



Report

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Report Title:

FRS National Framework 2008-11 Common and Specialist Services Review (Paragraphs 4.3 & 4.5)

Report Author:

Steve Worrall
WMRMB Programme Manager

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Summary:

The Fire and Rescue National Framework 2008-11 sets out a number of obligations/requirements to be addressed by both fire and rescue authorities and regional management boards (RMBs). This report considers the requirement for RMBs to undertake a review to establish any further areas of efficiencies that can be driven out through collaborative working and sharing of functions.

A completed review has recognised that whilst small scale efficiencies could be achieved through some limited regional or sub-regional working, the real opportunity for capacity building rests in the sharing of *expertise* and *knowledge*.

Recommendation(s):

WMRMB are requested to:

1. Give consideration to the formation of a Regional Improvement Group (RIG) formed from appropriately trained lay assessors and improvement experts.
2. Give consideration to the appointment of an Improvement Manager to lead and manage peer review teams.
3. Support the proposals set out within this report for 2009/10, reviewing the benefits arising on quarterly basis.

For further information, please contact:

Steve Worrall
WMRMB Programme Manager



01743 260204



07967 465813



01743 260268



steve.worrall@shropshirefire.gov.uk

1. Background Details:

Introduction

The Fire and Rescue National Framework 2008-11 sets out a number of obligations/requirements to be addressed by both fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) and regional management boards (RMBs). West Midlands Regional Management Board (WMRMB) has responded to the Framework by publicising the *WMRMB Programme Plan 2008/09* that sets out the region's activities to achieve government's expectations in respect of *further* modernisation.

This report considers aspects of paragraphs 4.3 and 4.5 of the Framework which requires RMBs to undertake a review to establish any further areas of efficiencies that can be driven out through collaborative working and sharing functions at regional or sub-regional levels.

A Regional Review – Summary Outcomes

In compliance with the requirements of the Framework a review was undertaken in October 2008 to determine those areas where efficiencies might be achievable at a regional or sub-regional level.

To facilitate the review a questionnaire was devised that sought, fundamentally, to:

- Identify what common and specialist services (excluding operational services) were currently undertaken by each FRA in the region.
- Determine what partnership/collaborative arrangements existed in the delivery of these services.
- Identify what partnership/collaborative arrangements represented a realistic future alternative to the provision of common and specialist services.

The questionnaire was circulated and completed by all FRAs in the region, identifying over 100 individual activities that could be defined as '*common and specialist services*.'

On 23rd October 2008, a 'Chief Officers' Workshop' was conducted and facilitated by representatives of the Improvement and Efficiency Partnership – West Midlands (IEWM). The workshop considered a range of factors, both internal and external to the region, which impacted upon the achievement of further efficiencies.

Whilst many present recognised that small scale efficiencies could be achieved through some limited regional or sub-regional working, it was concluded that the real opportunity for capacity building lay in the sharing of *expertise* and *knowledge*. To this end, a general consensus was reached that the sharing of knowledge and expertise could potentially be further improved through the creation of regional improvement group led by an Improvement Manager.

Regional Improvement Group

The proposed (*and further developed*) arrangements for the regional improvement group (RIG) would essentially be based upon the formation of a group of *'lay experts'* who would be called upon and coordinated by a fulltime Improvement Manager.

The lay experts would act as reviewers/critical friends called upon from time-to-time to undertake peer reviews commensurate with the needs of the WMRMB/FRAs. In practice, it is envisaged that each FRA would make available a small number (3 to 4) of 'experts' who with appropriate training, would be seconded to support the formation of peer review teams. The teams, comprising of 3 to 4 reviewers, would undertake reviews across the region. The role of the Improvement Manager would be to coordinate and lead the review teams and liaise with the Chief Fire Officers, Senior Management Teams and the WMRMB.

Such an approach has proved extremely beneficial in the past, the best example being the 'Comprehensive Performance Assessment' (CPA) peer reviews undertaken in 2005, which contributed to all FRAs in this region securing a CPA score of 'Good,' the highest collective performance of any region. A similar peer review exercise was undertaken in 2006 to support the 'Operational Assessment of Service Delivery' (OASD) and, in 2008; funds were secured to support the training and development of regional Equality and Diversity peer reviewers. These latter reviewers are in addition to several regionally trained Health and Safety peer reviewers that also exist.

All in all, FRAs across the region now have at their disposal a growing number of trained peer reviewers/assessors and experts, who currently, do not operate within any overarching peer-review regional framework/strategy. What is currently lacking is any central (within the region) coordination for this *ad hoc* but growing resource of expertise, hence the proposal to support the appointment of a fulltime Improvement Manager to act as regional coordinator. It is likely that this position that could be funded through an IEWM grant.

In terms of planned review activity, 2009/10 potentially represents a yet further challenging year for FRAs as they prepare themselves for a new regime of assessments. The recently published *'Fire and Rescue Operational Assessment Toolkit and Guidance Consultation'* document represents the proposed OASD process for 2009 and advocates the use of peer reviews. The OASD is to be known as 'OpA' (**O**perational **A**ssessment) for 2009. And whilst it is acknowledged that the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) and the department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) would prefer a CFOA-IDeA trained and coordinated peer review approach to OpA, in reality capacity may not exist nationally to enable a CFOA-IDeA led peer review for all FRAs during 2009.

A regionally coordinated OpA peer review represents a real opportunity for a WMRMB – RIG to build capacity within the region through the sharing of expertise and *'critical'*

friend' challenge.

But the opportunities do not end there. Further opportunities undoubtedly lie in the adoption of a collective approach to the preparations for '*Comprehensive Area Assessment*' (CAA). The Audit Commission will assess each the FRAs' respective operating area, based on the new National Indicator set, look at performance against the targets set in partnership within the Local Area Agreement (LAA), local priorities and customer satisfaction results. Value for money will also be assessed through a Use of Resources and Managing Performance Assessment. Shared information, joint target setting, pooled resources (people and money), shared use of assets, and co-ordinated performance reporting are just some of the practices that each FRA will be assessed under CAA.

There is no peer review process advocated within CAA (other than for OpA which forms an element of the CAA – Organisational Assessment), but as was found to be the case with CPA, the use of peer review to support assessment preparations can add value to the outcomes experienced.

Whilst arguably OpA and CAA offer the most immediate opportunities for peer review other areas also exist. The attainment of the '*Equality Standard for Local Government*' recommends peer review, and the experiences of some local authorities and police forces who have undergone the '*Data Quality Audit*' have also found peer reviews to be beneficial.

Scrutiny & Moderation

To ensure a degree of scrutiny and moderation to any peer review regime introduced, it is proposed to form a partnership with a neighbouring region that are planning to introduce similar arrangements to those set out above. Such a partnership would involve the periodic exchange of Improvement Managers (or similar) to offer a critical-friend scrutiny and moderation of the review methodology implemented to secure consistency of approach, particularly in respect of outcomes.

Recommendations

The review of *common and specialist services* has identified that the greatest capacity building opportunity resides in the area of sharing expertise and knowledge. To exploit such expertise and build capacity in this area the following outline recommendations are made:

1. That a Regional Improvement Group (RIG) be established. The RIG would be formed from lay assessors and experts brought together on an occasional basis for the specific purpose of undertaking peer reviews as deemed necessary by WMRMB.

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2. That the RIG be led and coordinated an appointed Improvement Manager, whose role would be to:
 - a) Maintain a register of lay assessors and experts.
 - b) Determine and address any necessary training needs by the lay assessors and experts to conduct themselves effectively as peer reviewers.
 - c) To develop a schedule of peer reviews for 2009/10 for consideration and approval by WMRMB.
 - d) To coordinate the formation of peer review teams, ensuring a balance of expertise and resource from each FRA.
 - e) To lead and manage the review teams, summarising and reporting the team's findings to each respective FRA's management team.

 3. That WMRMB support these arrangements for 2009/10, reviewing the benefits arising on quarterly basis. Where quantifiable benefits are derived, consideration should be given to proposals into 2010/11.

Next Steps

The Audit Commission is planning its approach to OpA on the assumption that FRAs will complete their Operational Assessments against the recently issued draft Toolkit (or equally robust self assessment tool) as soon as possible after its final issue in April 2009.

In order to establish the proposed RIG and address the proposals set out in this report it is recommended that arrangements are made to advertise, interview and appoint an Improvement Manager as soon as possible, with an appointment made preferably by no later than the end of February 2009. It is thereafter expected that OpA self-assessments will be completed by each FRA by the end of April, with peer reviews undertaken during May/June 2009.

The Improvement Manager appointment would be a temporary position (12 months) reporting to the WMRMB Programme Manager.

2. Legal Implications:

The Fire & Rescue Services Act 2004 stipulates that FRAs - *'must have regard to the Framework in carrying out their functions'* (Part 3, Section 21 (7)).

3. Financial Implications:

The Improvement and Efficiency Partnership – West Midlands (IEWM) have indicated that a grant of £175,000 would be available to support this initiative.

It is suggested that the post of Improvement Manager be offered at a scale/grade equivalent to that of Area Manager (A) (*circa £50k plus on-costs.*) It is not expected

that the post would attract a flexi-duty allowance (+20%) as there will be no expected operational cover provision. For comparison purposes, officers who were seconded to the CLG in 2006 to act as OASD peer review team leaders were operating at Area Manager (B).

Other expected costs that are associated with the formation of the RIG would be assessor training (circa £10-20k) and hotel accommodation/subsistence costs that may arise during peer reviews (circa £10-15k).

It is not expected that FRAs would receive any grant funding in lieu of the time engaged by each member of their staff seconded to the review teams. Subject to each FRA making available 3 to 4 members of staff to form the RIG, it is expected that each individual peer reviewer would partake in approximately three reviews during 2009, each review indicatively lasting 2-3 days (based on previous reviews), albeit this could be more or less.

4. Background Papers:

There are no background papers to this report.

5. Attachments:

There are no attachments to this report.
