

CPA Report

July 2005



Fire and Rescue Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Royal Berkshire 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 Royal Berkshire 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 Royal Berkshire 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 Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (the 'Fire Authority') has effective governance arrangements and managerial structures. It has demonstrated over time the ability to introduce change through continually refocusing and changing to meet new circumstances. It has a well-defined future vision and has arranged resources to support the delivery of priorities which are clearly set out in strategic documents supported by comprehensive secondary plans, strategies and policies.
- 6 Sophisticated information systems exist and are supported by an impressive performance management approach which is comprehensive, accessible and well-regarded throughout the Authority.
- 7 Mutual respect, trust and openness show themselves in the way that the Authority conducts both its internal and external business and this allows the Authority to engage at all levels with confidence and commitment and encourages those involved to contribute freely and positively.
- 8 A sense of purpose pervades the Authority and is recognisable at all levels including both members and staff. The Authority knows where it is going and how to get there.
- 9 There is still a lot to do and the Authority is very self-aware of the areas it needs to develop further. It is using its available people capacity fully and has recognised the need to match its aspirations to its ability to deliver. There are systems in place to ensure that it can maintain a flexible approach to changing circumstances and emerging priorities. Its own improvement plan has already set in being the early stages for the majority of the issues identified in this assessment.

Summary of assessment scores

A – What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Theme	Score
Leadership and priorities	4
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	3
Capacity: People	3
Performance management	4

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	4
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

- 10 Royal Berkshire Fire Authority operates within the unitary authorities of Bracknell Forest Borough Council, Reading Borough Council, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Slough Borough Council, West Berkshire Council and Wokingham District Council. The existence of six unitary authorities makes Berkshire a challenging structure to work within for the fire service.
- 11 The area covered by the Authority comprises 126,032 hectares. Berkshire is among the fastest growing and most densely populated counties in Britain, stretching from urban areas bordering London in the east to the rural Berkshire downs in the west; it enjoys an expanding business scene with employment levels well above the national average. The county has a population of more than 800,000, of which 50,000 are children under the age of four and 90,000 are elderly people (over the age of 65), in 313,000 domestic dwellings. The black and minority ethnic population represents 7 per cent of the population.
- 12 Geographical areas of employment in Royal Berkshire follow the M4 corridor in the technology and service industries. Overall unemployment at 11,765 – 1.47 per cent is significantly lower than the national average. Although affluent in parts there are concentrations of deprivation and social exclusion in the urban areas of Reading and Slough.
- 13 Major arterial routes include the M4, A4, A33 and A34, along with many heavily trafficked secondary roads with considerable commuter through traffic. The West Country mainline runs through Berkshire and Reading is a major interchange for mainline rail services.

The Fire Authority

- 14 The Royal Berkshire Fire Authority is a combined Fire Authority comprising twenty-five elected members from the six Unitary Authorities: Bracknell Forest Borough Council (three), Reading Borough Council (four), Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (five), Slough Borough Council (three), West Berkshire Council (five) and Wokingham District Council (five) The political representation on the Authority is twelve Conservative, five Labour, seven Liberal Democrat members and one independent member.
- 15 The Fire Authority has an executive committee (six members) an overview and scrutiny committee (six), disciplinary, appeals and grievance committee (three), an integrated risk management plan (IRMP) working party (six), a community safety forum (six) and a standards committee.
- 16 The Authority's revenue budget for 2004/05 is £28.59 million plus a capital budget of £1.408 million.
- 17 There are 20 fire stations. Reading's four stations and those at Newbury, Bracknell, Langley, Maidenhead, Slough and Windsor, are fully crewed 24 hours a day, Wokingham is a retained station augmented by a nucleus crew of four whole-time firefighters, whilst the stations at Lambourn, Hungerford, Mortimer, Pangbourne, Sonning, Wargrave, Ascot, Crowthorne and Cookham are staffed by retained. Retained appliances also provide additional cover at the Newbury, Maidenhead and Bracknell stations.

- 18 Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service employs 430 whole-time firefighters, 177 retained firefighters 27 control room staff and 106 professional and support staff. The Authority operates in one of the highest cost areas in the country (outside of London) and experiences higher operating costs as a result. The high cost of living and strong employment market also affect the ability to attract staff and particularly recruit and retain part-time (retained) firefighters.
- 19 The incidents attended by the service in 2003/04 included 2,262 primary fires, 3,171 secondary fires and 1,972 special service incidents. It carried out more than 559 rescues, including people trapped in buildings or from road traffic accidents.
- 20 Inspecting officers carried out over 4,500 inspections of a wide range of commercial and industrial premises enforcing both the Fire Precautions Act (1971) and the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1999.

What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Leadership and priorities

- 21 This theme is scored by this assessment as '4' – well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 22 Royal Berkshire Fire Authority has developed a shared vision and priorities which are consistently and clearly expressed in its documents. These have been produced from a combination of consultations, sound analysis of local data and the incorporation of national information. There is a clear continuity between the Authority's priorities and its key policy documents.
- 23 The Authority has well-researched, broadly owned and sustainable aims and objectives. Care has been taken in developing a programme of work that is realistic and deliverable. The proposed work responds to the urgency of many items and reflects available delivery capacity and addresses the Authority's wish to move forward in an inclusive and reasoned way.
- 24 The Fire Authority has made considerable effort to ensure that decisions are informed by consultation and are grounded in local context. As responses have traditionally been disappointingly low, different methods of consultation have been tried to encourage a larger and more representative number of responses. This has included the targeting of representative groups, the employment of managers for community relations, equality and diversity, and communications and the running of the successful Connecting Communities project.
- 25 The priorities of other authorities and agencies have been sought out for inclusion in the vision and strategies, notably from the local strategic partnerships (LSP). This comes through well in the objectives that support the vision with the inclusion of local public service agreements (LPSA) targets. This is reinforced by strategic level discussions with all unitary authorities to discuss shared priorities and joint working. This all allows a direct link between the activities and contributions of partners and the Authority's priorities.
- 26 Engagement with staff is a considerable strength and there is active and well-regarded contact between members, senior managers, trade unions and the staff as a whole. There is an openness and lack of confrontation that enables a free flow of information. Examples are the partnership for common sense, which encourages discussion between members and staff of the Authority, and the fire liaison group and round table which brings the members, senior managers and trade union representatives together. This approach has led to a shared sense of purpose.
- 27 This leadership approach has encouraged mutual respect and transparent relationships are also a feature of working between members of the Authority. This is contributing to effective and productive working that is in the best interests of the communities being served.
- 28 Prioritisation is effective with no and low priorities being identified using a risk-based approach. Issues are given a ranking using a point-based system and then mapped against available resources. Timeframes for addressing priorities are clearly set out in the integrated risk management plan (IRMP), along with clear explanation.

A balanced strategy

- 29 This theme is scored by this assessment as '3' – consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 30 The Authority shows a high level of commitment to change and has an integrated set of strategic documents that provides a well-researched and deliverable agenda supported by targeted action plans. The IRMP has benefited from comprehensive local demographic analysis and the delivery of its projects is kept relevant by access to a dynamic information system. The IRMP is well-structured and interconnected with the best value performance plan (BVPP), corporate plan and community strategy, all benefiting from ambitious targets. The best value programme has been refocused on the delivery of the eight IRMP work streams.
- 31 A clear and well-resourced community safety strategy exists built around seven shared priorities for public services. This strategy helps balance prevention and intervention and has led to tailoring of community safety work at a local level. This approach is flexible and balanced against station workloads, resulting in resources being matched to changing circumstances. Finances have been redirected towards preventative activities. This all leads to a supportive managerial environment which is recognised by staff and allows them to identify and champion community safety as one of their principal roles.
- 32 Service improvement has been effectively addressed with the national targets for 2010 having been brought forward by two years to align with partners. This has created an opportunity to stretch the specific targets set in the National Framework.
- 33 The Fire Authority puts considerable effort into communicating with all sections of the community. Initiatives exist to promote greater community safety and these are well-marketed. It has a systematic approach to communicating with different groups of people according to their circumstances. Initiatives have been targeted at specific groups such as 'have-a-go days', young firefighters, specific programmes for black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, the theatre in education project and schemes operating through ethnic food outlets.
- 34 The Authority is contributing effectively to the wider community safety agenda. There is commitment and enthusiasm for dealing with these issues and this shows in the active involvement with all six of the crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRP) in the Authority area.
- 35 Community safety is being addressed in a comprehensive manner. A broadly defined interpretation has been taken of the potential for influencing community safety. Within this, the Authority is already contributing to LPSA targets on antisocial behaviour and expanding this experience into the development of phase 2 LPSA. Other LPSA targets include the reduction of arson and hoax calls, which has led to the secondment of an officer from Reading Bough Council. This broad view is also illustrated by the involvement of firefighters in a car accident reduction project at a local college. The understanding of a broad approach is evident throughout the Authority.
- 36 Sound engagement with young people exists. This approach is supported by activities such as an innovative interactive web-based learning package being delivered through the schools education project team. There are also diversionary schemes operated by the Authority such as the Phoenix project that takes referrals from youth justice agencies. Other schemes include estate clear ups designed to reach out to selected audiences.

- 37 Community engagement has been progressed in a positive way by the innovative use of English speakers of other languages (ESOL) structures and other community-based projects and this has been effective in establishing two-way communications, including to people with different levels of reading ability. The community liaison officer is continually looking for new routes of engagement. For example, the Reading gay pride festival was used as a platform for community engagement.
- 38 A well-structured communications strategy provides a toolkit to support staff in engaging locally in delivering the Authority's priorities. Emphasis is placed on diversity by the Authority in its approach to external communications. For example, a training programme for all staff was developed with local race and equality groups. This is supported by the provision of translation facilities, and the use of other diversity agencies to convey messages. All of these assist community engagement.
- 39 The Fire Authority has displayed flexibility and measured consideration in responding to changing circumstances and it is accustomed to implementing change built upon evidence led, risk-based decision-making. This is a reflection of the Authority's preference to progress when armed with the evidence it needs to make a convincing case that will be understood and accepted by members, staff, partners and communities. However, partly because of this approach, the Authority has not yet addressed some of the bigger drivers for change and financial efficiencies such as duty systems.
- 40 Communities do not understand the changed role of the fire service. Whilst the Authority is seeking to address this, it is not using authority members as routes of communication. This lack of identification may have impacted on the responsiveness to consultations and on the acceptance of the Authority as participants on all six LSPs in the Authority's area.

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

Capacity: governance and management

- 41 This theme is scored by this assessment as '3' – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 42 Effective governance arrangements are in place and are kept under continual review. Good governance practice has been adopted and recent changes to committees have created a group of members who have the ability to focus on the work of the Authority in a concerted way. The scheme of delegation has recently been revised and standing orders and financial instructions are being reviewed.
- 43 Members have shown that they are prepared to take difficult decisions, such as proposals on aerial appliances but there is a clear preference for work towards sustainable solutions and decisions that have broad support. This leads to a very inclusive and open way of working where barriers to moving forward and misunderstandings are kept to the minimum. There is effective member – officer relationships and this produces good decision-making processes.
- 44 The democratic structures are arranged around the priorities of the Authority. This has produced an executive committee, overview and scrutiny committee, a disciplinary, appeals and grievance committee, an integrated risk management plan working party, a community safety forum and a standards committee. All of these committees have equal numerical representation from the political groupings reflecting the non-partisan mode of working. The community safety forum draws memberships from all the unitary authorities to ensure that messages can be routed back into all the communities.
- 45 Members are well-briefed in the clarity of their role and are kept fully informed with access to appropriate training. There is active encouragement for involvement and an acceptance that training can be tailored to allow for skills brought from constituent authorities.
- 46 Roles and responsibilities are clear throughout the organisation and set out in the members' handbook. The delegations that exist and the structures they operate within allow managers to feel empowered to act. The level of ability, expertise and experience in the workforce is obvious which combined with the overall teamwork and management support produces an environment of trust.
- 47 The Authority is open to changing its structures to meet objectives. Management structures are being continually and thoughtfully tuned to and the Authority remains alert to alternative ways of delivering its priorities and is prepared to redirect or convert staffing posts if better means of achieving the overall aims can be identified. For example, removing a senior uniformed post produced the resources for additional posts and investment in performance management.
- 48 Management is supportive and encourages staff to be involved in developing new ideas and ways of operating. This extends into the use of cross functional teams to deliver IRMP and other projects and this encourages wide ownership of emerging policies and spending decisions.
- 49 Information and communications technology (ICT) support is strong. This has an impact on members, stations, managers and specialist sections. Its use in innovative approaches to the development of performance management, human resources (HR) recording and risk mapping underpins many of the Authority's initiatives.

- 50 Strategic support to the service and the Authority is being limited. Issues such as slowness to act to infill a post behind the head of finance and a lack of specific succession planning has created pressures on the production of information for the Authority.
- 51 Scrutiny is not yet performing well. Whilst the Authority was sufficiently forward looking to create a scrutiny committee, the roles and method of operation are still settling down and the function being refined and has not been helped by changes in membership in the first year. This extends beyond the formal meetings, where members have limited ad-hoc involvement with service managers with only limited examples of members seeking out individual briefings.
- 52 The Authority has only limited strategic involvement in the regional management board (RMB). Principally this is concerned with a lead role for HR development (training) and its three work streams. In addition, there is officer involvement with other work streams, such as health and safety, procurement, and analysis work on special appliance distribution.

Capacity: resources and value for money

- 53 This theme is scored by this assessment as '3' – consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 54 Sound financial management exists. This combined with a long standing approach to maintaining working reserves has placed the Authority in a good financial position. A risk-based approach is taken to setting the level of reserves and more borrowing capacity has been generated through the application of the prudential code. Members are involved on a monthly basis with the monitoring of financial performance and this assists in the strategic monitoring of financial issues.
- 55 Good linkages exist between the planning and business cycles, the budget process and timescales for IRMP consultation. This includes the grading of options to assist members with their strategic consideration of competing priorities and detailed justifications are provided for essential and highly desirable bids, with alignment in most cases to the Authority's strategic plan.
- 56 Asset management is effectively supported. There are strategies for premises, the vehicle fleet and ICT. It will be further increased by work at the regional management board (RMB) level and by the commissioning of asset management software that is currently being loaded with data.
- 57 Procurement processes are in place but these are of a limited nature awaiting the arrival of regional and national strategies. Work has progressed on some aspects such as equipment purchase and the creation of a risk register for procurement but other procurement initiatives, including best value reviews, are delayed.
- 58 Value for money (VFM) and the redirecting of resources is routinely considered. It has led to the conversion of posts from uniformed to non-uniformed, the use of cheaper external trainers to address skill gaps, adoption of similar authorities BV review decisions and joint working on training. VFM is also supported by having the financial implications of decisions included in reports, the conducting of VFM audits and the use of CIPFA statistics for fire services as a benchmarking tool.

- 59 Effective partnership working is in place. There is effective leadership of partnership working from the top of the Authority with both members and senior managers actively involved. Resources are targeting at defined problem areas using sound data and intelligence which is shared and developed with partners. Partnership arrangements are being expanded to deliver projects such as major incident working, reduction in road traffic accidents and reduction in dwelling fires etc. High quality time and cost limited projects have been carried out with a systematic approach and in collaborating with other agencies. Written arrangements have been used to ensure the effectiveness of projects. This has encouraged considerable joint working and cost sharing
- 60 Clear outcomes, suitable timelines and resources to carry out the work allow the Authority to gain advantage from its partnership working. Partnership aims and objectives connect back to the Authority’s wider community safety initiatives and have allowed it to gain considerable benefit, such schemes as from the Slough REC, and Staywise projects. In a similar way, complex projects such as the Phoenix are well-supported by partnerships, as are projects designed to reduce hoax calls and anti-social behaviour. These sound partner relationships have led to more novel projects such as the proposed redevelopment of a fire station site to include a library, social housing and key worker housing.
- 61 Whilst there is a medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) in place, linkages between it, financial planning and priorities are still not fully mature and there is short-term business planning by managers which whilst adequate for year-on-year working does not assist thinking for the MTFS. This is being addressed through facilitated sessions designed to produce a longer-term vision.
- 62 Whilst the contributions of the Authority to partnerships are well-regarded and there are many excellent examples of detailed working it does not have a strategy for partnership working or a success and failure criteria by which to monitor the progress of partnership projects.

Capacity: people

- 63 This theme is scored by this assessment as ‘3’ – consistently above minimum standards, performing well.
- 64 There is a flexible, friendly and integrated workforce and considerable success has been achieved in attracting specialist staff. There is a sophisticated approach and understanding of the wider skills needed and the investment required to develop staff, including key managerial positions, to give the mix needed to deliver the Authority’s projects and policies. This leads to a productive working environment.
- 65 The integrated personal development system (IPDS) is well-embedded and being used effectively and extensively. The Authority’s approach has been well-structured and supported by sound policies, training and ICT techniques. Over 150 watch-based personnel are engaged on programmes and the first cohort of retained personnel has started using flexible half-day training, which is also being made available to neighbouring brigades.
- 66 Staff retention has been addressed by the Authority, particularly for firefighters where particular challenges exist due to the high cost of living in Berkshire. Whilst it is easy to recruit firefighters, many leave once qualified or on promotion, to areas where they can have a higher standard of living. The buoyant employment market also impacts on the ability to recruit retained firefighters. The Authority actively pursues opportunities to improve these difficult aspects.

- 67 The HR strategy and supporting policies are very comprehensive and robust. This includes access to a well-regarded occupational health service. Policy development was helped by a mature approach on aspects such as stress risk assessments and realistic action plans through which the strategy has effectively addressed the National Framework requirements.
- 68 Concerted action has been taken to reduce sickness. This has seen a reduction in the number of working days lost from 11.27 per cent in 2001/02 to 5.6 per cent in 2003/04, which places the Authority as the best performing nationally. Good examples of this are an employee assistance programme which gives access to free physiotherapy and chiropractor, the appointment of a health and fitness officer to support watches, and health campaigns and other support through the occupational health scheme. Absence levels are monitored and managed through effective performance systems.
- 69 There is a strong commitment to equality and diversity. This approach is fully supported by senior officers and is a prominent feature of the corporate plan. A rolling programme of training exists which has been tested through local race relations groups. Good commitment to workforce diversity was shown by projects such as positive action for women and involvement in the Slough race equality council project designed to build trust and confidence with minority ethnic groups and also by having a senior manager responsible for diversity and implementation of projects. Further work is driven at fire station level specifically targeted at both women and BME groups and this extends to retained stations. All of these provide a comprehensive approach and understanding.
- 70 Whilst the workforce does not yet reflect the make-up of the Authority's community, it is the fifth best performing authority nationally under BVPI 17, with 2.7 per cent of black and ethnic minority (BME) staff employed and 3.4 per cent for BME staff in the top 5 per cent of earners BVPI 11b. It continues to work positively towards increased recruitment and is very proactive in pushing forward the diversity agenda through its community relations officer. Significant progress has been made with the number of applications received from BME residents and further work is being done to support applicants through this process.
- 71 Capacity is stretched and the Authority faces challenges in implementing its agenda for change. In part this is due to the limited number of people available to share the workload and the way that capacity planning is applied. There are examples of managers having to carry out many roles because of the limited numbers of single reference posts. The problems with workload are increased because of the way that the role of the Authority is so widely defined and the support that this requires, particularly in working with others.

Performance management

- 72 This theme is scored by this assessment as '4' – well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 73 Well-structured risk management systems of work exist. They cover corporate, business and financial risks and are backed by a sound strategy and a comprehensive framework for accessing supporting intelligence and research material. Risk is managed in a dynamic and fluid way and is continually under review and there is a good understanding of potential and actual risk. Risk is an integral part of the decision-making process and both officers and members understand its relevance and importance. A risk register has been produced and is progressively being expanded.

- 74 Impressive and robust performance management exists. This is achieved through the PB Views system with automatic real time inputting of data and full access to all, including intranet browser access from home personal computers. Incident mapping is available daily to compare against IRMP targets, community safety strategy action plans and other local targets and priorities. It encompasses everything from station work to strategic management and member level. There is helpful and quick support for all levels of the organisation who request additional data, training or analytical assistance. This comprehensive system is a considerable asset to monitoring the work of the Authority.
- 75 Improvement of services is at the heart of the Authority's performance management approach. SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound) targets are used, evaluated and monitored by members and managers down to station level where dynamic four hourly data is becoming routinely available. Clear identification of managerial ownership is shown for each element of IRMP planning. Good focus on performance exists and all staff have access through an integrated ICT system to monitor performance information routinely as part of their work. Managers are supported well by the availability of the structured approach. Through these processes, the Authority has historically performed well on delivering outcomes against its priorities and action plans.
- 76 Priorities are assessed through the risk management group and resources allocated accordingly with regular reviews to check variations. Formal consideration and informal discussions between principal officers and senior members are conducted to monitor performance against expectations. This allows good control of high-level issues.
- 77 Project management is used well. The eight IRMP projects are managed through the performance management structures using similar methodology and all staff involved have been trained in project management and risk assessment. In support of this, regular performance information is provided to all stations via the PB Views system, focused on local community priorities. This identifies incident trends and hotspots and is actively used at station level to target workload to meet the risks.
- 78 Performance against local and national indicators is well-understood and regular and detailed reports are available, with simple to understand information. This is generally available to both staff and the public through hard copy and internet access. For example, LPSA targets are having mixed success and the targets that are failing have been evaluated and are clearly identifiable in the performance management system.
- 79 Management of individual performance is assisted by staff having regular appraisals for which full records are maintained, detailing firefighters' competency levels. This system provides a connection back to the objectives of the Authority.

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

Achievement of objectives

- 80 This theme is scored by this assessment as '3' – consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 81 Performance against national comparisons is in the mid range; the number of calls to fires (BVPI 142) at 69.2 per 10,000 population places the Authority 17th nationally as does the number of primary fires (BVPI 142 ii) at 28.5 per 10,000 population. Accidental fires in dwellings (BVPI 142 iii) at 17.4 per 10,000 population is the 26th nationally. Low comparative performance exists for; fire deaths (BV143) which at 1 0.75 per 100,000 population is ninth worst nationally, for fire injuries (BVPI 143 ii) at 10.10 per 100,000 population it is the eighteenth worst; malicious calls (BVPI 146) at 0.77 per 10,000 population are the fifteenth worst nationally and false alarms to automatic fire detection systems (BVPI 149) at 195 per 1,000 non-domestic properties the fourth worst nationally).
- 82 The Authority has delivered well against its strategic priorities. Whilst the performance against indicators set out above is mixed, the broader performance against its six strategic priorities has seen considerable invested of effort to try and deliver sound outcomes against its aims of minimising loss of life and injury from fire; reduce deaths, injuries and damage from other than from fire; deliver community education; apply fire safety legislation; demonstrate continuous improvement; and be a good employer. This has led to the Authority meeting or exceeding the majority of its key targets. This approach to performance achievement has carried through to the development of a project plan designed to stretch the National Framework targets with the support of partner organisations. Local targets have also been met for campaigns created to address specific problems and these have proved to be effective. The Authority has also completely discharged a previous notice issued by the health and safety executive (HSE).
- 83 A systematic approach to delivering the community safety strategy is used. This includes structured campaigns and sound marketing and there is obvious commitment from staff who see community safety as one of their primary roles. Extensive and impressive dynamic modelling of risk is used effectively with good predictive analysis and demographic mapping to identify the more vulnerable. This resource is also used to correlate local and national data and has been put to good effect to focus on trends in operational incidents and create programmes to tackle them.
- 84 The Authority has successfully and solidly connected the agenda of the Fire Authority to those with a crime and disorder reduction focus. It is represented on all six community safety partnerships in the Authority area and the linkages between arson, criminal damage and anti-social behaviour are well-defined and understood down to station level. Access to funding support has resulted through the close working that exists and there has been a reduction in the number of arson and rubbish fires. This has made the wider social agenda part of the Authority's focus.
- 85 Performance against national attendance standards has been good and local standards of fire cover have been approved by the Authority – although not significantly different from the previous national standards.

- 86 The Authority is effective within the constraints that it operates. The operating costs of the Authority are affected by the predominant affluence of the area with its buoyant economy and high levels of employment. Even so, the Authority maintains pressure on the identification of efficiencies and actively seeks to redirect resources within the budgets wherever it can, particularly through its best value programme. The overall impact has been to contain costs which place the Authority 5th out of the 13 in its family group and 17th best nationally (BVPI 150).
- 87 Clarity of outcomes for local community safety projects are starting to provide stations with a framework to measure performance against. This helps offset the more generally limited data on the effectiveness of specific community safety campaigns which the Authority is actively trying to address.
- 88 The outsourcing of payroll, pension administration and vehicle maintenance all resulted from VFM consideration by the Authority. These have generated efficiencies and considerable savings
- 89 The involvement of stations in community safety activities is not yet as structured as it could be and this has been recognised by the Authority. A more integrated approach is being pursued but does not yet strategically guide the enthusiasm for involvement which exists at station level.

Achievement of improvement

- 90 This theme is scored by this assessment as ‘3’ – consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 91 Performance against national and local has improved over a three-year period and most performance indicators show an overall trend of service improvement. Improved performance has occurred with indicators addressing the number of malicious calls (BVPI 146) – improved from 1.2 per cent 2001/02, to 0.77 per cent 2003/04; the number of false alarms caused by automatic fire detection apparatus (BVPI 149) – improved from 210.7 2001/02, 195 2003/04; the percentage of staff from BME communities (BVPI 17) – 1.37 per cent 2001/02 to 2.7 per cent 2003/04, and the percentage of BME staff in the top 5 per cent of earners (BVPI 11b) – 0 per cent 2001/02 to 3.4 per cent 2003/04.
- 92 Whilst performance has improved locally it is more mixed when compared against the performance of comparator authorities in the same family. Performance has slipped on indicators such as the number of fire deaths (BVPI 143 i) – 0.37 per cent 2001/02, to 0.75 per cent 2003/04 and fire injuries (BVPI 143 ii) – 8.47 per cent 2001/02, to 10.1 2003/04; the number of fire calls (BVPI 142 i) – 64.78 2001/02, to 69.2 2003/04 and the percentage of women in the top 5 per cent of earners (BVPI 11a) – 21 per cent 2001/02 to 0 per cent 2003/04. There are indications that performance during the year 2004/05 has improved for a number of indicators but audited comparative information is not yet available.
- 93 A detailed understanding of changes in performance over time is generated through the sophisticated monitoring systems in place. Comprehensive information is readily available and used naturally throughout the Authority to help deliver the priority of continuous improvement. The reasons for success and failure for indicators are publicly available on the intranet and are set out in the BVPP. This approach allows all sections of the workforce to engage directly in creating improvements to performance within their own activities.

- 94 Initiatives such as hoax (malicious) call challenge have been particularly successful in the targeted areas and are starting to make a significant impact on the level of malicious calls. Others initiatives like BME recruitment are increasing the number of applications received and whilst clearly building trust and interest, are not yet delivering the target numbers desired by the Authority. Improvements in the approach to statutory fire safety have seen risk-based fire safety inspections increased by 220 per cent over two years. Partner involvement has been secured through activities in the CDRP, the LSP and with LPSA targets across all of the unitary authorities in the Authority area. The examples are typical of the searching and energetic approach that the Authority is investing to create improvements.
- 95 Improvements have been aided by robust performance management. Local community fire safety initiatives have led to a drop in call outs for targeted incidents such as lock up garage fires, barn fires and rubbish fires. Other good local community safety initiatives are also making an impact on the wider community safety agenda such as with the ‘Live for your Girlfriend’ project on road accidents. These initiatives show the effectiveness of locally generated projects drawing directly on the data that is available and being converted into achievements that impact on the community.
- 96 Communities do not have a high level of knowledge of the Authority’s performance and changed role and efforts are been made to address this through the well-structured communications strategy. An integrated approach to engaging hard-to-reach groups is in place with concerted activity from the specialist staff in the Authority. There is progressively improving contact, particularly through some of the initiatives and schemes mentioned previously in the report. Difficulties exist with the identification of the public view of the quality of fire safety services and there is no feedback system in place to determine customer satisfaction.

Future plans

- 97 This theme is scored by this assessment as ‘4’ – well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 98 Robust future plans and strategies exist with the corporate plan firmly linked to the IRMP and the community safety plan. The eight IRMP projects form the basis of the BVPP and are lodged in the performance management system which links the whole of the strategic approach into the day-to-day activity of the Authority. This approach is complimented by a well-structured analytical service that exists within the Authority and which generates intelligence and data to forecast future trends and likely issues.
- 99 Plans and strategies are effectively reviewed. A structured system exists with the key plans having formal review periods built into and monitored through the performance management system. This ensures that documents remain relevant to the delivery of the Authority’s priorities.
- 100 Strategic finance issues which may impact on the future are being managed well. Potential financial pressures, with among other things pensions, insurance and legal challenges have been researched and identified and addressed within the MTFS. Long-term targets due for delivery in 2010 have been stretched to obtain delivery by 2008. This is preparing the Authority well to meet future demands.

- 101 Self-awareness is a real strength of the Authority and it has a firm understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. This has been helped by the use of EFQM over a number of years. Priorities to improve future performance coming from this awareness and already under way are:
- ◆ building relationships with local communities – considerable effort has been invested to pursue approaches and new avenues are continually being explored;
 - ◆ improvements to the community safety scheme which will see tailored station-based plans introduced to focus community safety activities flexibly on the risks identified from local performance data;
 - ◆ instituting a review to strengthen scrutiny's role;
 - ◆ recognised that the pace of change will be much greater in the coming years and that proposed changes to the organisational structure will require a thorough review of affected policies and procedure; and
 - ◆ a review of all property holdings to assist decisions with the future deployment of resources and the value of and alternative complementary uses for sites.
- 102 External challenge is welcomed within the Authority. An example is the response to the challenge of the HSE improvement notice which has been effective and long-term with continuation of the principles beyond the discharge date. It has stimulated a similar thought process for other authority activities. In a similar vein a responsible and considered approach is shown by inclusion of identified improvement items in documents for public consumption. There is a noticeable lack of defensiveness in the Authority's dealings and this assists in the way that challenge is received. This is increasing the Authority's ability to improvement.
- 103 The Authority is effective at learning from others. Exchanges of information and good practice with other authorities and agencies are regularly carried out. The Authority is often asked to share its learning with others and has also sought out and taken up ideas from elsewhere. For example, ideas on improving recruitment of women were borrowed from a Scottish authority. The Authority operates other information sharing fora such as the fire training collaboration group, the scope project, the NVQ development process, PB views and the Thames Valley uniform procurement initiative which all contribute to service improvement.
- 104 Impressive internal changes resulted from the lessons learnt from the 2000/01 special appliance industrial action, since when the Authority has very effectively sought to get all interested parties involved with the detailed working and thinking behind new initiatives before moving ahead with changes. This has been effective in smoothing the way through the delivery of the first two IRMP action plans.
- 105 Internally there are sound mechanisms for the exchange of information, including operational incident debriefs which identify improvements that are fed into the training and development system. Good two-way exchanges of information also exist between managers and staff with contributions getting a good response. This allows ideas to be cultivated within the brigade and then adopted on a wider basis and provides a solid foundation for future initiatives. By routes such as these innovation has recognisably been allowed to flourish.

- 106 Innovation is encouraged and staff are allowed to develop initiatives and present them for adoption as service-wide policy, for example, the home fire safety visits. Some innovative schemes used by the Authority include retained station recruitment mapping profiles to identify the impact of extending time responses and the catchments profile, home fire risk assessments and using the fire watch HR system to hold comprehensive information concerning personnel which allows effective decision-making and a volunteer trauma support crew. In these ways the Authority has gained benefit towards future improvement.

Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses

A – What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Leadership and priorities Score 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear consistently expressed shared vision. • Priorities of other agencies sought out and included. • Good engagement throughout with openness and a lack of confrontation. • Extensive internal communication. • Non-priorities have been identified using a risk assessed approach. 	
A balanced strategy Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well structured and integrated strategic documents. • Comprehensive local analysis and dynamic updating. • Enthusiastic involvement with CDRP and LSP. • Good community engagement with sound communications strategy. • Consistent emphasis on equality and diversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRMP not yet addressed the major drivers for changes and efficiencies. • Changed role of the Authority not widely recognised externally.

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 governance structures. • Well briefed members and clear roles. • Well-focused on the IRMP priorities. • Prepared to take difficult decisions and seek out sustainable solutions. • Members work well with officers with effective decision-making. • Staff are empowered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutiny not yet fully mature. • Strategic engagement with the RMB is low key. • Unfilled deputy head of finance post creating pressures.

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Capacity: Resources and value for money</p> <p>Score 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority in a healthy financial position. • Members involvement in monthly monitoring of budgetary performance. • Value for money issues routinely considered and resources targeted to problem areas. • Partnership working is effective and well-supported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkages between MTFP financial strategy and priorities still maturing. • Short-term business planning by managers. • Lacks partnership working strategy and success/failure criteria.
<p>Capacity: People</p> <p>Score 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPDS is being used effectively. • Understands the mix of staff needed to deliver services. • Use of able specialists in key managerial positions. • Robust HR strategy and policies. • Flexible, friendly integrated workforce. • Strong commitment to equality and diversity, fully supported by senior managers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing levels, work loads and multi-role managers are creating capacity pressure.
<p>Performance management</p> <p>Score 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well structured risk management systems extensively used. • Robust performance systems with full access to all. • SMART targets used and evaluated and monitored by members and managers. • Sound project management skills. • Regular appraisals and performance discussions. 	

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"> • Delivering sound outcomes against strategic aims. • Community safety strategy has systematic approach to campaigns. • Good linkages to LSP's. • Project plan to stretch the national framework targets. • Payroll, pensions administration and vehicle maintenance outsourced. • Dynamic modelling of risk focuses on trends in calls and corrective programmes. • Accessing funding through partnership working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low comparative performance on fire deaths; fire injuries; malicious calls and false alarms to automatic fire detection systems.
Achievement of improvement Score 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trend of improvement trend over three years. • Successful initiatives on hoax calls, increasing statutory fire safety inspections and BME recruitment. • Reasons for success and failure against targets are well-understood. • Local community fire safety initiatives have led to a drop in call outs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance on AFAs and malicious calls not improving in line with family group. • Communities lack awareness of Authority performance and changed role.
Future plans Score 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate plan matched to IRMP with good linkages to BVPP. • Future plans informed by sound research capability. • Potential financial pressures identified. • Systematic review of plans and strategies in place. • Self-aware with firm understanding of strengths and weaknesses. • External challenge and learning used constructively. 	

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

107 Appointed auditors were asked to score five areas, which 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	4	<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

- 108 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.
- 109 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.
- 110 The assessment for Royal Berkshire Fire Authority was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 3 to 10 February 2005.
- 111 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.