

Fire and rescue

Summary

January 2006

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Learning from CPA for the
Fire and Rescue Service in England 2005

- 1 The 2003 Fire and Rescue White Paper¹ set out the improvement agenda for fire and rescue authorities, including the development of a performance assessment framework. Fire and Rescue Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) examines how well fire and rescue authorities are being run to meet the needs of local people and sets a baseline for measuring improvement. It does not give an opinion on how well fire and rescue authorities respond to emergency incidents.
- 2 Fire and rescue authorities are changing. The programme of modernisation aims to implement a more targeted and risk-based approach to prevention, protection and emergency response. While there is a clear appetite for change in fire and rescue authorities the pace varies substantially and improvement has not been achieved to the extent that might be expected.
- 3 Forty-seven per cent of fire and rescue authorities have been categorised as good or excellent. However, only a small proportion of fire and rescue authorities are performing across the board at above minimum requirements. Metropolitan fire and rescue authorities and authorities serving larger populations, with larger budgets, tend to perform better. Capacity and the ability to achieve economies of scale are an issue for many fire and rescue authorities, but some smaller fire and rescue authorities have achieved good performance despite capacity constraints. Partnership activity is starting to address these but authorities and government should seek to identify new ways of creating capacity and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.
- 4 Leadership within senior management is often strong but the best performing authorities combine this with a well-developed and active role for elected members to good effect. Elected members must play a greater role in providing leadership, scrutiny and political accountability in fire and rescue authorities. Good political and managerial leadership drives modernisation and improvement in fire and rescue authorities.
- 5 The fire and rescue service employs over 50,000 people. However, managing the skills and capacity of staff is a significant weakness for many fire and rescue authorities and none achieves top levels of performance. Firefighters and support staff are the backbone of fire and rescue authorities but further improvement is needed to ensure that they have the skills and support they need to deliver the modernisation agenda. There is also a reluctance to recruit to skilled posts, such as human resources and communications,

¹ The Fire and Rescue White Paper 2003, available at www.odpm.gov.uk/fire.

from outside the service. Greater progress to implement fully the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) is essential to making the most of staff.

- 6** Managing and developing the skills of staff must also be supported by changes to working practices, such as making changes to shift systems or other working arrangements, to increase effectiveness and efficiency. Limited progress on this issue has meant that fire and rescue authorities are not fully realising their potential or their capacity to deliver on priorities such as community fire safety.
- 7** Diversity and equality are longstanding issues for the fire and rescue service, particularly in rural areas. Only 2.1 per cent of fire and rescue authority staff are from black and minority ethnic communities (BME) and only 2.4 per cent of the operational workforce are women. There is still much progress that can be made to improve diversity in the fire and rescue service both in relation to the composition of the workforce and the way in which the service engages with diverse communities.
- 8** Performance management underpins improvement across the fire and rescue service. It enables fire and rescue authorities to understand if they are making the most of their resources and maximising their impact to deliver on priorities. Performance management is the area where fire and rescue authorities most consistently under-perform. Almost two-thirds of authorities are only at or below minimum standards.
- 9** Fire and rescue authorities spent £1.7 billion of public money in 2003/04. While value for money is often considered it is less often delivered. This is restricting the ability to reallocate resources to where they are most needed, which is hampering improvement. Linking performance to spending is essential to running an effective fire and rescue authority. However, the links are not in place in many fire and rescue authorities. Metropolitan and larger authorities tend to perform better in their approach to use of resources and value for money.
- 10** The CPA process has already had an impact on strategic planning processes in almost all fire and rescue authorities. Furthermore, almost nine out of ten chief fire officers (CFOs) feel that CPA is a driver for change and a majority of chairs and CFOs would choose to go through the process again, even if it was not compulsory.

- 11 To bring about further improvement in the service delivered by fire and rescue authorities we have made a number of recommendations:
- **Fire and rescue authorities** should accelerate the pace of change by addressing working conditions and practices, seeking to fill skills gaps in key areas with those best placed to deliver them. They should improve performance management, support to and development of elected members and prioritise the achievement of equality and diversity in the service.
 - **Local government** should carefully consider the appointment of representatives to fire and rescue authorities to ensure that they are suitable and well equipped to provide strategic leadership.
 - **The government** should note that Fire and Rescue CPA appears to demonstrate a pattern of performance by different types of fire and rescue authority which merits further investigation.
 - **The Audit Commission** should continue to support improvement through development of a new assessment framework for fire and rescue authorities.

❗ Copies of the full report are available at: www.audit-commission.gov.uk
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For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:
Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ
Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421
www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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