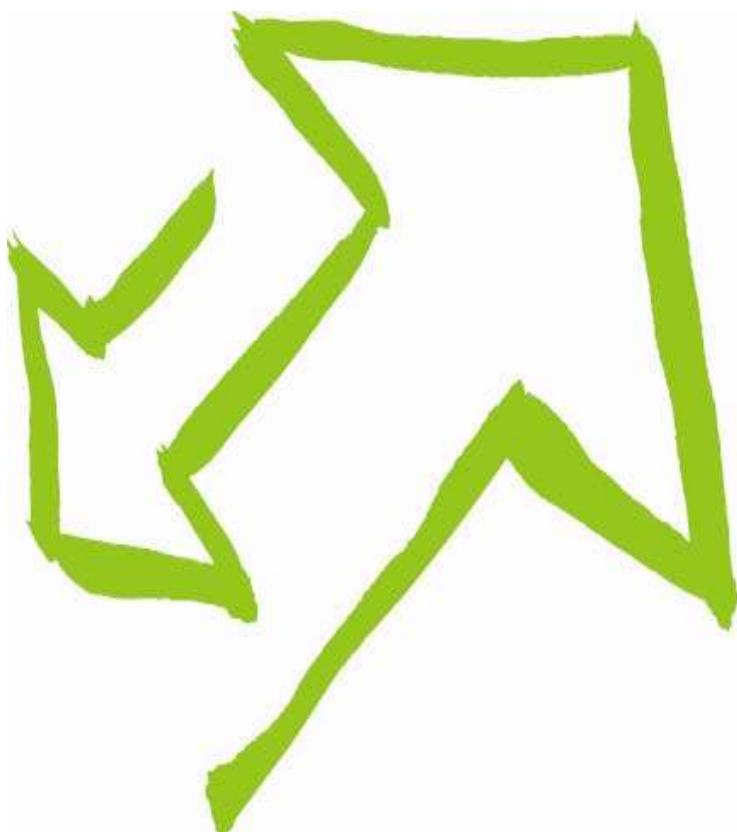


Corporate Assessment

Northamptonshire Fire Authority
January 2009



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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the FRA engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of FRA activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement and Improvement

Executive summary

- 3 Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Authority is improving and is now a 'Fair' service.
- 4 The Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) has worked hard to recover from its 'Weak' rating in 2005. It has a well-regarded member and officer leadership, motivated staff, an improved understanding of its communities and a track record of engaging in effective cross-cutting work with partners. It recognises the challenge to meet the complex and interrelated needs of its residents and is anticipating the challenges that will come with the projected significant population growth in the future. Its engagement with the wider aims of the County Council are now increasingly understood and valued. This manifests itself, among other things, in an enhanced community safety role for the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) at a county and regional level.
- 5 The FRA ambitions take into account national, regional and local priorities, including the need to deliver the requirements of the Fire and Rescue National Framework. These are supported by a range of corporate and service strategies, including the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP). This is underpinned by a good understanding of risk, demography and local need.
- 6 The FRA gives priority to issues that matter most to the community, but does not prioritise in a way that ensures that ambitions can always be effectively delivered. The emphasis on prevention as well as protection and response, and the increasingly effective integration of the three, is now widely understood by partners and other stakeholders. The FRA makes an increasingly valued contribution to multi-agency working, enabling access to homes for home fire safety checks in increasing numbers by addressing wider community concerns such as home safety and anti-social behaviour. But ambitions are not consistently set against capacity to produce a clear sense of what is an achievable priority, and what is not, leading to overstretch, particularly in delivery of programmes in the community, such as Home Fire Safety Checks. Prioritisation works best at a strategic level, with business planning and target setting sometimes failing to meet the high standards of the IRMP. The priority attached to equality and diversity issues is not fully reflected in business planning.
- 7 Capacity has been enhanced, but there is still significant overstretch, particularly in respect of the Retained Duty System (RDS). RDS Capacity problems require a continuous investment of senior time and effort to maintain adequate levels of operational capability. Members champion the aims of the service in local and regional forums. Financial management is good. Value for money has improved and is now also good. Financial savings targets have been exceeded. Organisational development has been improved, staff have been empowered, but areas of human resource weakness persist, such as sickness levels, staff development, and retention and recruitment. The approach to both asset management and procurement is generally sound but not strategic. The work on equalities and diversity, despite past investments in process, lacks focus and momentum. The service has a good track record on recruiting women to senior positions. More generally the workforce does not adequately reflect the community it serves.

Executive summary

- 8** Performance management has improved, but remains only adequate. Component parts of a robust system exist, and have contributed to improvement, but have not been combined to best effect. Monitoring processes are effective. But the performance culture is not embedded at all levels. Target setting is inconsistent. Performance and financial management are not integrated. Benchmarking occurs, but is not consistently applied at key stages of the performance process. New standards of operational response are in place, but lack performance indicators to evaluate their implementation. There is little evidence of sustained impact from internal challenge, including from elected members. Performance management of partnerships is generally strong, and the FRA is open to external scrutiny. .
- 9** The FRA is achieving well against its key priorities but has not made a step change in improving performance across the board. The FRA has continued to work to, and meet the previous national standards of operational response. It has recently devised new and more challenging local standards. A sustained focus on Children and Young People has made the authority a key partner in successful multi-agency efforts to improve the quality of life in the community, especially in areas of high multiple deprivation, reducing avoidable injuries and incidents of arson and anti-social behaviour. It has made headway in ensuring greater compliance with fire safety legislation, especially in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). The service has been a key contributor to improved resilience, including regionally. The last three years have seen an improvement in most performance indicators (PIs) but the rate of improvement has generally been insufficient to make up for past under-performance. As a result, around 60 per cent of PIs are below the national average.
- 10** Satisfaction with the FRA's services is high. The national satisfaction survey in 2006/07 showed that 71 per cent of the local population were satisfied or very satisfied with the service, putting the FRA in the top quartile nationally. The FRA is working to consolidate its reputation further through improved engagement and consultation processes.

Areas for improvement

- 11** The service needs to re-energise and mainstream its approach to equality and diversity. A refreshed strategy is urgently required. Community engagement programmes need to give due priority to equality and diversity issues. A more concerted effort is needed to attract job applications from people with disabilities, and from minority ethnic backgrounds. Community-based programmes specifically targeted at these groups could, among other things, act as a driver for this.
- 12** A robust and comprehensive strategy is needed to resolve the longstanding challenge of RDS under-capacity. Many of the constituent elements of this are already in place. Now all of the factors involved, including a detailed cost/benefit analysis of the effectiveness of retention and recruitment approaches on a locality by locality basis, need to be brought together into a single persuasive strategy that establishes a clear basis for bidding for extra resources and/or further internal reprioritisation.
- 13** The performance management systems require consolidation and further enhancement. The lower links in the business planning chain need to be strengthened to ensure that the performance culture is embedded at all levels. Benchmarking data needs to consistently influence both target setting and performance assessment, for example by incorporation into the balanced scorecard. The strategic integration of financial and performance management needs to carry through to analyses that map trends in performance against priority and cost. Challenge, including from members, needs to be more rigorous, and aimed at higher rates of improvement.
- 14** A strategic approach to procurement and asset management needs to be put in place and implemented to maximise any synergies locally and regionally. This could also strengthen the case of a RDS capacity-building strategy by demonstrating that all possible efficiencies are already being secured elsewhere.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	2
CPA category		
Fair		
*Key to scores		
1 – Below minimum requirements – inadequate performance 2 – At only minimum requirements – adequate performance 3 – Consistently above minimum requirements – performing well 4 – Well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

Scoring rules for determining CPA category

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

Context

The locality

- 15** Northamptonshire County lies in the heart of England. It borders seven other counties and is the most southern county in the East Midlands, covering an area of some 236,000 hectares. Its total population of around 680,000 resides in seven boroughs and districts.
- 16** The County is a mixture of urban and rural. The large town of Northampton has around 200,000 people; smaller but growing market towns and wide rural areas combine picturesque villages with areas of deprivation. Of the total population, 4.9 per cent is Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), which is above the regional average of 4.1 per cent but below the national average of 5.9 per cent. There are much higher proportions of BME communities in the towns of Wellingborough and Northampton and a growing population of new EU migrants, many of them from Poland. Over a hundred languages are spoken in the County. The share of the population with a limiting long-term illness or disability is 15.5 per cent, lower than the national figure.
- 17** Northamptonshire has more young people 0 to 15 year olds (20.1 per cent) than both the regional (18.8 per cent) and national (19.1 per cent) averages. The same is true of working age people, which at 62.9 per cent, is slightly higher than both regional and national averages. Northamptonshire has significantly less older people, which at 17 per cent, is 2.1 per cent less than the regional and 1.6 per cent less than the national averages.
- 18** Median gross weekly pay for full time workers living in Northamptonshire is £455.10, higher than the regional average (by £25.40) but lower than the national average by £3.90. According to the Indices of Deprivation 2007, Northamptonshire is ranked 112th- out of 149 county and unitary authorities (1 = most deprived). The main pockets of multiple deprivation are in areas of Northampton, Corby and Wellingborough.
- 19** There is a significant concentration of major roads running through the County, including 73 miles of motorway and 227 miles of non-motorway traffic, with a steady increase in the volume of traffic since 1991. Being sited in the 'M1 corridor', there is a high concentration of large industrial areas that form part of the 19,000 or so non-domestic properties within the County.
- 20** Northamptonshire is within the Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) growth area. The government's regional strategy projects an increase in the number of homes in the county, which currently stands at around 275,000, by nearly 100,000 by 2021, rising to 166,000 by 2031. This growth will be concentrated in two areas; the north of the county around Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough, and the West, focussing on Northampton, Towcester and Daventry. The population of the county is projected to rise by 27 per cent over the same period.

The Fire and Rescue Authority

- 21** Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is a local authority service and part of the recently formed Customer and Community Services Group of Northamptonshire County Council, having previously formed part of the Protection Services Group. The fire and rescue service was established in 1974, following the amalgamation of Northampton Borough and Northamptonshire County Council Fire Brigades. It is governed by the Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004.
- 22** Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) comprises 73 elected members, of which 45 are Conservative, 21 Labour and 7 Liberal Democrat. All 73 comprise the Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA). Cross party involvement in the FRA is sustained through the work of the IRMP sub-Committee and the Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee. The Cabinet member for Community Safety has had continuous responsibility for the Fire Service since May 2005, when the Council became Conservative-led, and has overseen the transition of the service from its previous role in the public protection group to its current place within Customer and Community Services. Within that Directorate, the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) is head of protective services including fire and rescue, trading standards, emergency planning and registration services. In June 2008, as part of the ongoing 'Effective Leadership review' within the County Council, the CFO was additionally given responsibility for the council's entire community safety remit, including line management responsibilities for the Drugs and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT).
- 23** The revenue budget for the fire and rescue service in 2007/08 was £23.8 million, which approximates to £35.50 per head of local population, the fifth lowest cost in the country. The County Council is committed to maintaining front line services in the FRS while seeking efficiencies in line with agreed targets.
- 24** The service currently employs a total of 634 staff, which comprises 303 whole-time uniformed staff, 230 retained firefighters, 18 fire control staff and 81 support staff. Fire and rescue cover for the County is currently provided from 22 fire stations. Three stations are solely whole-time, three have a mix of whole-time and RDS, two with a mix of variable duty system (VDS) and RDS and a further 14 are staffed on an RDS basis. In total, there are 28 pumping appliances, plus six reserve appliances, together with a further 9 specialist appliances (including support vehicles such as a water bowser, aerial appliances, an all-terrain heavy lifting vehicle (UNIMOG) and an incident command vehicle).
- 25** The Fire Authority attended 9,464 incidents in 2007/08, comprising 1,745 primary fires, 1,704 secondary fires, 1,306 special service incidents and 638 Road Traffic Collisions. Other attendances related to automatic fire alarms of 2,681 and 107 chimney fires.

26 Historically, Northamptonshire has been a low-spending authority and for many years, the fire service had the lowest expenditure per head in the country. A consistently difficult relationship between the service and the County Council over a number of years meant that fire service interests were not well-represented and the necessary investment in equipment and people was not made. Since the 2005 CPA the fire and rescue service has been improving integration with the county council and that this has gathered further momentum since the appointment of the new Chief Executive. The fire and rescue service has begun to be more closely integrated into the ongoing processes of restructuring and reinvigoration of the County Council, with the importance of their role and credibility within the community now more clearly recognised and valued. That sense of value is reflected in a much more visible political commitment to the fire service, both in terms of the positive public statements of the leadership and in increases in budget allocation at a time of retrenchment elsewhere across the Council. It is also reflected in the close alignment of the Fire Service's strategic priorities to the four strategic objectives of the Council.

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 27** The Fire and Rescue Service is performing well in this area. The clear vision for the community is based on a broad understanding of local risks and needs, though the knowledge of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities is not consistently detailed. The IRMP is strategic and action oriented, with a robust underpinning of risk profiling and data sharing. Member and officer leadership continues to develop with good commitment to tackling the wider social issues of the area. Ambitions reflect national and local agendas well. Member engagement is generally good, and consideration is being given to new processes to sharpen the focus. The Fire and Rescue Service has robust mechanisms for risk and demographic profiling and is working closely with partners, including Councils across the county and the third sector, to anticipate future challenges arising from the growth agenda. It provides clear leadership for the community, and contributes significantly to tackling social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and community safety, though in the early stages, delivery did not always keep up with demand. Staff at all levels are well engaged with strategy, the internal consultation process for the development of the IRMP being particularly thorough and resulting in engagement by workforce representatives.
- 28** The IRMP is strategic and action-oriented, and is based on shared data and needs assessment. It has been drawn up in accordance with national guidance, with the benefit of extensive risk profiling. It clearly articulates the service's four strategic goals, which cover improvements in preventative and protection work in the community, improved response to emergencies, maximised efficiency and improved capacity, and organisational development to improve delivery. Each of these is underpinned by action plans for the reduction of fires, deaths and injuries from fires and other emergencies. The IRMP incorporates analysis about projected demographic change in the county and directs action planning accordingly. It also develops a strategy for building capacity and structures that anticipate the introduction of a Regional Control Centre (RCC) in 2010. As a result, the IRMP provides the basis for long term as well as short and medium term planning.
- 29** The Fire and Rescue Service has a clear vision based on a broad understanding of local risks and needs which links closely to the wider ambitions for the County. The IRMP, in setting out its vision for the future, establishes clear links between the Fire and Rescue Service's ambitions and those of the Sustainable Communities Strategy, the Local Area Agreement and the Community Safety Strategy, as well as the four main strategic goals of the County Council. These are then related across to the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services. This provides a clear, shared focus to help the service improve outcomes across a broad range of activities in partnership with the County Council and other statutory agencies.

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 30** Member engagement is generally good, with new processes to further enhance this now under consideration. Members are engaged at a number of levels. The cabinet member works closely with the service at both a strategic and operational level. The cross party IRMP Sub Committee has enabled members to bring their specialist knowledge to bear on strategic policy and performance issues well beyond their original limited remit. The Stronger Community Scrutiny group has played a less engaged oversight role. Councillors of all parties demonstrate a strong commitment and passion for improvement and modernisation of the service which, after years of financial constraint, they are now supporting with adequate financial resources. As a result the service is well led politically.
- 31** Partnership working is strong and is outcome oriented. The service makes an effective contribution to a wide range of community outcomes but delivery does not always keep up with demand. The key role the service plays in countywide strategic oversight groups, such as the Safer Communities Board, the Partnership and Renewal Oversight Group (PROG) and the Casualty Reduction Partnership is widely recognised by partners. The impact on the ground of its growing involvement in neighbourhood renewal is recognised and valued in towns with areas of high multiple deprivation, such as Corby. Fire service programmes such as Action Reaction Consequence (ARC) and Young Firefighters, and the joint work with the Police in the Arson Task Force have had a significant impact on participating young people at risk of offending, or re-offending, and secondary vehicle fires. Partnership working is regularly reviewed using a toolkit developed in house and exit strategies are developed for programmes of declining importance. The strength and success of this partnership working makes a real difference locally, but also increases demand for yet more engagement which overstretches capacity.
- 32** Leadership is visible and strong, but work in the community does not take sufficient account of the needs of ethnically diverse communities. Within the service, the CFO has led by example, both through his advocacy of a transparent and constructive approach to strategy making, and through his regular engagement with crews including training exercises with them, known as the 'Chief's Challenge'. In the community, and especially in areas of high multiple deprivation, strong leadership is apparent from the high regard local people have for the effectiveness of the service's consistently productive input into partnership working. However the service ambitions do not make sufficient specific provision for ethnically diverse communities. The visible and strong leadership which is generally manifest cannot therefore guarantee that the service meets the needs of all local communities.

Prioritisation

- 33** The service is performing adequately in this area. The robust business planning framework effectively translates vision and ambitions to specific priorities underpinned by needs and risk assessments. The authority has a track record of making difficult choices about the use of scarce resources. Prioritisation is based on a holistic vision of service delivery that integrates protection, prevention and response. Target setting does not consistently live up to the high standards of the IRMP. Consultation with partners and with the community is good, though sometimes, the impact of consultation is unclear and more needs to be done with minority ethnic communities. Emergency response plans are in place, on the back of operational agreements with other responders, and these are regularly reviewed to drive improvements. Action planning is responsive to changes in context and priority, but a number of key authority strategies, such as the Equality and Diversity strategy are out of date.
- 34** The business planning framework effectively translates vision and ambitions to specific priorities underpinned by needs and risk assessments. The four strategic goals of the service cascade down into a number of sub-priorities, which are then used as the basis for business planning. The risk profiling support for business planning includes FSEC as well as other risk mapping tools such as Phoenix, which facilitate proactive as well as empirical analysis. Shared data and needs assessments are factored in from the countywide intelligence analysis unit CoMPaSS. All this creates a coherent basis for prioritisation in a format that is accessible to staff, stakeholders and users, and which links back to the overall vision of both the service and the County Council. As a result there is a sound foundation on which to build the rest of the business planning process.
- 35** The sound foundations of the business planning framework are not built upon consistently. Target setting in the business plans does not always live up to the high standards of the IRMP. Ambitions are not consistently set against capacity to produce a clear sense of what is an achievable priority and what is not leading to overstretch, particularly in delivery of programmes in the community such as Home Fire Safety Checks. Key information about performance indicators and costs are not routinely integrated into all business plans. For example the operations business plan for 2008/09 sets out the improvement objectives and how they link to corporate plans and objectives. Tasks are detailed quarterly with assigned responsibilities and target dates. But the costing of the IRMP does not cascade down to allocate resources to each task, and there is no key performance indicator information. All this means that the opportunity to use the business planning process to secure a better fit between ambition and capacity and drive improvement in key priorities at a higher rate is not fully exploited.

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 36** Consultation with partners and stakeholders is generally good. The service is closely engaged with neighbourhoods with high levels of multiple deprivation but has yet to establish clear channels of communication with most BME and other diverse communities. Consultation processes on community safety are based on a service consultation strategy which was refreshed in December 2007. More informal consultation with partners and the public flows from the involvement of the service in the six Crime Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) across the county. The CFO chairs the countywide Safer Communities Board and the District Liaison Officers are embedded with the local Borough Councils, overseeing, among other things, the Service Level Agreements (SLAs) which establish a joint approach to fire safety in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). The thread from consultation to reprioritisation and delivery is clear in most cases but the impact of consultation on delivery planning is not always apparent. All this means that the generally good consultation is neither fully effective nor inclusive.
- 37** The service has a track record of making difficult choices, and seeing those decisions through to successful conclusion. The new Standards of Operational Response are a good example of this. An innovative approach based around operational need and regional controls had been taken, instead of the traditional model of numbers of pumps. This was much more difficult to plan and develop, involving painstaking internal consultation and negotiation. But the successful adoption of these new standards will provide a basis for identifying improvement opportunities and will help facilitate preparations for the introduction of the Regional Control Centre in 2010.
- 38** Prioritisation is based on a holistic vision of service that is increasingly delivered in partnership. Prevention has been successfully re-prioritised to the point where delivery now integrates protection, prevention and response. This has been facilitated by internal restructuring which has seen the creation of Community Risk Teams, now refocused as Community Risk Groups (CRGs), which ensure an effective balance between the three. Partnership is also central to this integration process with clear links between the CRGs and the community safety groupings that exist at all levels across the County. The 'Building Communities' initiative in Kettering, for example, had looked at the full range of challenges of prevention, protection and response in the context of a wider multi-agency programme in an area of high multiple deprivation. This, and similar projects elsewhere in the County, ensure that the partnership effort in local communities takes full account of all three priority strands of fire service work.
- 39** Emergency response standards are in place, on the back of operational agreements with other responders, and these are regularly reviewed to drive improvement. Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with both the East Midlands Ambulance Service (EMAS) and the Environment Agency underpin an increasingly close partnership with both bodies. The co-responding arrangements with EMAS work well in practice, with the fire service taking a positive and constructive approach to all issues, strategic and operational. There are plans in place to further expand this. The pattern of co-operation with the EA is equally positive and again further enhancements are planned. This ensures that co-responding remains a high priority and continues to further enhance capacity. .

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 40** Action planning is responsive to changes in context and priority, but key strategies do not always keep pace, resulting in a loss of impetus and focus. The service is quick to make changes that pick up on new intelligence; for example the identification of a need for youth diversionary activity by the multi-agency North Northants Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Unit led to the targeted introduction of the Young Firefighter scheme. But the translation of change into strategic direction does not always keep pace, and a number of key authority strategies, such as Equality and Diversity, are out of date.

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 41** The FRS is performing adequately in this area, but has a number of issues to address if further improvement is to be delivered. Corporate governance arrangements are being developed. The leadership promotes openness, support and respect. Corporate, service and operational planning takes due account of risk. The service makes good use of its resources. Managerial and leadership skills across the service have improved, especially at senior levels but inconsistencies remain elsewhere, giving rise to pockets of low morale. The service has taken a strategic approach to partnering through the Regional Management Board (RMB) and has contributed significantly to regional partnerships. Procurement and asset management processes are sound but lack strategic direction. Human Resources policies have been updated. Workforce planning and development is more rigorous but the impact of these improvements has not yet been fully felt; retained duty capacity has been strengthened in recent years, but weaknesses persist which put sustained pressure on operational capability. The service's commitment to equality and diversity is reflected in an array of processes and procedures but actual delivery has not as yet matched the ambition.
- 42** Corporate governance arrangements are being developed to provide sound strategic leadership. There are examples of all party engagement through the IRMP Sub Committee which scrutinises plans to ensure challenging targets are in place. However, opposition members lack a regular flow of timely management information which may impact on their willingness to support service delivery and continuous improvement. Corporate governance arrangements, though effective, are therefore not fully robust.
- 43** The service leadership promotes openness, support and respect and uses this to secure positive change. A number of potentially difficult issues from variable crewing through to personnel issues such as rank to role and job-sizing have been addressed. The new Standards of Operational Response were successfully secured by means of the involvement of a cross party group of members from the IRMP Sub Group and by engaging closely, consistently and openly with both service managers and representative bodies. This approach, as with other difficult issues, has ensured a strong common understanding of the issues involved and has secured a broad based commitment to service modernisation.

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 44 Corporate service and operational planning takes due account of risk. The County Council Risk Management Protocol has been adopted by the service. Business risks are reviewed quarterly through corporate quarterly performance reviews, which involve members and county council officers as well as heads of service. This carries across to similar reviews by senior management and ensures that risk management cascades down effectively into corporate, service and project planning. There is a consistent emphasis on, and commitment to effective risk profiling and management which is apparent throughout the organisation.
- 45 Managerial and leadership skills across the service have improved but the strength at senior levels is not fully reflected throughout the service. Strategic capacity has been significantly strengthened by the recent restructuring. Matrix management has been introduced to create multiple lines of accountability to bolster established patterns of cross team working. Some operational line managers have struggled to come to terms with increased responsibilities, and wider terms of reference. This weakens the lines of communication across the organisation, blunts the overall effectiveness of the recent improvements and creates pockets of low morale. .
- 46 Training and development has been standardised and made more robust. Joint working with Lincolnshire FRA has resulted in the creation of a common competency based training framework for both RDS and WDS. This creates a common standard for all crews. Specialist training involving key external partners such as East Midlands Ambulance Service and the Environment Agency has been delivered, with further integration of skills training planned. Leadership and management training has been delivered for senior staff as part of the ongoing effort to develop strategic resilience. For example through senior management attendance at 'Gold' training courses. Further training and development of middle management is planned through the ILM management development programme. All this means that the workforce continues to develop its skills in line with changing need.
- 47 The service makes good use of its financial resources. Budgets are closely monitored and managed, with an Internal Finance Network Group challenging all new spending bids. This tight control is being further enhanced by the introduction of new corporate financial systems at the County Council. Where possible costs are reduced by sharing with other organisations, for example through joint working with other fire authorities. The service exceeded its Gershon financial savings targets for 2007/08 by 50 per cent. There is consistent focus on value for money, which was reflected in the improved 'good' score in last year's assessment by the Audit Commission. A clear political commitment to sustaining and if possible increasing future financial capacity has been reflected in the recent opening exchanges on the Council's draft medium term financial strategy 2009 to 2013. This creates a sound financial management platform for decision-making.

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- 48** Retained duty capacity has been strengthened in recent years, but weaknesses persist. Following a fundamental review, crewing levels have been raised to around 90 per cent, operational capability has been made much more predictable through the use of the RAPPEL system, variable crewing has been introduced to buttress capacity, and detailed monitoring of shortfalls are monitored on a shift by shift and station by station basis. There has been good progress in bringing the retained and whole time delivery systems closer through the use of whole time staff on secondary retained contracts. Recruitment and retention policies have been overhauled and improved. Last year, 41 retained staff left, and 51 were recruited. Yet despite all these efforts, RDS capacity remains a key challenge for the service requiring a disproportionate investment of time and effort on the part of senior management to maintain adequate levels of operational capability.
- 49** The service has taken a strategic approach to partnering through the Regional Management Board, and has contributed significantly to regional partnerships. The Cabinet member, supported by one of her colleagues, regularly attends the RMB and senior officers contribute regionally, for example the CFO, who chairs the regional resilience work-stream led on the establishment of a regional Water Agreement between the regional water authorities, which through standardisation of policy, procedures and training, aims for a more seamless response to regional fire service needs.
- 50** Procurement and asset management processes are sound, but they are not integrated into a strategic approach that meets the wider objectives of the service. The service's sound approach to procurement and asset management emphasises and delivers value for money. But a wider strategic approach that takes due account of the regional strategy developed in conjunction with East Midland colleagues and the new National Procurement Strategy for FRS, is still in draft, and is likely to remain so until 2009. The components of a sound approach are already in place, in terms of fleet, property and ICT strategies, but have not been integrated into an overarching strategy and, whilst working well in practice, lack impetus.
- 51** The service's commitment to a proactive approach to equality and diversity is clear but actual delivery has not matched ambition. The service aspires towards level 3 of the Local Government Equality Standard on the basis of the processes and procedures that it has put in place but implementation falls short of this. It has worked with partners to produce a regional equality and diversity strategy. A Diversity Action Group (DAG) has been established. An innovative approach to multi-tier entry has been a contributory factor in the increase of female high earners in service to 16.7 per cent. Targets are under review against the recently published national fire service equality and diversity strategy and the county council's community cohesion strategy. Policy implementation stalled in 2007 due to staff shortages. Equality Impact Assessments are not used systematically across the authority. Awareness training has not been consistently updated, and employment of people with disabilities and from BME groups remains very low, with both firmly bottom quartile.

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

52 Human Resources policies have been updated with a much more rigorous approach to workforce planning and development, though there is still further work to be done to ensure full coverage of personal development and appraisal among firefighters. The service makes use of different types of working arrangements to improve capacity and work life balance. It has a flexible working policy and staff have the opportunity to flex their hours to meet their needs. IPDS has been embedded across all uniformed personnel but PADP has not been rolled out to all firefighters. Sickness rates, though improved, remain high. Sickness absence levels fell consistently from 2003/04 to just above the national average - 8.29 days against 7.9 - but a slight rise in 2007/08 has prompted further remedial action. The net effect of all these changes, incomplete though they are, has been to modernise the approach to organisational development, enhancing capacity and improving work/life balance.

Performance management

53 The service is performing adequately in this area. Components of a robust performance framework are in place, but the lack of impact of existing processes of integration reduces impact. Performance monitoring is regular and increasingly effective, with robust information available across the service. Financial and performance management processes are well established but run in parallel. Benchmarking data is collected and analysed but not routinely incorporated into performance management. The fire and rescue service regularly reviews performance with its partner organisations to share good practice and learn from others. Performance in key partnerships is well managed. The fire and rescue service is adopting a more proactive response to dealing with complaints, complements and comments and is positioned to benefit significantly from new corporate council performance management and feedback processes. Members are engaged in performance improvement but the impact of their intervention has been on enhancing capacity to deliver.

54 Systems of financial and performance management are integrated at the strategic level, through the IRMP. But this integration is not used to generate analyses that set performance against cost and priority. As a result, the strengths of the monitoring, review and financial management systems do not fully carry across to performance management.

55 Performance monitoring and review is regular and systematic, and leads to performance improvement. Performance reports regularly update citizens, staff and partners about the progress being made. Performance indicators are assessed monthly by the Senior Management Team (SMT) and the Tactical Leadership Team (TLT) using a balanced scorecard approach. There are quarterly reviews of performance against priorities. These include challenge by a Principal Officer unconnected to the service being assessed. Action is taken in areas where performance is deemed to be at risk. For example the successful measures to increase RDS capacity. Action is also taken to address weak performance. For example on sickness the TLT set up a sub-group to assess the underlying problems and recommend corrective action. These processes ensure that any performance issues that arise are addressed promptly.

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- 56** The component elements of a robust performance management framework are all in place but have not been combined in a way that maximises their impact. Business planning establishes clear links from ambition through to achievement but the links in the internal chain down to personal objectives become progressively weaker. An inconsistent approach to annual staff appraisal means that some staff, for example at watch manager level, are unclear about how their work contributes to the aims and objectives of the fire service. Target setting is insufficiently challenging to bring about a step change in performance from the historic low base. Despite a proactive approach to benchmarking, including membership of several benchmarking groups, including the chair of the FRA family group, comparative data has a limited impact on target setting and performance management. As a result performance management is delivering improvements at a rate to match most other FRAs but the historic gap in achievement remains.
- 57** Financial management and performance management systems are well established, but are not integrated, thereby inhibiting effective reprioritisation of spending. The Internal Fire Finance Network involving all budget holders meets to agree priorities and set budgets. The business planning process cascades strategic priorities down to service and individual priorities. But the two processes are not combined, either at the strategic level in the IRMP or in the service level business plans. Senior managers are aware of the links between the two and bring about integration in their decision-making. But without clear links between the two systems at all stages of the planning cycle the link between resources and priorities cannot be clearly established making it difficult to effectively shift resources to respond to performance concerns.
- 58** Performance in key partnerships is well managed. The fire service reviews performance with its partner organisations to share good practice and learn from others. Key programmes across the county are regularly monitored and assessed to ensure that targets are met with corrective action being commissioned as necessary. For example the Fire Service is now an active participant in the countywide Casualty Reduction Partnership (CRP) which has a robust oversight structure that assesses performance in statistics for people killed and seriously injured (KSI) on the county's roads. These oversight mechanisms at both strategic and operational level commission improvement work as appropriate from specialised supporting sub-groups that target high risk groups such as young drivers. This focused approach has ensured that government targets for KSI have consistently been exceeded locally. A similarly rigorous approach is taken to key neighbourhood renewal projects that the fire service is engaged with, using standardised processes to review performance against targets such as primary and secondary deliberate fires and completion of Home Fire Safety Checks (HSFCs). The previous backlog has been effectively tackled. By these means, robust performance management across key partnership is driving local improvements.

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- 59** The service uses internal and external scrutiny and evaluation to improve performance. A Peer Review was conducted by IDeA in May 2008 and its recommendations are now being implemented. The service has initiated a number of internal reviews to increase capacity to deliver, the most notable being that on the RDS in 2006. Corporate support for performance management from the County Council is being significantly upgraded, with a new performance board established. Performance champions from each department are now being held to account during performance reviews. Following a corporate review of effective leadership, a new template and guidance for business planning is being circulated for 2009/10. Clear guidelines have been issued for target setting and how targets will be monitored by the Performance Board. These improvements are already contributing to a strengthening of the fire and rescue service's performance management processes.
- 60** The fire and rescue service is improving its response to complaints complements and comments. Although new procedures have only recently been implemented, there are already a number of examples of customer feedback leading to remedial action. For example, a number of complaints were received from the public concerning the noise levels from a drill session on one fire station. This led to the station changing the time of its drill. Further work with complaints, complements and comments is being developed to dovetail with the significant enhancements to the corporate customer relationship management software about to be introduced by the County Council.
- 61** Members are actively engaged in performance management but the impact of their intervention has focused on enhancing capacity to deliver. Elected members are taking an active role in the scrutiny of overall performance evidenced through the new corporate performance board, the all party IRMP sub committee, the Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee and through the strong and strategically focussed relationship between the cabinet member and the CFO. This engagement ensures that members are involved in both the setting of ambitions for achievement and the monitoring of outcomes. The key outcome this year has been their support for a bid for a further £112, 000 towards additional training for retained firefighters, as part of the ongoing effort to improve RDS capacity to deliver. This underlines the trend of evidence that the impact of the positive member engagement has been more on the side of improving capacity to deliver, rather than direct challenge of underperformance.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

- 62** The service is performing adequately in this area. Working strongly in partnership, it has secured improvements in most key priority areas. Performance against national and local indicators is improving but more than 60 per cent of all performance indicators remain below average. The service is deeply engaged with multi-agency efforts to improve the quality of life in the community, and especially in areas of high multiple deprivation, though targeted engagement with BME groups is limited. Satisfaction levels with the service are high.
- 63** Performance against national performance indicators is improving but the rate of improvement is not sufficient to catch up with most other FRA. Over the past three years, 92 per cent of BVPIs improved. In the past year 74 per cent of PIs improved which is above the average (69 per cent). But the rate of improvement was in most cases insufficient to lift performance from the low base point relative to others. As a result, only 21 per cent of PIs are among the best in the country, against an average of 34 per cent, while over 60 per cent remain below average.
- 64** The service has met most of its targets for its main external strategic priorities. These are the following.

Reducing avoidable injuries

- 65** Progress in reducing deaths and injuries has consistently remained above the national PSA target. Injuries in accidental dwelling fires fell by around 46 per cent from 8.87 per 10,000 population in 2004/05 to 4.78 in 2007/08. Deaths from accidental fires have fallen from 0.77 per cent per 100,000 population in 2004/05 to 0.3 in 2007/08. This improvement is being consolidated by a targeted approach to home fire safety checks which has provided advice and equipment to 14, 000 homes across the county. Casualty reduction figures show the same improvement trend, with a 43 per cent reduction in the number of people killed and seriously injured on the 1994-98 baseline with even greater reductions among children and young drivers. The LAA1 stretch target of 55 per cent, which still has a year to run, is, however, unlikely to be met. The co-responding scheme has achieved an 80 per cent improvement in intervention targets for life threatening emergencies in areas of cover.

What has been achieved?

Compliance with fire safety legislation

- 66** Procurement of a new Community Fire Risk Management Information System (CFRMIS) has been used effectively to programme a wide range of protection activities. The SLAs with borough councils are focused on improving fire safety in houses in multiple occupation using a mix of advice, joint inspection, and enforcement. This process although still in its early stages has already resulted in improvements. These include two new subsidised sprinkler systems, programmed evening inspection visits to all Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) registered premises, as well as a number of high profile prosecutions, with nine enforcement notices issued to date in 2008, one resulting conviction.

Reducing arson and anti-social behaviour (ASB)

- 67** Deliberate fires fell by 56 per cent from 2003/04 to 2007/08. A proactive approach to prompt removal of abandoned vehicles, known locally as ELVIS, has made a real difference to the work of the Arson Task Force, a joint initiative with the police and the local councils. Secondary vehicle fires have been reduced from over 7 per cent per 10,000 population in 2003/04 to 1.15 in 2007/08 and deliberate primary vehicle fires, from 11.97 per cent per 10,000 population in 2006/07 to 8.12 in 2007/08. A programme of fitting fire suppression systems combined with programmes to reduce opportunities for arson in schools reduced primary fires in educational buildings from 11 in 2006/07 to 5 in 2007/08. On ASB, two programmes stand out. The Action, Reaction, Consequence multi-agency initiative led by the service which co-ordinated activity based programmes for youths already in the criminal justice system led to a 93 per cent drop in re-offending rates of participants. The Young Firefighters scheme which targeted youths at risk shows an initially high success rate.
- 68** Delivery against other strategic priorities which are about building capacity and improving operational capability has progressed although most of it has been incremental. Partnership work on 'firelink' is seeking solutions to cost and operational challenges. Work continues to deliver the regional ICT strategy. A Regional Fire Investigation Agreement, which, among other things makes use of the services' significant environmental protection assets, is in place to build capacity.

- 69** Emergency response targets based on previous national standards are being met and new and more ambitious local targets have been set. The variable duty system has improved crewing levels and supported the availability of retained duty system appliances. The service has strengthened its response to non fire emergencies. The capacity to deal with flooding incidents has been improved through external contracting. The acquisition of a new all terrain heavy lifting vehicle (UNIMOG) has provided a capability for dealing with rural emergencies, and has a high profile locally. In June 2008 the service established new challenging local ambitions for emergency response. Responses within eight minutes, expressed in equipment needs and skills rather than numbers of pumps, are based on FSEC modelling, casualty survivability rates, health and safety considerations and benchmarking against other FRS. It is too early to assess whether the new standards are being met. But their introduction is a major building block towards a more effective and more regionally co-ordinated response, in anticipation of the future roll out of the RCC.
- 70** The service is deeply engaged with multi-agency efforts to improve the quality of life in the community especially for children and areas of high multiple deprivation. The direct engagement with BME communities is more limited. . A number of successful projects have been implemented in Wellingborough, Kettering, Corby and Northampton. Links to the Children and Young People Strategy of the County Council are particularly strong. A good example is the home safety partnership work with the Probation Service focusing on households with potentially vulnerable children. The success of this in the Castle Ward in Northampton has prompted wider extension in Northampton and it is now going to be showcased at a Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) national workshop In November. With BME communities more specifically, the use of sessional workers who speak multiple languages including Polish, Somali and Urdu has already contributed to a high take up of home safety checks in the local BME community. But while deprivation and young people are a consistent focus, engagement with diverse communities is not consistently mainstreamed.
- 71** Satisfaction levels are high, and the service works hard to maintain its good reputation. The service engages widely with local communities and users to assess satisfaction levels with its services including surveys, public meetings, focus groups and web-enabled multimedia. In the 2006/07 public satisfaction survey, 71 per cent of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with only 6 per cent showing any dissatisfaction. The service is about to improve customer engagement further by managing customer satisfaction surveys on a live basis in house instead of using annualised mailings.

Appendix 1 - Framework for Corporate Assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The FRA's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the FRA's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Northamptonshire Fire Authority was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 22 to 26 September 2008.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the FRA, 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 FRA.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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