

CPA Report

July 2005



Fire and Rescue Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority

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Introduction

- 1 In the Fire and Rescue National Framework for 2005/06¹, published in December 2004, the Government outlines how performance management in the fire and rescue service will be assessed by the Audit Commission. This report arises from a CPA ('Comprehensive Performance Assessment') review carried out as outlined in chapter 8 of the National Framework. It gives the results from our review of the Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority. We used the CPA methodology published by the Audit Commission.
- 2 Our on-site work took place in early 2005. We received a self-assessment from the Fire Authority and a set of judgements from the external auditor. Both were taken fully into account in the course of our work. A summary of the auditor's judgement is given as Appendix 1 to this report. The judgements we have made are based on the evidence we saw before and during our visit, and on any further information supplied to us by the Fire Authority during our discussions with them in the course of preparing this report.
- 3 CPA is an assessment, at the corporate level, of how well the Authority is being run. It does not give an opinion on how well the fire service responds to emergency incidents. The official version of this report is also available on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/fire.

¹ The Government is responsible for setting clear priorities and objectives for the Fire and Rescue Service. The Fire and Rescue National Framework does this by making clear the Government's expectations for the Fire and Rescue Service; what Fire and Rescue Authorities are expected to do; and what support Government will provide.

Executive summary

- 4 Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority is rated by this assessment as **good**. CPA is an assessment, at the corporate level, of how well the Authority is being run. It does not give an opinion on how well the fire service responds to emergency incidents.
- 5 The strength of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority (the 'Fire Authority') lies with the commitment from its people. Staff throughout the Authority have a communication network that is open and the views of both staff and the public are proactively sought in the decision-making process. The Fire Authority is a learning organisation demonstrated by the voluntary CPA assessment undertaken in 2003.
- 6 The vision of the Authority is communicated widely. The performance management framework ensures that business, area and station plans are linked to aims and objectives and these are monitored regularly. Stations have community safety objectives and some staff have individual appraisals.
- 7 The substantial number of retained staff within the Authority are being developed through the integrated personal development system (IPDS) and their development could be further enhanced through more community safety engagement. Retained staff show an enthusiasm to take on a more active part in community safety and the Authority is progressing this through a pilot project.
- 8 The key objectives, derived from the framework are in the process of being prioritised through a methodology that incorporates the use of the National Framework 'musts' and 'shoulds' and the CPA Key Lines of Enquiry. Shropshire developed the methodology and this has now been adopted by the regional management board (RMB).
- 9 Regional working is a priority for Shropshire. The Fire Authority is taking the lead on a number of key projects and, although the Authority is much smaller in size than some of its fellow partners, it has led the way in driving forward some of the framework initiatives, leading on 14 projects regionally and providing the project manager for the board.
- 10 Community fire safety (CFS) work has been undertaken routinely by the Authority for a number of years so is not new. The Fire Authority has recognised that the time is now right to review and evaluate the 100-plus partnerships that it has developed over the years and prioritise these to focus on those that will contribute to its aims and objectives.
- 11 Effective corporate governance arrangements exist as does a good framework of corporate accountability and devolved decision-making. This can be strengthened through the further development of the standards committee. Financial planning exists informally but a medium-term financial strategy is yet to be developed and other key strategies are in the process of being written or are in draft.
- 12 Future plans are clearly documented, for example the IRMP and IPDS have long-term delivery actions but further long-term planning is less clearly defined. The Authority has an awareness of its future capacity and a clearly demonstrated conviction to drive through the changes required by the modernisation agenda.

Summary of assessment scores

A – What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Theme	Score
Leadership and priorities	3
A balanced strategy	3

B – How has the Fire Authority set about delivering its priorities?

Theme	Score
Capacity: Governance and management	3
Capacity: Resources and value for money	2
Capacity: People	3
Performance management	3

C – What has the Fire Authority achieved and, in the light of that, what does it plan to do next?

Theme	Score
Achievement of objectives	3
Achievement of improvement	3
Future plans	3
Overall CPA score	Good

Scoring key

- 4 Well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 3 Consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 2 At only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 1 Below minimum requirements, inadequate performance.

In coming to an overall CPA score, we applied the rules table set out below.

Excellent	No scores of 2 or 1. At least four scores of 4.
Good	No scores of 1. At least seven scores of 3 or more.
Fair	No more than two scores of 1. At least five scores of 3 or more.
Weak	No more than three scores of 1. At least six scores of 2 or more.
Poor	Any other combination of scores.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Shropshire and Wrekin Combined Fire Authority, comprises Shropshire County Council and Borough of Telford and Wrekin. These are two contrasting areas. The County Council covers a large area of 1,987 square kilometres with a population of 286,700. One-third is designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty. The majority of the population lives in the rapidly growing new town of Telford where approximately 1,000 new dwellings are completed annually. The Borough of Telford and Wrekin was originally designated as the New Town in 1963 and recent decades have seen a significant industrial and residential growth in the area, which totals 180 square kilometres.
- 14 The borough has some areas of social deprivation. The borough has a population of 160,288 and a significant manufacturing base providing 30 per cent of employment in the area. Wages tend to be relatively low as a significant proportion of the local employment opportunities are semi and unskilled. The situation is reflected in the results of the index of multiple deprivation, which found high levels of income deprivation and educational deprivation. The Borough of Telford and Wrekin has five neighbourhoods in the top 10 per cent most deprived in England and 15 neighbourhoods in the top 10 to 20 per cent.
- 15 The Telford and Wrekin area became a unitary authority in 1998 thus creating the present Fire Authority. The county of Shropshire has a higher percentage of retired people and lower percentages of children and adults of working age. Because of the rural nature of Shropshire (approximately 80 per cent of the land use is agriculture), a high proportion of residents work in agriculture compared to the national average.
- 16 The use of Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC) software through the integrated risk management planning (IRMP) process has identified that over 37,000 dwellings (approximately 20 per cent of all dwellings) in Shropshire are classified as being well above average risk of fire. Although a high proportion of these (approximately 60 per cent) are in those urban areas previously identified and targeted with community safety initiatives, many are in more rural parts of the county, with correspondingly higher response times when a fire does occur.

The Fire Authority

- 17 The Authority has 17 members (11 from Shropshire County Council and 6 from Borough of Telford and Wrekin). The number of members appointed by each constituent authority is proportionate to the number of local government electors in the area. The current political representation of the Authority is 6 Labour including the chair, 5 Conservative, 3 Liberal Democrats, 2 Independents and 1 member from the Association for Independent Shropshire Councillors. In addition to its 17 full members, the Authority also has two independent members, who sit on the standards committee.
- 18 The Authority appoints a chair and vice-chair at its annual meeting. In the year the chair is a member of Shropshire County Council, the vice-chair is a member of Borough of Telford and Wrekin, and vice-versa. The political composition of the Authority reflects the political balance within each constituent authority.

- 19 The members have formed the following committees and panels to address areas of responsibility: finance and performance management committee (F&PM), personnel committee, standards committee, principal officers employment panel, urgency committee and health panel. The Fire Authority also has an appeals committee and a disciplinary appeals tribunal, which meet as and when required.
- 20 The Fire Authority had a revenue budget of £17.427 million in 2004/05 rising to £17.881 million for the financial year 2005/06. The capital programme for the year totals £1.179 million. Some support functions are outsourced to Shropshire County Council, for example treasury management, payroll and creditor payments system under a three-year contract.
- 21 The Fire Authority's vision and aims:
- 'Putting Shropshire safety first'* is the Authority's logo seen on all documents and appliances. The vision is: *'Save life, protect property and the environment and reduce the risk from fire'* and aims are:
- ◆ reduce the risk to life and material loss from fire and other emergencies in the community;
 - ◆ protect life, property and the environment from fire and other emergencies;
 - ◆ secure the highest level of safety and welfare for all staff by providing effective supervision, training, equipment and systems of work;
 - ◆ provide a service that demonstrates quality and best value in service provision; and
 - ◆ provide a service committed to the highest level of equality and fairness.
- 22 The Fire Authority has three whole-time stations located in Wellington, Shrewsbury and Telford, 20 retained stations, service headquarters in Shrewsbury and a training centre in Telford. The service employs 217 whole-time firefighters, 297 retained firefighters, 16 control staff and 53 Support service staff.
- 23 Equipment consists of a fleet of approximately 46 operational vehicles and special appliances including an aerial ladder, platforms, a rescue boat and various pod-based units located at Shrewsbury and Telford.
- 24 In the fiscal year 2003/04, the Service dealt with 8,503 incidents of which 1,334 were primary fires, 2,145 secondary fires, and 1,095 were special service calls. The remaining 3,929 were false alarms or other calls.

What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Leadership and priorities

- 25 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 26 The Fire Authority has a clear and consistent vision of what it aims to achieve for the local community and how it will tackle modernisation of the service. *'Putting Shropshire's Safety First'* is the overarching theme, which is well-branded. The message is conspicuous in the Authority's buildings – headquarters and in fire stations and there are logos on vehicles. There is evidence that the Fire Authority's strategic aims are effectively cascaded down into business plans, district plans and station plans. This has resulted in ownership of the Fire Authority's overall aims at all levels of the organisation and a strong focus on the overall vision.
- 27 The Fire Authority has maintained a clear and long established focus on community safety. It has developed the safety first policy over the past five years and the job descriptions of firefighters have reflected the prevention role. The IRMP is therefore not regarded as a new idea. Internal and external consultation has been comprehensive and the results of consultation have been considered during the development of the IRMP. It is clear that the Fire Authority is aware of what it is trying to achieve and has the support and commitment of its staff.
- 28 Senior officers and members demonstrate clear leadership. All are supportive of modernisation, and see the IRMP and modernisation as effective processes to achieve efficiencies and improvement. The new version of the IRMP will be presented to members in May 2005. Members are involved in all aspects of the modernisation programme, for example, they are strongly represented on the IRMP working group. This sends a positive message to communities that the vision is collectively owned.
- 29 The aims and objectives of the Authority reflect the National Framework. Strategic planning is ongoing in assessing the objectives through a prioritisation methodology and objectives will be delivered through the already established area and station plans. This framework clearly sets out the way the Authority will deliver its vision.
- 30 The Fire Authority has a good understanding of the needs of the diverse communities, which it serves. There are two distinct socio-economic groups – one urban and the other rural, the latter includes second homes and older groups of residents. Both however, have vulnerable and hard to reach groups. It has good links with schools and youth groups. In consulting with the community the Fire Authority has a clear process to engage local stakeholders. It has engaged consultants to undertake consultation with the community through scrutiny panels, focus groups, public meetings and the internet. Effective communication is achieved generally but the Authority now needs to continue its efforts in communicating with hard to reach groups of residents.

- 31 There is good communication between the management team and staff. There are more than half of operational staff from the retained service and the Authority are keen to ensure that communications are maintained to a high level with this group, for example, representatives from the management team and members visit all whole-time and retained stations on a regular basis. This promoted a general feeling amongst all staff that they were valued and their views taken into consideration. There are also systems in place to support other forms of communications. There is a regular staff newsletter, The Pink, which is received by all staff and there is also regular written communication from the chief fire officer (CFO). Not all firefighters have access to email so briefings are mostly in paper form. This means that some firefighters do not have immediate access to information held on the website.
- 32 There are regular meetings of members that are documented and published on the website. The chair of the Fire Authority is in regular contact with the chief fire officer and other elected members, and member engagement and challenge promote effective decision-making.
- 33 The Fire Authority is proactive in its engagement with partners. Clear processes are in place to consult external communities and stakeholders and the results of consultation is considered when setting priorities, for example, it is represented on the crime and disorder regional partnerships (CDRPs) and local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and this is a rich source of information to shape strategic plans and objectives. The proactive approach to partnership working has resulted in a network of over 100 partnerships some of which no longer meet the aims and objectives of the Authority. The Fire Authority has recognised the need to evaluate all partnership arrangements to determine their value and contribution to the community safety programme.

A balanced strategy

- 34 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 35 The Fire Authority has a clear and long established focus on prevention, balanced with a strong commitment to providing an effective response to incidents. This is reflected in its vision and objectives, supporting strategies and community safety practices. There are clear and challenging targets – related to reducing incidents, deaths and injuries – to drive improvements in these areas. These are in excess of those in the National Framework.
- 36 Some effective key strategies have been developed to drive improvement in service delivery. The IRMP is robust and has been developed in line with national guidelines. It contains demographic and incident data on which to base future decisions relating targeting community safety work and deploying operational resources. The CFS strategy has recently been updated to take account of the new Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, and the National Framework. It has ambitions, objectives and challenging targets for improvements in both community safety (CS) and legislative fire safety work, but an action plan to deliver the objectives and targets has still to be fully developed.

- 37 There is a clear commitment to improving CS at all levels within the organisation. Members and senior officers demonstrate strong leadership in this area, for example, by their direct involvement in key CS partnerships. Whole-time staff on stations currently spend more than half their working hours carrying out CS work. They have clear and demanding targets for home and workplace inspections, for example 500 visits per watch per year. These are underpinned by station plans that are linked to area plans and the objectives in key strategies. Retained personnel also undertake some CFS activities such as after-the-incident campaigns, but this is currently limited and not consistent. This is recognised and there are plans to develop this important area using a risk-based approach and pilots are current being evaluated.
- 38 The Fire Authority is working effectively in its key partnerships with other agencies to tackle CS and the wider social agenda. It is an active member of all CDRPs and most LSPs addressing the specific needs of the local communities. It is involved in partnership work related to vehicle crime (with the Youth Offending Service), and is targeting young people through the Local Education Authority to raise awareness and promote fire safety at a young age. It also uses these relationships to access vulnerable groups and the hard to reach. Examples include home fire safety visits to the elderly by care agencies and the fitting of smoke alarms by housing trusts. There are protocols in place to guide all of this partnership working to ensure that consistency is applied and good practice is shared across the Authority.
- 39 The Fire Authority is using demographic data and its knowledge of diverse communities to inform plans and target improvements in safety and response to incidents. It has some effective research and engagement mechanisms, for example, the people's panels and FSEC mapping for IRMP development. It strives to be an inclusive, fair and equitable organisation and has some sound diversity policies and practices, but many public documents are not available in other formats and languages.
- 40 There are some effective operational procedures and protocols to support a partnership approach to environmental protection. These include the removal of rubbish and abandoned vehicles identified during day-to-day duties, an agreement with the environment agency for dealing with potential pollution at incidents and extensive procedures to respond to local flooding. But policies related to sustainability are less well-developed and structured.
- 41 The Fire Authority is progressive and agile in its approach and response to changing circumstances. It is assessing the impact of the regulatory reform order, freedom of information and other emerging statutory duties and has plans to ensure it conforms in an appropriate way. It is currently assessing the impact of the National Framework and is prioritising work. It has already exceeded some of the targets set in the framework and is responding positively to its new duties in relation to the RMB, for example, it has the role of project manager.

What is the capacity of the Fire Authority to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity: governance and management

- 42 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 43 The Fire Authority has effective corporate governance arrangements. Excellent officer and members relationships exist and staff have respect for members, which supports effective leadership. There is a clear and effective governance structure in place delivered through the operation of various member sub-committees, all of which have clearly defined responsibilities. The Authority has established an urgency committee that considers the local impact of issues discussed at RMB. A standards committee exists, its terms of reference includes monitoring code of conduct issues. To date, the committee has considered relevant legislation relating to conduct issues and one complaint against a member. The standards committee is starting to monitor code of governance issues.
- 44 The Fire Authority's corporate governance statement supports compliance with corporate governance standards and staff are fully aware of the Authority's comprehensive procedures, policies and standing instructions through the formalised arrangements for distributing and updating the Authority's brigade orders. The 2003/04 external audit letter concluded the Authority's arrangements to prevent and detect fraud and corruption are generally sound. A whistleblowing policy exists as part of the brigade orders. However, a formal fraud and corruption policy does not exist.
- 45 The Fire Authority has a management structure and style that supports delivery of its strategic objectives. There are clearly defined areas of responsibility for the management team following recent appointments, such changes have resulted in efficiency savings and clear evidence of effective succession planning to aid effective knowledge transfer. The Authority has a relaxed management style that is open and inclusive. The flat management structure reflects the incident command system, both of which support devolved decision-making and effective communications. At the time of our review, the Fire Authority were in the process of consulting with staff on the proposed changes to the management structure, as a result reporting arrangements for some support service staff were still to be finalised to confirm clear lines of accountability.
- 46 There is effective representation and engagement on the RMB, both at senior officer and member level. There is strong commitment to regional working and the Fire Authority's role within the RMB is clear and effective. This is reinforced by the appointment of the programme manager from within the Authority. Formalised arrangements exist to feedback issues to Authority meetings, which strengthens the engagement.
- 47 A good framework of corporate accountability and devolved decision-making exists. This is achieved primarily through the operation of the policy group. A number of working groups exist to further support sound judgements and decision-making. Members understand their role and this is formalised in the recent production of 'Role Descriptions for Members'. Formalised arrangements exist to monitor the accountability of members via the member code of conduct. The Fire Authority has plans to involve members in the personal development and achievement review (PDAR) to further strengthen corporate accountability.

- 48 The Fire Authority is supported by strong support services, which proactively seek to develop innovative ways of working with support service users. Progressive information technology (IT) development can be evidenced by the majority of retained stations having access to broadband. Development is delayed on some retained stations as they are unable to receive broadband. The Fire Authority's current IT strategy is out-of-date and is presently being reviewed.

Capacity: resources and value for money

- 49 This theme is scored by this assessment as 2 – performing at only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 50 The Authority has sound financial management practices and has a good record of achieving its budget. It carries out an annual review of income charges. However, there is no strategic approach to external funding to further increase financial capacity. The Authority has in place plans to build its reserve level to a targeted level and a risk assessment following CIPFA guidelines was undertaken in November 2003. This risk assessment has not been recently reviewed therefore current risk on future budget demands cannot be determined.
- 51 Financial information presented to members is of a good standard. Adequate budget setting and monitoring arrangements exist although budget monitoring reports presented to the CFA are on an exception basis. Arrangements are strengthened by the operation of the budget working group and policy group who scrutinise the set budgets, monitor budget variances and question whether revenue and capital budgets support strategic priorities. Policy group members are primary budget holders and there is strong budget ownership in this regard. This has facilitated effective decision-making and there is clear member engagement in budget setting and future financial strategy decisions.
- 52 There is effective management of property and fleet assets, supported by formalised processes. The Fire Authority's property asset management plan is detailed and contains numerous benchmarking and cost comparisons, which have resulted in effective strategic decision-making in respect of the property portfolio, for example, an increase in maintenance budgets. There are good links between asset management and the IRMP process with the asset and procurement manager being involved in IRMP action planning.
- 53 There are some effective proactive procurement practices. These exist operationally, through engagement with the Office of Government Commerce and various procurement consortiums. There is an ethical purchasing policy that supports the Authority's ethical standards. There is no formal adopted procurement strategy to guide effective procurement, although a brigade order details practical procurement guidance for all staff. Staff involved have appropriate skills and knowledge and all staff involved in procurement have received Chartered Institute of Public Procurement training.
- 54 The Fire Authority has delivered value for money. There are clear processes for reviewing and improving services and these are monitored corporately. This can be evidenced in the outsourcing of services, for example, breathing apparatus and hydrant maintenance, through a review using costs and other information to compare and benchmark to obtain value for money. The Authority is clearly committed to efficiency savings and has included proposed and costed savings in the three-year revenue budget.

- 55 The Authority has processes in place to ensure that financial planning takes place although there is no written medium-term financial strategy to clarify the process and provide a formalised future financial direction. Revenue and capital budgeting cycles are clearly linked; however, service planning is not formally integrated, for example the costing of all support service work plans does not take place. Financial planning cannot be effective until these processes are clearly linked.
- 56 The Fire Authority has not fully assessed the potential savings and costs of all its strategies. For example, it has started to cost the IRMP action plan and the medium-term budgets contain a contingent sum for IRMP delivery and an indication of efficiency savings to be gained. But the quantifiable costs or savings associated with IRMP have not been calculated and made explicit in strategies. Delivering efficiency savings will be largely dependant on the implementation of policy changes, for example, overtime and deployment of specialist vehicles, and factoring in cost estimates on the outcome of project appraisals.
- 57 The Fire Authority is proactive in its engagement with partners to deliver the community safety agenda. The proposed evaluation of partnership arrangements will guide the Authority in determining their value and contribution to the community safety programme.

Capacity: people

- 58 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 59 The Fire Authority has an understanding of the skills and people it needs to achieve its vision. The Authority has progressively replaced uniformed staff in key support functions with non-uniformed personnel who have specialist knowledge and qualifications in their respective fields, for example, personnel, procurement and facilities management. This has increased the Authority's capacity to allow uniformed staff to deliver core frontline services, and has improved performance in specialist services.
- 60 The Authority is proactive in developing its members. Role descriptions have been introduced to set out member's responsibilities and accountability and members regularly challenge officers on key decisions. Member training has routinely been available for some time on an informal basis and a more formalised member training programme is being developed.
- 61 IPDS is clearly a priority of the Fire Authority. Staff showed a positive awareness of IPDS and how it affects them. The newly updated strategy sets out the plans and capacity to deliver the programme, which is being progressed through a dedicated team. All operational staff have undertaken an assessment of competencies against the National Occupational Standards and assessors and verifiers are in place on all whole-time stations. Probation staff and some support staff are working towards their NVQ's. IPDS is being delivered to the substantial numbers of retained staff through a comprehensive training programme and leadership and management NVQ's are also available for retained managers. Currently, 40 retained junior officers are working towards these NVQ's. The Authority is also leading on a number of IPDS projects at a regional level.

- 62 The personal development and achievement record (PDAR), which has been operating for five years, has been revised to address the recommendation from staff. The system covers all support staff, operational staff above watch manager level but not retained staff that have quarterly meetings with their station managers to discuss development issues and identify training needs. The PDAR system is not being used consistently at the moment and will not become fully effective until all staff are using it as part of their everyday activities.
- 63 The Fire Authority has not made any significant changes to work patterns and shifts to gain efficiencies. Progress on a review of working arrangements has been ongoing since April 2004 with some policies being implemented. For example, whole-time/retained contracts currently apply to 10 per cent of the whole-time staff. The final report detailing any further amendments to working practices will be presented to members later in the year.
- 64 Flexible working arrangements are developing, for example many workshop and general duty staff are also retained fire fighters. Flexible working is addressed through family friendly policies that meet and exceed the statutory allowances. However, until the full review of shift patterns is completed the maximising of capacity cannot be demonstrated.
- 65 The recruitment of retained staff is recognised as a serious issue for the Authority. It is being effectively addressed through a retained recruitment strategy group who examine the most successful and innovative ways to recruit to the service. Recruitment specialists have been commissioned in the past to examine the barriers to recruitment and the information gathered from this exercise, including the targeting of local businesses, has been used to direct an advertising campaign. Although this approach has been successful, it is an ongoing issue to fully staff the 20 retained stations.
- 66 There are a number of policies in place to guide human resources (HR) practices including a training and development strategy and a personnel strategy with long-term development areas. Brigade orders cover most HR issues and the Authority will be developing a formal HR policy as a priority in the near future. The sickness absence performance indicator for uniformed staff is low amongst all authorities and average for the Authority's group. The indicator for all staff shows levels having risen over the last year. The Authority is aware of this and is using existing procedures to address this area of performance.
- 67 The Authority's approach to diversity is strong. Commitment to this agenda is demonstrated by the appointment of an equalities and diversity manager who is promoting diversity awareness amongst staff. Staff in their probation period, currently receive two days training on equality and diversity awareness and existing staff receive ongoing training from an external diversity group.
- 68 The workforce now reflects the profile of the local community with respect to BME composition. The level of BME personnel has reached the local target of 0.9 per cent although numbers are small with only 1 per cent of the community from this minority group. The percentage of women fire fighters is low despite positive efforts to recruit women.

Performance management

- 69 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 70 The Fire Authority is risk aware. Risks are assessed as part of the project management methodology used for all projects including the IRMP and IPDS. The assessment of corporate risks has been undertaken and a formalised risk register is being developed. It is recognised that this process is a high priority and is being addressed.
- 71 Performance monitoring is an area of strength in the Authority. Performance monitoring by the finance and performance monitoring committee has led to improvements, for example, a redirection of resources has resulted in clearly improved performance in relation to automatic fire alarms. Performance information, particularly related to BVPIs, is reported to the finance and performance monitoring committee bi-monthly. The policy group, consisting of the senior management team and some departmental heads, monitors the performance and progress of projects. Each project has a project sponsor responsible for the delivery of the project who keeps projects on track.
- 72 Performance management is working effectively. The vision, aims and objectives are clearly reflected in station plans and objectives are set for all areas of the service including CFS. Support staff and operational staff above watch manager are aware of their objectives and their performance against these objectives through the use of personal development reviews. Staff below watch manager and retained use station plans for setting objectives and reviewing performance. This will be further developed through the roll-out of the PDAR system to all staff. All staff have regular team meetings, and routine monitoring. There is a sense of pride within the organisation and a clear ambition to achieve targets.
- 73 There is a culture of delegated decision-making and accountability within the Authority that has developed over recent years after the incident command management structure was adopted. This structure, which covers day-to-day operations as well as incident command, sets out clear lines of responsibility and gives staff the Authority to make decisions within their areas of accountability. The structure reduces the levels of command making a simplified more effective structure that maximises capacity.
- 74 Business plans for support services are also in place. Monitoring is not formalised but is based on discussions with line managers. This informal procedure could result in objectives not being delivered and staff not being focused on priorities.
- 75 The open communication in the organisation encourages staff to contribute to the improvement of services. This is achieved through the working of the policy group. An example of this is related to community safety and a suggestion from a firefighter resulted in the use of palm top computers to record information obtained during home visits. This should result in an increase in home visits.
- 76 The opinion of the public on service delivery is sought routinely and results are analysed and used to inform improvement priorities. Consultation is sought in a variety of ways to try to reach all sections of the community, for example scrutiny panels, focus groups, public meetings and internet communication.

What has the Fire Authority achieved and, in the light of that, what does it plan to do next?

Achievement of objectives

- 77 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 78 The Fire Authority is achieving quality outcomes in its strategic objectives. Public satisfaction is at a high level and consistently improving high performance is achieved on deaths, injuries and accidental fires. The Authority continues to improve their already good performance with the introduction of new policies and procedures.

Reduce the risk to life and material loss from fire and other emergencies in the community

- 79 The Fire Authority has shown above average performance in terms of its incident related BVPIs for 2003/04. The Fire Authority is one of the highest performing in the country in terms of deaths and injuries (BVPI 143). The level of primary, accidental and the total number of fires (BVPI 142), shows about average performance across the range. Fires have been reducing over the last three years.
- 80 The Fire Authority has an excellent record in terms of both malicious calls and the incidence of false alarms caused by automatic fire detection (AFD) apparatus in comparison with other services nationally and is in the upper quartile for both BVPI 146 and BVPI 149. The effect of the recent revision to the service's attendance policy for AFD incidents is being monitored closely by the unwanted fire signals (UwFS) group, with ambitious targets for future performance. All targets exceed national targets and the performance of the Authority has already exceeded the national targets for deaths and injuries and accidental fires.

Protect life, property and the environment from fire and other emergencies

- 81 The Authority achieved 100 per cent performance of fire appliances meeting national attendance standards. The Fire Authority has yet to determine new local standards of fire cover, and has made the decision to utilise existing (amended) indicators until the outcome of its FSEC work, which is proceeding to schedule. It has used its IRMP process, combining incident and demographic data, to determine those areas of highest risk and devised an innovative 'community safety priority matrix' to target its community safety work to the most vulnerable households. Whole-time staff are fully engaged in both residential and commercial fire safety activity, and watch managers have been developed through secondments to technical fire safety departments. However, although there is an appetite for similar work amongst retained staff, for example, home risk assessments, where the roll-out of this programme is yet to proceed beyond the pilot stage. This work is included in the revised community safety strategy.
- 82 IRMP analysis has resulted in the introduction of the XL cab – a nine-person fire appliance. This has resulted in a new approach to incident attendance, moving the focus from traditional numbers of appliances to the actual resources required. Combined with the parallel introduction of the Ranger vehicles with potential for use in CS, this has provided some efficiency gains and has reinforced the cultural change to a focus on prevention.

Secure the highest level of safety and welfare for all staff by providing effective supervision, training, equipment and systems of work

- 83 The Fire Authority has met its own sickness absence target and sickness absence monitoring is in place. Training is a priority and has been covered earlier in this report.

Provide a service that demonstrates quality and best value in service provision

- 84 Associated corporate objectives are: promoting a partnership approach in pursuance of continuous improvement having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and to ensure the provision of a service that meets the needs of the community.
- 85 The Fire Authority has achieved its objective with regards to partnership working. Public opinion is regularly sought to ensure that the service meets the needs of the community. Best value has also led to some efficiency gains, for example, the outsourcing of occupational health and stores holdings.

Provide a service committed to the highest level of equality and fairness

- 86 Level 2 of the Equality Standards for Local Government has been met achieving the target increase from level 1 last year.

Achievement of improvement

- 87 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 88 The Fire Authority has shown good performance in terms of achievement of improvement in relation to its ambitions.
- 89 The service is achieving significant reductions in the number of fire related deaths and injuries. The Fire Authority consistently performs well and is still improving. The service shows a reduction in terms of primary and accidental dwelling fires although the total number of fire calls has continued to rise; this is broadly in line with its family group and is at a lower rate than the national average. The service has not yet defined new local standards of fire cover but has set a range of local performance measures and intends to report against the old BVPIs, amended to remove the old risk categories.
- 90 The Authority carried out a public opinion survey in 2003, which showed a consistently high level of customer satisfaction with the services provided (over 72 per cent). Additional public engagement and a perception of need are derived from the use of public/citizen panels and focus groups, which broadly represent the public in Shropshire. This work has been undertaken by an independent third party who also provides similar services for a range of other UK fire services. This has allowed the Authority to benchmark itself in terms of service delivery, which shows the Authority as a high performer against all authorities and its benchmarking group.
- 91 Public consultation through the focus group has been undertaken to inform both the IRMP and the budget setting process. It is planned to extend the scope of consultation to wider issues. This has provided both members and officers with an appreciation of the service users' perception of improvements gained by the Authority and where to re-direct resources to meet identified community priorities. There is evidence that the Authority has adapted its plans to meet this public expectation.

- 92 The Fire Authority recognises the constraints placed upon it, particularly in respect of levels of funding – an issue on which it regularly campaigns at national level. It is engaged in a large number of partnerships at both strategic and tactical levels, and acknowledges that it requires more robust management and evaluation processes. This will ensure that it is gaining capacity and extending the scope of its work to the wider social agenda, without wasting resources on no productive ventures
- 93 The Fire Authority is achieving value for money (VFM) in terms of expenditure per head of population related to the achievement of its aims. It spent £34.25 in 2003/04, which compares to £31.77 in 2002/03 and £28.11 in 2001/02. This is average for the Authority's family group and is steadily rising. But its achievements in relation to its aims are well above average.
- 94 The Authority is making steady progress in relation to the implementation of its plans and has processes to ensure that members and officers are actively engaged in monitoring. However, it is difficult to determine what benefits will be delivered and recognised by local people from the IRMP action plan for 2005/06. The five action points in the current action plan relate only to reviewing processes. Benefits to the community and efficiency gains are not quantified and are only anticipated in the longer-term.

Future plans

- 95 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 96 The Fire Authority has a robust framework of future plans and strategies to drive continuing improvement in the services that it provides to the community. Longer-term planning arrangements are not yet in place, but short to medium-term planning is effective. The BVPP is the key strategic plan. It is reviewed annually and has a clear vision and supporting objectives with targets more challenging than those in the national framework. Objectives are generally in line with the National Framework and regional and local imperatives related to a safe community and reduction of incidents, deaths and injuries. There are a range of supporting strategies including the CFS and the IRMP, which have medium-term planning horizons and medium-term financial planning is taking place.
- 97 The Fire Authority regularly reassesses its plans to ensure they are up-to-date and relevant. It is undertaking a comprehensive review of its objectives in the current planning cycle. This is to ensure that it has captured and prioritised all its diverse stakeholder needs and expectations and that corporate plans are fully consistent with the National Framework and the IRMP. Review periods are explicit in all key strategies. For example the IRMP, which covers a five-year period has annual reviews and annual action plans; the three-year CFS strategy is reviewed annually.
- 98 Future planning is supported by some effective research and consultation/engagement mechanisms. These include FSEC mapping systems and demographic data to support IRMP, effective engagement with key community partnerships such as LSPS, CDRPs and engagement with the RMB. The Fire Authority also uses two public scrutiny panels to directly gain informed community views. This has given the Authority an adequate understanding of the diverse nature of its community.

- 99 The Fire Authority is effectively addressing areas of weakness, under-achievement and areas for further development in its future plans. For example, it has undertaken an impact assessment for new fire safety legislation and has plans to address the extra demand on resources such as posts and training. It has an improvement plan to address the areas for development identified in the CPA self-assessment, for example, to develop corporate risk management.
- 100 There is a strong track record in relation to internal and external challenge. Best value has led to some clear improvements, such as outsourcing non-core functions to achieve significant efficiency gains. The Fire Authority also carried out a CPA inspection based on district council methodology when it was not chosen as a pilot for fire CPA. This has led to improvements, which addressed identified weaknesses captured in an improvement plan, for example, the need to evaluate partnership working. External challenge has also led to a self-awareness, which is clearly expressed in the openness the Authority approached the self-assessment and the improvement plan. It will use the outcomes of this CPA review to improve the service and has developed clear mechanisms to prioritise improvement areas in future plans.
- 101 The Fire Authority is clearly a learning organisation. Its culture is open and inclusive and staff are empowered to make decisions and take responsibility for their actions. This supports learning and encourages staff to be creative and to innovate. For example, the current water rescue policy and procedures were developed by operational staff with encouragement from policy group. There are mechanisms to promote the sharing of learning and good practice across the organisation for example projects are monitored monthly by line managers and reported to policy group.
- 102 The Fire Authority is a learning authority. It learns through what has worked and what hasn't, such as the introduction of large crew cabs on some retained stations. Original working arrangements were modified in the light of experience. Learning is also sought from others. The Authority encourages staff to benchmark with the best when developing initiatives and making improvements to areas of weakness. There are mechanisms to encourage this such as project management systems and meetings with line managers. Examples are extensive and include adoption of accident reporting systems and benchmarking AFA reduction strategy from best performers.

Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses

A – What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Leadership and priorities Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication of the vision extremely successful. • Good internal relationships, consultation and communication (two-way). • Language is clear and intelligible. • Some effective mechanisms to engage community – people panel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with hard to reach groups in the community. • Review and evaluation of partnership arrangements.
A balanced strategy Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sound strategies to deliver clear improvements in prevention and response. • Addressing the wider social agenda. • Working constructively with other agencies to deliver its vision. • Responds well to new responsibilities, eg key player in RMB. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFS action plan yet to be adopted – being developed. • Retained appetite for CFS still to be fully exploited but clear plans in place.

B – How has the Fire Authority set about delivering its priorities?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity: Governance and management Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective corporate governance arrangements. • Relaxed management style that is open and inclusive and supports delivery of strategic objectives. • Good framework of corporate accountability and devolved decision-making. • Proactive support services, which seek to develop innovative ways of working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalised monitoring of code of governance issues. • Some key strategies are in the process of being written or in draft (fraud and corruption policy & ICT strategy).

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity: Resources and value for money Score 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member engagement in budget setting and future financial strategy decisions. • Efficiency savings factored in medium-term financial planning. • Outsourcing of internal services. • Partnership working with CFS focus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No strategic approach to income generation. • Reserve levels not based on a recent or systematic risk assessment. • No medium-term financial strategy in place to formalise financial planning.
Capacity: People Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-uniformed staff appointed for specific functions, eg personnel. • NVQ structures in place for trainees. Assessors and verifiers in place on all whole-time stations and retained. • Diversity a priority and practices in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR strategy still to be developed. • PDAR not consistently applied across the organisation. • Shift patterns and working arrangements still to be reviewed.
Performance management Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy group monitor projects through project sponsors. • Aims and objectives cascade to station level through area plans, which are monitored. • Monitoring of PI's is good. • Resources linked to corporate priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management still developing. • Monitoring of support service objectives is not formalised.

C – What has the Fire Authority achieved and, in the light of that, what does it plan to do next?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement of objectives Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good performance in relation to malicious calls, AFAs, deaths and injuries. • Implementation of XL cab. • Community safety priority matrix. • Level of FS skills in operational managers and utilisation of whole-time firefighters to support CFS work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local standards of fire cover not developed. • Appetite for Home Risk Assessment work to be undertaken by retained, but currently at pilot stage in a limited area.

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Achievement of improvement</p> <p>Score 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term decreasing trend in AFAs. • Continuous reduction in recorded injuries in accidental dwelling fires. • Work with ORS and citizen panels to better understand needs of service users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRMP action plan 2005/06 mainly work in progress – unlikely to deliver publicly noticeable change within reporting period. • Lack of management of partnerships.
<p>Future plans</p> <p>Score 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive framework of future plans to deliver the vision. • Plans based on research and adequate knowledge of community – some effective engagement, eg people’s panel. • Plans regularly updated and address new developments and weaknesses. • Track record in relation to challenge – responds positively. • Culture of the organisation has led to innovation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No longer-term planning mechanisms yet in place. • Key plans yet to be formally mapped with national framework and IRMP – work in progress.

Scoring key

- 4 Well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 3 Consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 2 At only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 1 Below minimum requirements, inadequate performance.

Appendix 1 – Appointed auditor assessment

103 Appointed auditors were asked to score five areas that relate to the statutory code of audit practice. When scoring each area a range of issues are taken into account. These issues and the score that has been given in each area are set out in the table below.

Area for auditor judgement	Grade	Issues included in this area
Financial standing	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting a balanced budget. • Setting a capital programme. • Financial monitoring and reporting. • Meeting financial targets. • Financial reserves.
Systems of internal financial control	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring of financial systems. • An adequate internal audit function is maintained. • Risk identification and management.
Standards of financial conduct and the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical framework. • Governance arrangements. • Treasury management. • Prevention and detection of fraud and corruption.
Financial statements	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timeliness. • Quality. • Supporting records.
Legality of significant financial transactions	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles and responsibilities. • Consideration of legality of significant financial transactions. • New legislation.

Scoring and calibration

- 4 Good.
- 3 Adequate.
- 2 Adequate overall, but some weaknesses that need to be addressed.
- 1 Inadequate.

Appendix 2 – Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 104 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and the Fire and Rescue Act 2004. The Fire and rescue Act 2004 extends the Commissions powers under sections 10 to 13 of the Local Government Act to inspection of a fire and rescue authority's compliance with its duty to 'have regard to' the Fire and Rescue National Framework prepared by the Secretary of State.
- 105 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the Authority;
 - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the Authority's self-assessment;
 - ◆ a corporate assessment of the Authority's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements; assessed with the aid of the following diagnostic tools:
 - ◆ Community Fire Safety (CFS);
 - ◆ Equality and Diversity (E&D);
 - ◆ Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS);
 - ◆ Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP);
 - ◆ partnership working;
 - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice; and
 - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 106 The assessment for Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 31 January to 11 February 2005.
- 107 This report has been discussed with the Authority, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Authority.