



**CFOA**  
Chief Fire Officers  
Association



**Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue  
Service  
Fire Peer Challenge  
February 2017  
Feedback Report**

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# 1. Introduction, context and scope

## Introduction

This report outlines the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA) Fire Peer Challenge at Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) in February 2017.

Fire Peer Challenge is part of sector led improvement. Since 2013, all 46 English FRSs nationally have undertaken a peer challenge. Following this, the process was revised to reflect changes within the sector and ensure it continues to meet the needs of FRSs and other key stakeholders. FRSs are now able to commission another peer challenge, to take place at a time of their choosing over the next four years. The process is evolving to reflect sector priorities after the move to the Home Office in 2016. The RBFRS peer challenge took place as the new approach was being introduced, and therefore this feedback reflects the forthcoming model more than the previous presentation and report.

The report is structured around, and expands on, the presentation that was delivered at the end of the peer challenge. The conclusions were agreed by the team whilst on site, and are based on triangulated information and evidence; that which the team heard, saw or read. The slides are included as an appendix to the report for reference, illustrating the clear link between the presentation on site and the report.

The report, therefore, reflects a snapshot in time. Work continued with the Service after the team left, and there will be areas that have been addressed by the time this report has been agreed and published. The team encourage RBFRS to publish an update alongside the report, reflecting the actions and developments that have taken place since the team was on site.

## Context

In February 2014, RBFRS commissioned a Fire Peer Challenge, the report from which highlighted a number of key areas for the Service to work on. This was particularly around the culture of the organisation, leadership and internal relationships. Since then, progress was made, for example:

- The then recently appointed Chief Fire Officer and his senior managers supported the Combined Fire Authority (CFA) to develop a new, ambitious policy agenda
- Members and senior officers gave a commitment to ensure all staff and other stakeholders to be meaningfully engaged in developing detailed plans for implementing that policy agenda
- An organisational development programme started to substantially change the governance, structure and culture of the organisation so that it could successfully deliver the plan that would bring the CFA's aspirations to life.

The Service took the opportunity of the move to a new headquarters to cement a cultural change and a new focus of the organisation, with a new approach to Prevention, Protection and Response work.

RBFRS invited a smaller team back in October 2015 to assess progress. At that time, significant changes had taken place, and it was clear that the new culture was beginning to establish itself. The team recognised that cultural change is a slow process, and was encouraged by the developments that they saw.

Since the 2014 challenge (and the 2015 follow-up), there has been significant transformation to streamline the Service to deliver positive outcomes within a shrinking financial climate. This included a substantial organisational restructure, with changes to job roles, new ways of working and in some cases, redundancies.

The CFA has also changed. Many of the recommendations from the 2014 peer challenge have been acted on. This includes a reduction in the size of the authority, a smaller committee structure and more efficient decision-making. Lead members now work closely with specific officers to enhance their knowledge and understanding and enable them to shape decision-making together. Considerable time was spent building relationships between members and senior officers and as a result, Vision 2019 has a truly collaborative feel about it. Member-led, but involving staff at all levels of the organisation, the Service owns and understands the vision and is working to implement it.

RBFRS is now focused on the future. A new CFO took up his role in April 2017. There have been three recent major public consultations about the delivery of the new IRMP amid funding reductions from central government. RBFRS plans to embed the changes introduced by the Home Office, including increased collaboration, partnership and workforce reform. The Retained Duty System (RDS), remains a focus for RBFRS to consider within wider workforce reforms. The peer team in 2017 explored these areas, particularly flexible options for on-call and retained staff, knowing that the traditional RDS model has not been easy to establish and develop in this Service.

## Scope

For this peer challenge (2017), RBFRS asked for the following areas of focus:

1. An assessment of the progress made since the last Fire Peer Challenge
2. To what extent will delivering the RBFA Corporate Plan 2015-19 improve outcomes for communities across Royal Berkshire?
3. To what extent will delivering the RBFA Corporate Plan 2015-19 meet the requirements of the Home Office fire reform programme, under the themes of:
  - Efficiency and collaboration
  - Transparency and governance
  - Workforce reform
4. Retained Duty System

Fire Peer Challenges are structured around the core elements in the Operational Assessment toolkit. All Fire Peer Challenges consider these seven key assessment areas (KAAs) and six strategic leadership questions.

KAAs:

- Community Risk Management
- Prevention
- Protection
- Preparedness
- Response
- Health, Safety and Welfare
- Training and Development

Strategic leadership questions:

- Understanding local context and priorities
- Delivering outcomes for local communities
- Financial planning and viability
- Political and managerial leadership
- Governance and decision-making
- Organisational capacity

The Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge toolkit can be viewed and downloaded from: [2016 OpA Toolkit](#)

Accordingly, the team considered all aspects of the Operational Assessment toolkit within the three areas of focus.

## **2. The fire peer challenge process and team**

Fire peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector, for the sector, and peers are at the heart of the process. The challenges help Fire and Rescue Authorities and Services with their improvement and learning by providing a practitioner perspective and 'critical friend' challenge.

The RBFRS Fire Peer Challenge took place from 28<sup>th</sup> Feb – 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017 inclusive and consisted of a range of on-site activities including meetings, focus groups and fire station visits. The peer team met with a broad cross-section of staff, including firefighters and other frontline staff, managers, principal officers, partners and elected members. During the challenge the peer team were very well looked after and people the team met were fully engaged with the process and very open and honest.

The peer team undertook background reading provided to them in advance, including RBFRS' Operational Assessment. The evidence and feedback gathered was assimilated into broad themes reflecting the focus areas and was delivered to RBFRS on the final day of the challenge (see Appendix).

The peer challenge team at RBFRS was:

- Councillor Christopher Newbury, Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Authority (Conservative)
- Lee Howell, Chief Fire Officer, Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service
- John Beard, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service
- James Belcher, Head of Planning, Partnerships and Collaboration, Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service
- Jon Pryce, Head of Operations Support, Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service and Vice Chair of National CFOA RDS working group
- Damien West, GM North Response, Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service and Chair of the CFOA RDS Practitioners' Working Group
- Becca Singh, Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

### **3. Overview**

There has been significant progress since the 2014 peer challenge at a time of reductions in central government funding. Strong relationships have been built between elected members and senior officers through significant member engagement (an area of particular successful focus by the previous CFO). Further work may be needed in order to ensure all Members understand the national reform agenda, but strong foundations are now in place.

There are good and improving partnership relationships at a strategic and operational level. This includes South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS), Thames Valley Police, and the constituent Councils, as well as the neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services (Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire). These relationships are furthering the national agenda with increasing collaboration, including posts with shared responsibilities and joint procurement exercises.

RBFRS rightly focused on reforming internal processes and structures after the 2014 peer challenge. There are revised approaches to business planning, project and programme management to establish consistency and accountability across the Service. The CFA has been reduced in size, whilst maintaining a proportionate representation of its six unitary authorities. Committees have been reviewed and streamlined to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of strategic decision-making. Governance arrangements and business processes are in a much stronger position than in 2014.

The peer team recognised that they were on site at a particular point in time, whilst the IRMP consultation and Service re-design were out for public consultation. The team heard and felt a sense of nervousness about the new Service structure and their individual and collective roles within it. The planned staff engagement exercises were expected to improve morale and clarify what the new structure will look like going forward. This will help to ensure that the many people the team met will be able to provide an even greater contribution going forward.

Now that the systems and governance are in a much stronger position, an increased focus on staff engagement and empowerment (supported with improved communication) will get the most of the Service's most valuable resource, its staff and will improve morale. With change and complexity comes a need to ensure communication and engagement is effective at all levels. RBFRS recognises that more needs to be done to ensure that all staff feel able to influence change now and in the future. Given the reform agenda, change is likely to continue for all Fire and Rescue Services.

## **4. Areas of focus:**

### **4.1 Progress since 2014**

There has been considerable progress in a number of areas since 2014, particularly on organisational development, business planning, processes and structures, governance and decision-making and changing the culture of the Service. This is a significant amount of change in a comparatively short space of time and RBFRS should be commended for what it has achieved.

There has been a significant organisational restructure, which has meant difficult and substantial personnel changes at the top of the organisation. But there is now a collaborative senior management team (SMT) which has a shared sense of collective responsibility. The impact of all these changes should not be underestimated. Staff reported there to be little or no appraisal of the impact from the recent or the proposed organisational structural changes. For example, the impact on Thames Valley collaboration work if team personnel change. Whilst evaluation of the impact may have taken place, this does not appear to be widely known, or widely accepted. An extensive staff engagement was due to take place shortly after the peer challenge, and this may have helped to share the findings of relevant evaluations. There is also a high level of uncertainty demonstrated by personnel in temporary positions and personnel who have experienced multiple role changes in the past 12 months. Some of this uncertainty is inevitable in the current financial and changing climate in the FRS sector as a whole.

The previous CFO spent considerable time with the CFA, building relationships and confidence. There is now a high degree of trust between Members and Senior Officers who work together to establish future direction.

Governance and control processes throughout the Service have been revised considerably with clearer lines of responsibility and a consistent and rigorous approach to decision-making and reporting. However, some staff felt that this was complex, and potentially restrictive. It is important that good and effective governance empowers and doesn't stifle staff. Comprehensive planning processes were introduced to ensure robust oversight of work, but now may be an opportune time to consider the balance between control and innovation.

There has been a huge change of focus towards a more balanced approach between Prevention, Protection and Response. There is a perception (of staff and partners) that some of the work appears uncoordinated, with an apparent lack of consensus about the best way to deliver the Prevention strategy. This could be due to communication about the strategy rather than the wrong activities being undertaken. A central strategy driving strategic intent is key, balanced with the flexibility to tailor this at a local level. Local (station-based) IRMPs offer this opportunity, although they have so far had a mixed acceptance and response.

There has been a positive change in behaviour, culture and leadership and those team members who visited the Service previously said that it felt like a totally different organisation from 2014. There has been a marked improvement in levels of sickness absence since 2014 which is notable practice. In 2016/17, RBFRS were the best performing from the 30 FRs that provided figures. There is now a clear policy regarding event investigations, with a robust process dealing with issues raised, including establishing wider organisational learning and assurance mechanisms. People across the Service commented on the improvements to their health, safety and well-being. This includes the introduction of fitness provisions as well as training and awareness-raising of the mental health agenda, for example the Blue Light Mind pledge and a Mental Health Awareness week. Building trust and confidence with staff at station level has been a prime objective for the Service. The peer team agrees that this focus should continue. Clear, targeted, planned and appropriate internal communication, that reaches all personnel, needs to build on the positive change in values and behaviours that has been started.

Beware of organisational change stalling. There was some considerable feeling in the Service that work in some areas (for example, partnerships), was on hold, waiting for the new CFO to start his role. This could happen at any time if there is an additional, particularly an external pressure. Try to maintain the momentum that has been built when unexpected pressures arise.

Central training courses are reported to be of good quality, and middle manager development is in place to support new ways of working. The Learning and Development Team now has a mechanism to evidence where training meets national standards. However, a planned review into the reliance on NVQs had not been completed at the time of the 2017 peer challenge, and the frequencies and content of on-station training had not been reviewed, despite this being highlighted in 2014, and again in 2015. Large numbers of staff are either not meeting on-station training requirements, or not recording such training if it is taking place, including Breathing Apparatus (BA) training. BA trainers are still not required to support on-station BA training for RDS personnel. This is and should remain a focus of attention.

The lack of focus on RDS remained an area of concern for the peer team. The timing of the peer review visit (during the IRMP consultation process) was not ideal, as it meant that suggestions that the team made were not able to be included within the consultation document itself. The team heard concerns by different groups of staff about the impacts of proposed changes on retained staff. However, the broader view of on-call options, as well as a traditional model of RDS, was not included in the consultation. The team hope that the suggestions later in this report will still be able to be explored.

Staff are looking forward to a period of stability following the organisational redesign. However, long-term stability is unlikely, with change expected to continue for RBFRS and the whole sector. Greater awareness is still needed amongst Members and officers of the national agenda, and the national

political strategic direction, in order to understand this more fully. Communication improvements will assist the organisation become more agile and better able to respond to change in the internal and external environment.

#### 4.2 Improving outcomes for communities by delivering the Corporate Plan

The Corporate Plan and the Vision 2019 document set out how RBFRS intends to make communities safer, with a greater emphasis on prevention activities, as well as collaboration and workforce improvements. The Vision was developed through an extensive and inclusive staff engagement exercise. It has been adopted by the Authority and the Service, and is widely known and understood. Staff at all levels are committed to its aspirations, which reflects the inclusive way it was developed. It also provides an opportunity to simplify plans, policies and strategies. This was a good model for ongoing staff engagement.

The new IRMP, therefore, also has an increased focus on prevention activity, partnership and collaboration which partners welcomed. The six unitary authorities within the Fire Authority area have different, sometimes competing, priorities. There has been significant improvement in the identification and management of risks locally, through better working with individual councils. RBFRS understands the need to use specific, targeted, approaches in the different local authority areas within the county.

More locally, individual stations have their own IRMP, based on data about the local area. However, there are inconsistencies in how they have been developed, perceived and delivered, although this is because they are still developing and will take time to become established. This may have an impact on the services communities receive, regarding both the quality and the targeting of such work (for example Home Fire Safety Checks). There is a view that too much activity is with households where risks are low in order to meet output targets. Better, or more consistent, local staff engagement in developing their local IRMP would improve the outcomes for communities.

RBFRS has strategic insight across the county and the wider Thames Valley. There is therefore the opportunity to further consider RBFRS' contribution to wider activity in order to achieve good outcomes (for example, the Prevent agenda). Partners said that they have good and valued relationships with RBFRS and see the Service as a willing partner (for example on the health and wellbeing agenda, and Community Safety Forums). There is increasingly a sense of shared responsibility as partners explore ways they can each add the greatest community value. There is room for mutual and shared learning, for example on prevention activity. Partners are confident that the relationships will successfully translate into action.

Local councils (and some other partners) felt that individual strategies are usually complementary but that it would be better if priorities were jointly identified, agreed and set. Working with partners (Thames Valley Police and health partners as well as councils), RBFRS could develop shared goals on the wider public health, social care and community safety agenda (including

Prevent and Health and Wellbeing). Partners could jointly agree what outcome and output measures will achieve these goals and which partners should deliver them. There has been a marked increase in sharing information; the next step is to produce information and strategies together. RBFRS' role with strategic oversight of the whole county will be useful here. These measures used to determine improved public safety should then drive activity within the Service, clearly and realistically linked to identified risks, and enable RBFRS to direct resources appropriately.

Performance monitoring has improved significantly since 2014. RBFRS is better able to measure its performance and demonstrate improvements in outcomes. The initial focus was inevitably on planning and establishing monitoring arrangements, and less on evaluating and managing performance, and relating that performance to outcomes. Performance is good for some outcome measures (fire deaths) but not in some output measures (HFSC numbers). Clearer links to jointly-agreed public safety goals may help to reassess RBFRS outcome and output targets. Some, where performance is good, could be more ambitious (call handling), when compared to other FRSS. Others may need some review to be more realistic and achievable (RTC attendance times). Health and fitness is a good example of where performance has been managed and not just monitored. Specific, targeted interventions were put in place as a result of monitoring and have led to improved performance.

There is confidence in the organisation that operational response is to a good standard. The new single mobilising processes across the Thames Valley will be completed by the end of the year. However, there is a lag between changes in structures and policy requirements for operational reviews and this will need to be strengthened to improve effectiveness and demonstrate that RBFRS is embedding learning.

The impact of the prevention activities could be increased by broadening the range of agencies referring into RBFRS for HFSCs and focussing on the most vulnerable in the community. This could be supported further through the implementation of the principles behind 'Safe and Well' checks and links to setting shared strategic goals.

The Corporate Plan sets out how RBFRS intends to improve outcomes for its communities. A clearer link between strategic intent (identifying risks, priorities and goals with partners), and measures to drive resource allocation and activity will further help to improve outcomes.

#### 4.3 Fire Reform Programme: Efficiency and Collaboration

The Corporate Plan set out how RBFRS aims to be a fully collaborative Service by 2019. There are good foundations in place for this to happen, and relationships with strategic partners are generally well-established and valued. True collaboration and partnership starts with building effective relationships and RBFRS has good examples of this.

Collaboration across the three Thames Valley FRSs has continued beyond Thames Valley Control (which was almost complete at the time of the peer challenge in 2014). This provides the opportunities to reduce duplication, provide resilience, and also widens career possibilities for staff. A joint Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) ensures the continued commitment to collaboration which will drive improvement and a clear plan, sets out parameters for decision-making, responsibility, and activity, in a phased approach to delivery.

This current model focuses on releasing capacity but RBFRS needs to be able to cede responsibility for projects where others are leading, as well as lead those for which it has direct responsibility. Otherwise these collaboration projects will remove capacity at a time when resources are stretched. This was highlighted in learning from earlier collaborative work with Hampshire (fleet maintenance) and Thames Valley Control. True collaboration means sharing responsibility and letting go of some of the work, trusting partners to act in the best interests of all parties. Further work may be needed on internal communications to set out the financial and social value for this kind of collaboration, as well as steps to ensure the transfer of knowledge and skills from staff brought in on time-limited contracts to work on such projects.

The foundations have therefore been laid for more ambitious collaboration with neighbouring Fire Services. Notable success include a joint Thames Valley control room (hosted by RBFRS), a shared fleet management function with Thames Valley partners, and joint pension arrangements between RBFRS and Buckinghamshire FRS. Accessing national procurement arrangements may provide further resilience and free up capacity whilst continuing to reduce duplication.

There are good examples of co-location, such as the joint Fire / Police station at Hungerford, plans for a shared site in Reading, as well as sharing FRS headquarters with Police and other partners. The work with Thames Valley Police (TVP) with respect to sharing estates is particularly notable. Strong relationships and confidence between RBFRS and TVP were readily apparent. There are now explorations of collaboration with other public sector partners, such as with SCAS, as well as posts with shared responsibility (with other FRSs). The foundations are now in place for RBFRS to increase the speed and depth of collaboration with their partners.

Further collaboration will bring additional innovation, new thinking and ways of working. This will accelerate progress and support RBFRS' work on the reform agenda. There is a sense that this work has been slow to progress within RBFRS in some areas, due to its internal focus, but with the new duty to collaborate, this is an area that the forthcoming inspectorate is likely to examine.

Strategic priorities and objectives need to be clear for all of this work to ensure that resources can be allocated appropriately. Currently, some managers are unsure how far, and with whom, they can work due to real or perceived political difficulties and appetite for collaboration locally. Some

partners are unsure about the strategic commitment. A framework with political and executive support, developed and agreed partners will help collaboration to be systematic and sustainable. This needs to be communicated clearly, internally and externally, to drive behaviours. This may need to be differently communicated and delivered in the different local authority areas of the county. Good communication would reassure both partners and staff.

#### 4.4 Fire Reform Programme: Transparency and Accountability

RBFRS has worked hard with the Fire Authority to reform the governance arrangements. This has resulted in a reduction in number of Fire Authority members (from 24 to 20) and of committees. All members had an opportunity to engage effectively with this change, which streamlined the decision-making process, improving effectiveness and reducing duplication.

The CFA owns the Vision 2019 document, developed as a result of considerable work by the previous CFO. Elected members are clearer now than in 2014 about their strategic role, although there is still a tendency for some to get involved in more operational matters. A greater understanding is needed of the national political and overall reform agenda for the sector, including consideration of national reviews (such as the Thomas Review) and how they relate to RBFRS.

A clear Member/Officer protocol, recommended in 2014, has not yet been developed and implemented. This is an area RBFRS could learn from other Services to ensure that there are clear lines of responsibility and communication between Members and Officers, a greater understanding by both councillors and staff of the strategic nature of the role, and defined standards or behaviours to work to.

The current pay policy statement recognises the need to provide transparency with regard to RBFA's approach to setting the pay of its employees. This includes identifying the methods by which salaries of all employees are determined, the detail and level of remuneration of its most senior staff, as defined by the relevant legislation. It is likely that this will continue to need to be a focus moving forward. RBFRS recognises that the issue of Directors' pay could have been handled differently.

The 2016/17 pay policy statement refers to a review to be conducted in 2016 but the outcome of this review was not initially made public at the time. It is important that the process for determining pay is clearly outlined within the Pay Policy Statement and made available publicly.

#### 4.5 Fire Reform Programme: Workforce Reform

The peer challenge took place during the formal consultation on the Service Review proposals and staff were understandably feeling unsettled. The team encouraged RBFRS to move through this period of uncertainty as quickly as possible.

The Service Review presented a range of options, some of which provided alternative ways of working. However, there were few innovative working models that offer greater employee choice, allow the Service to be more agile and responsive in meeting changing demands, or improve the diversity of the workforce. There is a traditional model in place for both wholetime and retained duty systems which could be examined more flexibly. This is further expanded below in the section on Retained Duty System.

RBFRS is investing in developing middle managers' skills to manage staff effectively (for example, having difficult conversations). This will help the Service through the change and improvement agenda. It will also help to further improve the culture and resilience of the organisation and build leadership capacity for the future.

RBFRS has moved some considerable distance towards an empowering culture, but there is still some way to go to change the traditional, uniform-led, command and control culture. Increasing investment in staff to empower them to make decisions within clear parameters will eventually improve the speed and consistency of decision making; at the time of the peer challenge, it felt clunky and time-consuming.

Relationships between the CFA, SMT and Trade Unions is becoming clearer and improving. There is a sense of cautious optimism about industrial relations going forward. The Member/officer protocol will help clarify roles, parameters and communication channels. Good communications, particularly around times of uncertainty, is crucial. Building a clear and widespread understanding of the national agenda with respect to the fire sector will also help cement productive industrial relations.

The Corporate Plan made it clear that RBFRS aims to have a 'one team' ethos with a positive, empowering culture, working flexibly to meet the needs of its communities in the direction set by the CFA. The culture has significantly improved from the fragmented and divisive approach seen in 2014. However, divisions still exist between different groups of staff (for example, station-based / headquarters based, retained / wholetime personnel, and uniformed / non-uniformed). This limits the sense of a single team working together towards a common strategic vision. It would be beneficial to look for, or create, opportunities to actively challenge these perceptions in order to change them, such as shadowing or mentoring across different roles and teams. Consider implementing a development programme allowing high potential, non-uniformed staff to progress into senior operational roles, as has been pursued at Gloucestershire and Hampshire FRSs. Staff clearly felt strongly about the variations in uniforms. Even staff with the same functional

roles or ranks wore different uniforms. This inconsistency does not fit with the 'one team' ethos that RBFRS is striving for. Whilst this might seem a minor point, how staff look and feel is important.

There was little evidence demonstrating the commitment to equality and diversity, despite the current high-profile national focus. There was no explanation given or exploration demonstrated of the reasons behind recruitment, retention and development figures for different staff groups. Although there is limited opportunity during a recruitment freeze to change overall numbers, there was no apparent equality analysis or exploration of the data. Improved reporting will enable RBFRS to demonstrate how it is looking at this issues, particularly around retention and development. Improved analysis of the data, including qualitative analysis of experiences of staff from different groups, will help address any potential inequalities that may occur. This is an area where RBFRS could learn directly from other FRSSs, for example through the CFOA Equality Practitioners' network.

RBFRS has increased its awareness and implementation of the national agenda. Steps have been taken on workforce reform, particularly around improving the culture and engagement of the workforce. The organisational design strategy has good links to the national reform agenda, including strong links to CFOA work. This is generally seen as beneficial. There were indications that staff felt change had slowed recently and it would be good to get this back on track. However, the national agenda, particularly on workforce reform, needs to be better understood by Members and officers, and more clearly communicated to the rest of the organisation.

There is a consistent programme of station visits for SMT members (two visits a year for each station), but some station-based staff felt strongly that there was not enough direct contact. Stations consistently felt they see more of FRA members than they do of SMT members. Although the regular interaction of FRA members with front line operational staff enhances the 'One Team' approach of RBFRS, there is the risk that operational staff could view members as the 'go to people' to resolve issues rather than their managers. Clarity over the purpose, scope and value of station visits by both Authority Members and Senior Officers would be helpful, linked to the member/officer protocol clarifying roles, responsibilities and reporting lines. However, there other staff engagement mechanisms now, as well as station visits, such as 'Shout', 'Cascade', leadership forums, and the new intranet which was designed in consultation with end users.

## 4.6 Retained Duty System

The management team specifically requested the peer review team consider in detail potential 'On Call' improvements and it is for this reason that a comprehensive report follows. In addition, the national agenda in the fire sector is strongly encouraging FRSs to focus on, and expand, the role of Retained and On-Call personnel.

Whilst both these terms are generally deemed interchangeable, RBFRS has only traditional RDS staffing. The use of On-Call staff in the wider context could present significant opportunities to the Service. This could still include the traditional RDS, but also different types of contracts, such as: day/nucleus crewing (on and off station), fully contracted On-Call, off duty wholetime staff on an on-call contract, and part time firefighters with blended On-Call and wholetime type commitments.

In recent years RBFRS has given a clear commitment to support and develop its RDS staff. The Service is aware that this has not developed and is still needing considerable effort to initiate. SMT still wish to focus on this work. However RBFRS' most recent consultation proposals do not appear to support the strategic commitment with additional resources or activity to improve the 'On Call' model and may be seen to be counter to current thinking. RBFRS may wish to review their approach to 'On Call' staff from first principles.

Across the UK, there are many variations of on-call arrangements that are working effectively in both rural and urban areas, though there are also many other FRSs in the UK who do not have a functional and resilient On-Call contingent and strategy. The peer team strongly encourages RBFRS to explore further how other Services have adapted the traditional retained / wholetime structures to become more agile. Other services, similar to RBFRS, have a significant on-call workforce effectively delivering a large part of core delivery functions, covering emergency response and the wider health and well-being agenda. Despite the sustained reduction of retained personnel across the organisation, the remaining On-Call contingent will need to be supported.

The team did not find a clear strategy for either retained or on-call personnel, and retained staff did not seem to be included in key strategies (Learning and Development, Communications, People). There appeared to be an unconscious bias away from retained staff. On-Call staff are not always sure how they fit into the delivery of core services. There appears to be no evaluation of the benefits and impacts of their employment, support and contribution to the communities they serve.

When policies, procedures and strategies are revised, the consideration or impact on retained appears to be an after-thought. Systems and processes align solely to whole time staff, with little consideration or support for retained personnel. This included remote access to availability systems, which can have a knock-on effect on emergency response. For example, RBFRS staff

have to physically attend a station and log onto an internal system to book availability. RDS personnel could be more often available if there was an online system for booking availability. The other two FRSs using Thames Valley Control have app-based systems allowing them to book availability remotely. Therefore, Thames Valley Control does not have comprehensive real-time information on appliance availability.

Establishing the Retained Support Unit (RSU) was seen as positive and innovative in 2014. However, recently it has lacked guidance and direction, and there was confusion over its role. A review in 2015 concluded it was not performing against its original objectives. Its proposed removal was seen by some staff as “another nail in the coffin of the RDS” and an indication of the lack of support for retained fire fighters. Regardless as to whether the RSU is the right way to provide support, its removal has the potential to reinforce the view that the Service does not see RDS staff as strategically important. Managers recognise that there are difficulties in managing RDS staff, but feel that it has not been a priority for the Service. Further work is needed if RBFRS is to improve and expand the numbers of retained / on-call firefighters.

Retained staff were encouraged when the former CFO arrived in 2013 from another Service with positive intentions for the RDS. Unfortunately, progress was limited, primarily due to the overwhelming wider organisational change agenda, which was successful, but did not allow development of the RDS programme as had been envisaged.

The RDS focus group during the peer challenge, requested specifically to listen to and respond to retained personnel, was poorly attended, though extremely valuable. Senior Managers were unable to say how well communications work for retained staff, as the key communications mechanism is the middle managers. However, middle managers were particularly cited as not understanding the role of the RDS. Improving the engagement and management of retained employees should fall to each and every manager regardless of rank, position or contract if change is to be sustained and effective.

Retained staff were seen generally, including by themselves, as subservient to wholetime staff, emphasised by organisational decisions around mobilising, cover and potential closure of stations. There were notable exceptions. At some stations, RDS deploy Special Appliances, and are also involved in medical emergency response. If the RDS staff are to act as reservists or resilience to wholetime staff then this should be an organisational strategy and the Service should clearly adopt this stance and adapt its working to accommodate this. If this is not the strategy, then a significant cultural change will be needed to change the attitude of many within RBFRS including the RDS themselves.

The recently commissioned RDS review captures a number of options and practices that have been successful in other Services and bode well for the development of RBFRS if they are enacted. However the timescales and

investment to achieve such change must not be underestimated and such focus will need to be supported and sustained for years to come.

The team suggest the following actions could improve RBFRS' approach to on-call personnel:

- Understand and communicate the national agenda (with elected members as well as officers) with regards to workforce reform and the use of on-call personnel, including consideration of the wider use of On-Call models where appropriate in future.
- Review staffing of appliances as a whole, rather than separate traditional Wholetime / Retained reviews to take into account alternative models, including part-time roles and banks of staff.
- Establish a sustainable structure to support the RDS in the Service and develop a cultural change in attitudes towards the RDS, for example a RDS Officer Champion and reporting line structure with accountability for development and performance. This could link to an Elected Member who also focuses on exploring options for on-call personnel, although all managers need to be part of championing RDS, not just a lone few.
- Develop a 'RDS friendly' culture in management and communicate this through all levels of the Service
- Raise awareness and understanding of all managers regarding the RDS, especially those with direct line management responsibilities, by engaging with RDS personnel
- Ensure that the impact of decisions on the RDS is considered at all levels of the organisation at the time of the decision.
- Adopt a flexible approach to RDS related matters without being constrained by tradition or HR myths. For example, look at contracts of varying hours, flexible training opportunities, involving RDS in policy development. Consider how on-call arrangements could work for both WDS and RDS. Explore how other Services have approached on-call options imaginatively through the use of peer support networks that have been offered, eg HWFRS and Notts FRS.
- Engage with the CFOA On-Call Group to share practices and experiences
- Decide what, if any, the role of the RDS is within the Service's IRMP and Service Delivery
  - Develop a fully considered On-Call strategy dealing with how the existing RDS staff are managed and integrated, as well as looking at how any future IRMP type changes could incorporate the wider consideration of the use of On-Call staffing models.
- Adopt a common RDS availability system across the Thames Valley

## 5. Conclusion and contact information

There has clearly been considerable progress since 2014, most particularly to improve governance, decision-making and accountability. There are good aspirations and plans to further the fire reform agenda, and good foundations on which to build. RBFRS is more aware of its challenges now that it has these good foundations, built on evidence gathering and performance monitoring. However, there are still some significant challenges on which to focus. The new Senior Management Team has an opportunity to continue the improvement journey and increase the collaboration, efficiency and culture change that has been started.

Through the peer challenge process we have sought to highlight the positive aspects of Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service but we have also outlined some key challenges. It has been our aim to provide some detail on them through this report in order to help the Service consider them and understand them. The senior managerial and political leadership will therefore undoubtedly want to reflect further on the findings before determining how they wish to take things forward.

Thank you to RBFRS for commissioning the challenge and to everyone involved for their participation. The team are particularly grateful for the support provided both in the preparation for the challenge and during the on-site phase and for the way people we met engaged with the process.

As part of the revised Fire Peer Challenge offer, team members are happy to be contacted for suggestions to help develop your plans, and offer to undertake a follow-up to the challenge in due course, at a time which is most useful to you. Becca Singh, the Challenge Manager, will be in touch in due course about this follow-up. The Local Government Association's Programme Manager in your area is Clare Hudson, and you may wish to stay in touch with her as well as with members of the team in the meantime. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the organisation, its resources and packages of support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service every success in the future.

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## Appendix –Feedback presentation delivered to RBFRS on Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017



### Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service

Fire Peer Challenge

28<sup>th</sup> February – 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017

[www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)

### Introduction

- Peer challenge is part of the approach to sector led improvement and complements Operational Assessment self-assessment
- The process is currently being revised and our feedback will look different from 2014
- We have been invited in as 'critical friends' and familiarised ourselves with Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service through background reading
- We have been well received and made very welcome, with open and honest discussions in meetings, focus groups and station visits with staff, partners and members
- Feedback is a reflection of what we have heard, seen and read and is non-attributable
- Today also provides the opportunity to discuss our feedback and ask questions
- Our draft report will follow

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## The team

- Becca Singh, Challenge Manager, Local Government Association
  - Councillor Christopher Newbury, Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Authority (Conservative)
  - Damien West, T/GM North Response, Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service and Chair of the CFOA RDS Practitioners' Working Group
  - James Belcher, Head of Planning, Partnerships and Collaboration, Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service
  - John Beard, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service
  - Jon Pryce, Head of Operations Support, Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service and Vice Chair of National CFOA RDS working group
  - Lee Howell, Chief Fire Officer, Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service
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## Focus areas

- To provide an assessment of the progress made since the last Fire Peer Challenge (2014);
  - To assess the extent to which delivering the RBFA Corporate Plan 2015-19 will improve outcomes for communities across Royal Berkshire;
  - To assess the extent to which delivering the Corporate Plan will meet the requirements of the Home Office fire reform programme:
    - Efficiency and Collaboration
    - Transparency
    - Workforce Reform
  - Retained Duty System
-

## Overview

There has been much progress and the ground has been prepared for the future. The CFO has built strong relationships with elected members and external partners and the DCFO has done the same with colleagues in the Thames Valley and the Trade Union. A focus on planning has resulted in new approaches being presented (IRMP and service restructure), decisions on which are imminent. There is a nervousness in the organisation as to what this might look like and the uncertainty as to future job security is limiting progress. Now that the systems and governance is in a much stronger position, a focus on staff engagement and empowerment will improve morale and ensure the many great people who we have come into contact with are able to provide an even greater contribution moving forward.

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## Progress since 2014

- Considerable progress and organisational development since 2014
  - Difficult change has been implemented at the top of the organisation
  - RBFRS have implemented governance and control processes
  - The IRMP demonstrates an intent to deliver a prevention focused organisation
  - There has been a positive change in behaviours, culture & leadership
  - Organisational change appeared to stall but is now increasing in pace
  - Weaknesses in maintenance of operational competency have not been addressed
  - The lack of focus on RDS remains an area of concern
  - Staff would like a period of stability following the organisational redesign
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## Improving outcomes for communities

- The more targeted approach to prevention activity will ensure resources are used more effectively
  - Measures used to determine improved public safety should drive activity within an organisation
  - Opportunity with public health partners to develop shared strategic intent and outcome measures
  - Aspiration of making communities safer is strong and reflected in Vision 2019. Focus on planning and evaluating performance is essential
  - Some targets could be more ambitious (call handling, RDS availability)
  - Some outcome measures are good (fire deaths) but some output measures are not performing as Service would like (HFSC, time to mobilise, RTC attendances within 11minutes)
  - Further work recommended on the correlation between output measures and outcomes
  - Define what success looks like in outcome measures. Opportunity to further consider how FRS contributes to wider activity such as the Prevent agenda
  - Look up and out of the organisation to learn from others – allows RBFRS to push further and faster
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## Collaboration

- Thames Valley collaboration is delivering common kit, fleet and Control
  - The foundations have been laid for more ambitious fire-fire collaboration
  - Deeper fire-fire collaboration has potential to save money, improve resilience and career opportunities for staff
  - Co-location of premises has begun with other agencies
  - There is an expectation that the speed and depth of blue light collaboration will need to increase
  - Effective collaboration will generate additional capacity which will support RBFRS' reform agenda
  - Further collaboration will bring additional innovation, new thinking and ways of working which will help the reform agenda
  - Strategic intent with regard to pace and depth of collaboration needs to be clarified, agreed and communicated
  - Political and professional agreement is required
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## Transparency and accountability

- Streamlined arrangements for the authority has reduced duplication and provided greater clarity on decision making
  - Fire Authority has ownership of the vision and are driving reform through monitoring progress
  - Member officer protocol would help ensure there is clarity of roles and expectations (identified in 2014)
  - Arrangements for determining senior officer pay could have been more explicit within the pay policy statement as this has generated some mistrust - visibility on remuneration in line with publishing requirements may need to be reviewed
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## Workforce Reform

- IRMP is presenting a range of options, some of which provide alternative ways of working
  - Investment in middle management skills is being rolled out and will assist the change and improvement agenda (skills)
  - Investment in staff and empowering them to make decisions within clear parameters will increase the speed of decision making and reform (autonomy)
  - Optimistic future with rep bodies
  - 'One Team' approach is aspirational but still evidence of silo working
  - Unable to find evidence that diversity is a priority area
  - Progressing national reform agenda, including Thomas, should be an area of focus
  - Need to further improve trust in senior management
-

## Retained Duty System / On call

- Current consultation proposals, and actions within the Service, do not align to the National agenda
  - A fundamental question for RBFRS - is there a desire for the RDS / On call delivery model?
  - Across the UK there are many variations of on call arrangements for whole-time and retained personnel that are working effectively in rural and urban areas
  - We were unable to find a clear strategy for the RDS
  - To what extent are mainstream policies and procedures inclusive of RDS?
  - Some business processes are not aligned to improve appliance availability
  - There are different ways of working and appliance available to maximise limited crewing whilst still providing an initial operational response (is a fire fighter a fire fighter?)
  - There appears to be an absence of managerial support for the RDS model. This will be even more important if some of the options in the Service re-design consultation go forward.
  - We heard of a clear divide between WT and Retained across the Service
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## Other issues

- Comprehensive planning processes have been introduced in order to ensure robust oversight of work; ensure that this doesn't stifle innovation and continues to empower middle managers
  - Are your processes slowing you down?
  - Stop planning, start delivering
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## Notable Practice

- Health and well being and mental health agenda
  - Procurement of common vehicle, kit and stowage across three services
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## Closing thoughts

- Some staff feel that after the decisions on structure and IRMP are made, they will be able to take stock (Lewin: Unfreeze, Freeze, Unfreeze). In reality, given the pace of external reform expected as well as internal changes needed, steady state is not likely to occur. Change will become the norm. This will need to be reinforced through communications.
  - Good progress is being made. Moving in the right direction. There are some areas of focus that you will want to progress. This will include a review of RDS, considering approaches adopted elsewhere, as well as workforce reform, including diversity (Thomas).
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