concern came from services involved in the pilot phase which shows that the LGA and CFOA have taken these criticisms on board and made changes (eg increasing the number of days for the visit).

There is currently no absolute standard of what 'good' is since national performance indicators were abolished. A few services felt that the OpA could improve on the basics and focus more upon performance measures and how services compare with each other.

While seven in ten respondents (71 per cent) thought that the balance between operational issues and corporate leadership/capacity is about right, a quarter were not sure. It was argued that the process is providing some reassurance at the strategic level but this isn't replicated at the operational level. The case studies revealed some concerns about picking up operational problems:

“The whole process is more of an organisational assessment than an operational assessment.”

“The balance is not right. If there were problems between staff or with members, the peer challenge would probably pick that up. If there was an operational problem, I'm not sure if it would find it.”

The majority of interviewees were positive about the impact of the process. As one officer explained:

“There's enough in the report for us to be getting on with. We refer to the peer challenge in performance meetings after the visit.”

but others were clear in wanting more challenge. In one service, an officer suggested that the process had:

“Assisted us in being able to move certain elements forward [but] because it is done within the sector you didn't have the level of scrutiny that you got previously. So challenge was light.”

The view from another service was that they felt a 'little under-done'. It didn't matter to them whether they received more positive or negative comments, they just wanted more content. Another interviewee posed the question:

“Were there nuggets in there [the report]? The answer would be 'No'.”

It was helpful though in this service in re-emphasising some priority areas which enabled some parts of the service to go up and others down their risk register. Finally, one chief fire officer thought that there wasn't enough evidence and challenge on value for money.

The process relies on the integrity of a fire and rescue service to undertake an honest and accurate self-assessment that can be used as a base for the challenge team to investigate critical issues. There is a concern that some services view the process as an opportunity to present strengths whilst hiding areas of weakness. The team may be able to uncover this but a short visit of four days makes this difficult. One interviewee suggested that:

“The challenge provides a narrow but deep assessment, but not reassurance.”

The process is designed to be forward-looking and should therefore provide ideas for improving the delivery of the service. Only half of respondents reported that useful sources of advice and support

were given (and only 4 per cent strongly agreed). While it is part of the team's job to highlight examples of notable practice, it is important to get the balance right between seeking out examples of notable practice and sufficiently challenging the service on their operational performance and leadership/corporate capacity. As one officer concluded:

“They should look for the problems – not the good stuff.”

Once notable practice has been highlighted, much more needs to be done to disseminate these examples across the sector so that all services can share learning on issues which are relevant to them. The LGA and CFOA recognise this gap and are working to develop this area. This could lead to additional guidance within the OpA as well as expanding the knowledge base on which challenge teams currently give advice. We heard that team members generally provided examples of good practice from their own organisations only.

As a follow-up visit is not part of the process, it is the responsibility of each service to devise an action plan in response to the report and to implement any changes. There is no external body which checks whether any recommendations are followed-up. We feel that in order to 'close the loop', each service should set out how they have responded (or not) to recommendations within the report so that there is clear transparency on where the process has led to change.

While the process is aimed at improving and not judging a fire and rescue service, a number of interviewees missed having a score or label which demonstrated how they were performing. This reflects the competitive nature of the sector, the wish to show improvement over time and to compare performance against their peers.

We heard that some fire services compare their performance with others within family groups (such as the metropolitan fire authorities), but there seems to be a lack of knowledge about the performance of fire services across the country. There could be more comparison between services across a range of indicators and this could be used in the OpA.

9.1 Recommendations

Our findings suggest that the OpA and fire peer challenge are working well and could be further improved with a few refinements.

Fire and rescue services need to:

- Continue to be committed to complying with ground rules concerning transparency and integrity. For the peer challenge to have the maximum impact, services need to be open and keen to learn from others.
- Continue to support the process by offering up senior officers and councillors to join teams.

The LGA and CFOA should continue to:

- Work with fire and rescue services to scope the challenge carefully so that services decide whether they would like the focus to be broad and shallow or narrow and deep. A service is likely to get more value from a challenge if there is more depth as the team is able to drill down on issues.
- Ensure that all team members are trained/briefed, operating at the same level and understand how different type of fire and rescue authorities work. It is important to match the background and skills of the peers to the most appropriate challenge.

There are also a number of ways in which the LGA and CFOA could consider to further improve the process. These include:

- Being clear on what the fire peer challenge is focussed on – is it an organisational or operational challenge? Is it possible to sufficiently cover all areas in four days or should certain aspects be prioritised according to each service? Could more be done to observe operational performance on a visit?
- Assessing whether different types of peer challenges might be appropriate.
- Introducing more flexibility within the process so that there is variation on how long a team spends on site which is determined by the content of the OpA and the specific focus for the challenge.
- Reflecting on the learning from across all fire services and update the OpA accordingly. The current pressures on budgets mean that these are challenging times for fire and rescue services. It is important that the OpA and fire peer challenge adds value by enabling services to make maximum use of available resources and to continue to deliver improvements. Therefore, more attention could be paid to the potential for transformational change, efficiency, innovation and collaborative working. The financial element of the process could be expanded so that peer teams review existing financial data which assess how resilient services are in the current environment.
- Continue to discuss 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. Also, examine the composition of the team to ensure the best mix of levels and skills.
- Continue to ensure that the reports are robust and comprehensive and reflect the feedback provided at the end of the visit.
- Formalise the current arrangements so that services may receive additional support from members of the peer challenge team where there is demand and resource capacity.
- Ensure that where performance data exist, these are used to compare how fire authorities are performing at the local, regional and national level.
- 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

LGA and CFOA response

We would like to thank the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff Business School for their report. We recognise the importance of an authoritative and independent external evaluation of the CFOA/LGA fire peer challenge programme and welcome the positive conclusions they have reached that our approach continues to work well and is having a real impact for fire and rescue services.

Throughout the development of the sector-led approach CFOA and the LGA have worked with colleagues from fire and rescue services, including chief fire officers and senior politicians, to test our thinking and to make sure peer challenge continues to meet the sector's needs. Many of the conclusions in the report reflect our own findings from feedback from the many services which have participated so far.

The take-up of fire peer challenge is one of the biggest signs that services value the approach. By the end of 2014 we anticipate every service in England will have had a peer challenge, with 35 already completed by April 2014. This reflects the substantial demand for constructive challenge and the value of peers' insight for services in challenging times.

We continue to report progress on the programme to the LGAs Fire Service Management Committee. As a result, many of the recommendations in this report are ones that we have implemented already, or are in the process of doing so, including: ensuring the quality of peers; encouraging all services to publish their reports and sharing the learning and best practice arising from peer challenges.

The programme has also brought wider benefits. Peers emphasise the value of the process for their own personal learning and development. Some have described the peer experience as 'a great development opportunity' and one that helps to them reflect on their own services' practice.

We are committed to on-going evaluation and dialogue within the sector and we will produce a detailed action plan to respond to the evaluation findings.



Councillor Kay Hammond
Chair, LGA Safer and Stronger Communities Board



Paul Fuller
CFOA President

To find out more about what services have to say about their experience of fire peer challenge go to:

www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

For more information about the LGA fire peer challenge, or to find out how to become a peer, please contact:

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