

Report on an Inspection of Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service

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1. Summary

1. This report presents an assessment of Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service (HIFRS) following an inspection in November 2012. It is an examination of how the Service is addressing issues raised in the 2012 Accounts Commission report into the Service.

2. It is widely accepted that the fundamental issue within HIFRS is a structural one. The Service is trying to provide an extensive network of fire stations across a large geographical area with insufficient supporting resources. Our view is that the number of stations which the Service is attempting to operate has developed over a long period of time and not as a result of an assessment of risk. We also think that to effectively and efficiently sustain the existing network of stations would require a significant redirection of resources within Scotland.

3. If that view is accepted, then a move towards a sustainable model requires two complementary strategies – continuing to challenge the overall number of fire stations, and an improvement in the support systems and functions for the remaining stations. All of this work needs to be built around a strategic assessment of community risk.

4. The Fire Board and the management team understand these issues and are implementing appropriate solutions. Much improvement is taking place on support systems; there has been steady but less progress on reducing station numbers. Our general feeling is that the Fire Board and management team are making as much progress on this second strategy as can reasonably be expected at this time and have been prepared to take on this politically difficult work.

5. The arrangements for a Peer Support Team (PST) of senior officers from across the Services and the appointment of a temporary Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) to work with the Service and Fire Board have had a very positive effect on HIFRS. We give credit to the Fire Board for adopting this innovative approach and the improvements in governance it has made to the temporary DCFO, his team and the PST on how this has been implemented and to the staff of HIFRS for their outstanding efforts.

6. In the short-term, work in addressing the backlog in staff training and legislative fire safety has been resourced by a combination of developing internal capacity and support by staff from neighbouring Services. However, while this has successfully reduced these backlogs, HIFRS is likely to have a continuing need for support. For example, a need to provide a rolling programme of refresher training, the categorisation of premises in relation to fire safety audit and resourcing community safety work. We also see the potential for a very substantial demand for HR management issues which may arise from station rationalisation and occupational health policies.

7. The new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) which will formally take on responsibility for the Highlands and Islands area on 1 April 2013, will have to consider whether and how, within its own reducing budgets, that degree of support can be maintained.

8. We are very clear that despite the impressive progress which is being made, sustainability and stability in the Highlands and Islands area is by no means guaranteed at this point.

2. Why We Inspected

9. The Fire Service Inspectorate is an independent scrutiny body that operates within Scottish Government. We have scrutiny powers from the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 and Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. This includes statutory power to inquire into the functions carried out by Fire and Rescue Services.

10. The inspection of Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service (HIFRS) which is documented in this report was carried out following direction from the Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs. It was intended to capture issues and ongoing improvements and to support the inclusion of the Service into the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS).

11. The terms of reference for the inspection taken from the Minister's direction are as follows:

The inquiry should take the form of an inspection and should review the manner in which Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service has taken action that has addressed, or is likely to address in the future, the issues raised in the Best Value Report and whether the Service now has the appropriate policies, procedures and practice in place.

In addition to providing an overall account of the current position and general assessment of any progress made, I particularly wish you to report to me on:

- whether a sufficient training programme, delivered by suitably qualified instructors, is now in place to ensure firefighters across the Service have achieved and can retain the appropriate level of competency across a full range of required skills;
- whether the Fire Board has taken a stronger role in the scrutiny and challenge of how effectively the service is managing and monitoring the use of resources to ensure that a financially sustainable model is transferred to the single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on 1 April 2013;
- whether there now exists a consistent framework, managed by appropriately trained and experienced staff across the districts for ensuring that legislative fire safety enforcement activity provides appropriate reassurance on the level of risk;
- whether community fire safety initiatives are proportionate and sufficiently evaluated to identify their effectiveness against expenditure; and
- any other issues raised in the Best Value Report which you consider require to be addressed as a matter of priority.

If in any of these areas you perceive risks of continued concerns being carried forward into the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, I would welcome your recommendations for the priority actions the new Service should be asked to consider.

3. About The Service We Inspected

Overview

12. On 1 April 2013, Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service (HIFRS) will become an integral part of the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). Reform of the Fire and Rescue Services is intended to reduce duplication of support services and sustain frontline services whilst ensuring equal access to specialist support and national capacity. It is also intended to strengthen the connection between services and communities by creating new formal relationships with each of the 32 local authorities.

13. In writing this report we acknowledge this imminent change in governance and management and have therefore directed our recommendations both to HIFRS and to the new SFRS.

14. Highlands and Islands includes the local authority areas of Highland, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands Councils. At around 31,000 km², it covers the largest land area of the eight Fire and Rescue Services. The area is predominantly rural with many islands, rugged coastlines, and hilly and mountainous terrain. For the most part, population density is very low. Together, these factors present many challenges for the delivery of a Fire and Rescue Service.

15. The population of Highlands and Islands is a little over 291,000¹, which gives an average of 9.3 people per km², but with a significant proportion of people living in towns, the population density is much lower in a large proportion of the area. The main population settlement is Inverness (pop. 57,960)², with a number of other towns of between 5,000 and 10,000 including Fort William, Nairn, Thurso, Wick, Kirkwall, Lerwick, Stornoway, and Alness.

16. The population is projected³ to increase slightly, with the increase in the proportion that are aged over 65 at a slightly higher rate than the Scottish average. Older people are recognised as a higher risk group⁴ and particularly with the predominantly rural nature of the area and high levels of inaccessibility, this presents further potential risk issues for service demand and capacity for delivery.

17. HIFRS is governed by a joint fire and rescue Board that comprises 24 councillors. Sixteen of the members are Highland Council members, four are from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, two are from Orkney Islands Council and two are from Shetland Islands Council. The Fire Board meets four times per year, and is supported by a number of subcommittees including a Best Value and Audit working group and Service Improvement working group. The current convener and vice convener were appointed in June 2012.

¹ The General Register Office for Scotland – Population of Scotland 2010

² The General Register Office for Scotland – Population of Scotland 2010

³ The General Register Office for Scotland – Population of Scotland 2010

⁴ Scotland Together: A Study examining fire deaths and injuries in Scotland 2009

18. HIFRS delivers its services from one whole-time station in Inverness, 92 retained duty system (RDS) stations and 12 Community Response Units (CRUs) (Exhibit 1). The Service spent £21.6 million in 2010/11 on its running costs. It employs around 1300 staff. Of these, approximately 82% are retained firefighters, a notably higher proportion than the Scottish average of 34%⁵. It has a fleet of 142 emergency response vehicles, ranging from community response vehicles, standard water tenders with ladders, tenders with additional road traffic collision equipment, through to an aerial ladder platform and a control unit.

19. Since 2005, the Fire Board and the Service have been upgrading stations by providing equipment, vehicles and premises. To help achieve this, the Scottish Government provided enhanced levels of capital funding. Thirty new station premises have been provided to date. However, there is a capital backlog of £17 million, with a further 35 stations potentially needing to be upgraded.

20. In 2009 the Fire Board chose to progress a 'risk review' of all fire stations. This review consisted of three phases. Phase one was the development of the Service's future Capital Build Programme. Phase two was the consideration of station sustainability based on the following criteria:

- RDS stations which have establishments below the minimum requirement of six personnel;
- CRUs which have a community fire safety/wildfire only role and which have establishments below the minimum requirement of six personnel;
- CRUs previously allocated a CFS only role and which have less than two personnel.

21. Finally, the third phase was intended to consider community risk measured against the contribution provided by each station to life safety.

22. An outcome of this review was the decision to reduce the number of stations based on the agreed set of criteria. The Fire Board has reduced its network by 23 stations over a period of seven years which included the merger of an auxiliary station with a retained station in 2005, and the reduction of a further 19 CRUs and three retained stations.

⁵ CIPFA Statistical Returns (as at 31st March 2011)

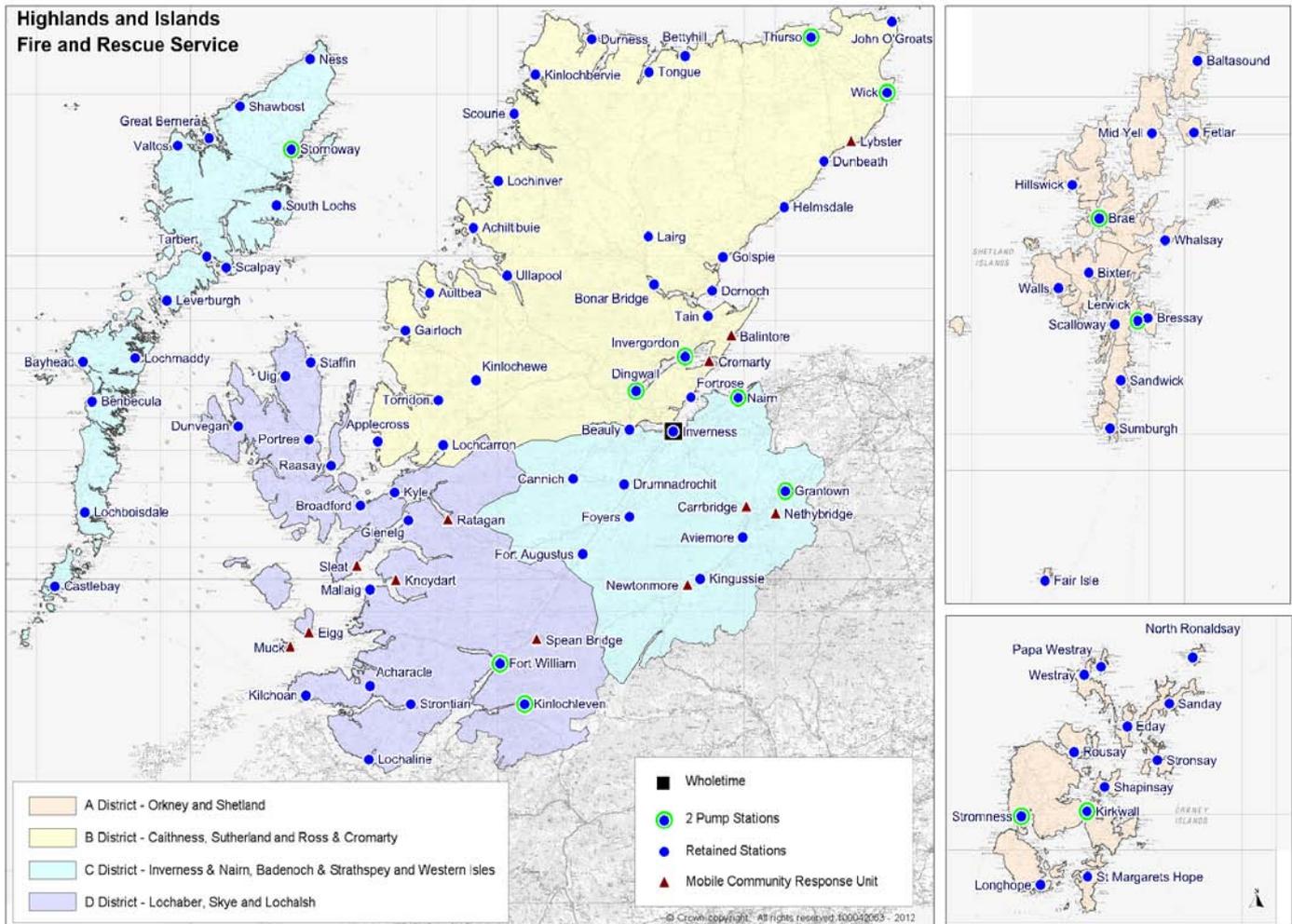


Exhibit 1: Staffing and fire stations in Highlands and Islands October 2012

Workforce Profile:

Whole-time	157
Retained and CRU	1115
Non-uniformed	83
Total	1355

Source: Map - HIFRS CIFRA presentation November 2012

Source: Staffing data – HIFRS CIFRA presentation November 2012

23. During 2011, Best Value audits were carried out at each of the eight Scottish Fire and Rescue Services and reports prepared by the Controller of Audit for the Accounts Commission. Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service's Best Value audit was carried out during September 2011. The Accounts Commission report, which levelled significant criticism at the Service, is the starting point for our inspection.

24. In November 2011, the Fire Board agreed to an offer of support from a Peer Support Team (PST). Chief Fire Officer David Dalziel, Grampian Fire and Rescue Service; Director of Corporate Services David Millar, Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service; and Deputy Chief Officer Alasdair Hay, Tayside Fire and Rescue, volunteered to make up that team. The combination of the three individuals constituted a significant body of expertise from within the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services.

25. In turn, the PST proposed, and the Fire Board agreed, to embed a seconded officer at Brigade Manager level. Area Manager Stewart Edgar was seconded from Tayside Fire and Rescue as temporary Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) in February 2012 and is leading the Service through the change process. This combination of a senior officer on the ground, the background advice offered by the PST and the support which has been channelled through the PST has, we believe, been a substantial driver in improvement and the DCFO is receiving praise for his management of the Service.

26. The PST initiative was unprecedented in Scotland, giving some indication of the severity of the challenges facing HIFRS. To date the practical implementation of these arrangements is impressive. The PST has a very good relationship with the Fire Board and the Clerk to the Board, and the ongoing advice to Service managers is greatly appreciated by the management team. A significant level of resources has been, and is being channelled towards the Service which is contributing greatly to the Safer Firefighter Programme (SFP) and the number of fire safety audits being conducted. HIFRS management team and staff, the Fire Board, PST members and those from other Scottish Fire and Rescue Services who have contributed to this work are commended for this achievement, and for the constructive and positive approach taken to the peer support arrangements.

4. Our Findings

Firefighter Safety, Training and Competence

27. The scale of the challenge around firefighter safety was highlighted in the 2012 Best Value report which identified a gap between training development requirements and actual delivery arrangements.

28. In response to this, a critical analysis of training delivery was initiated by the PST. The analysis resulted in two distinct actions, a strategic training review and the introduction of a 'Safer Firefighter Programme' (SFP). Importantly, the Fire Board made a specific decision to allocate funds to this programme.

29. A strategy was developed to achieve the following outcomes:

- A robust and suitable training and organisational development framework;
- Effective and efficient methods of delivery;
- Structures and assets that fit the needs for organisational training and development;
- Initiating a pathway to a learning organisation; and
- Ensuring a smooth transition moving forward to a single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Training Strategy

30. The Service believes that to be successful, it urgently needs to embed suitable leadership, supported by appropriate structures, to ensure there is focus on organisational training and development. The Service has agreed a structure to match its aspirations to achieve organisational development. This new structure is not yet fully embedded and the learning and delivery strategy currently relies on a level of support from other Fire and Rescue Services.

31. The strategic training review also identified future human and physical resource requirements to meet the continued delivery of the learning and development training programme. HIFRS has entered into discussions with a number of local partners to develop new training facilities which would contribute to an innovative and collaborative approach to the delivery of training.

Safer Firefighter Programme

32. The rationale of the SFP is to ensure all firefighters have acquired a set of core skills in order to safely deliver an effective emergency response.

33. The key components of this provision are:

- Risk critical information;
- Competent supervision and communication lines;
- Adequate training to meet the demands of the role;

-
- Adequate and suitable personal protective equipment;
 - Safe systems of work and standard/local operating procedures;
 - The provision of suitable equipment, associated instruction and maintenance arrangements; and
 - A selection process to ensure that the right people are recruited into the Service to meet the demands placed on them.

34. The Service is very focused on delivering this provision and has a seconded officer supporting strategic direction and providing leadership. The purpose of this arrangement has been to accelerate the rate of training events and activities to ensure all operational personnel have baseline competency skills relevant to their role. Progress on this work is supported by the addition of seconded personnel, instructors and resources provided by other Services. Despite the current high rate of activity, it is unlikely that HIFRS will be at a state of self-sufficiency prior to the establishment of the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS).

35. Good progress has been made in areas such as the availability of risk critical information, the provision of suitable personal protective equipment, and the current recruitment and selection processes.

36. The Service has applied the principles of the HSG65⁶ model for health and safety management. It is recognised that a number of related policy documents are still under development and are being scheduled in accordance with the formation of the SFRS.

37. There is a clear strategy to establish a sustainable three year training plan, with consideration being given to the needs of all operational firefighters. The delivery of the SFP is a primary concern to the Service and a risk based priority station banding system has been introduced to schedule the delivery of baseline competency training.

Performance Management

38. A structure and processes have been developed to support performance management of the SFP. This structure is ensuring that people and teams responsible for the SFP know and understand what is expected of them. To achieve this, planning, defined expectations and performance standards have been communicated to staff.

39. Performance indicators have been put in place and measures relevant to both inputs and outputs established. The Service presents SFP performance reports to the Fire Board at each Board meeting. This enables Fire Board members to scrutinise the programme's progress and to look at the subsequent actions the Service is undertaking to address any areas of improvement.

⁶ HSG 65 Successful Health and Safety Management: Health and Safety Executive

40. The Service has introduced a transformational leadership programme as part of its development for managers in order to support the ambitions of the Service. This is still in its infancy and its potential impact on influencing organisational culture cannot be evaluated at this point.

41. The direction of travel with respect to firefighter safety is encouraging and is expected to continue following the establishment of the SFRS. As a priority we would expect the new Service to examine these arrangements.

42. We recognise that the Service has prioritised the SFP to ensure a balance between the capacity to deliver risk critical skills against the availability of staff to deliver the programme. This prioritisation has inevitably influenced the scheduling of other training activity and set back training programmes in other areas, for example 'safe working at height'. The longer term delivery of full programme work will be something which the new Service will need to take into account.

Incident Command Training & Development

43. To meet the incident command requirements for RDS crew and watch managers, an initial locally developed 'managing incidents' course is being delivered. This provides RDS managers with knowledge and skills to competently apply appropriate elements of the Incident Command System and enhances confidence in dealing with incidents.

44. The Service is aware of the requirement to continue to develop its RDS personnel with respect to incident command through the national development pathway. This matter will be an important legacy consideration for the new Service.

Communications

45. The findings of a communications survey conducted in 2011 have contributed to the Service's approach to the use of ICT. There has been an upgrading of the ICT infrastructure which has resulted in improved availability and access for all whole-time and RDS personnel. This provision has enabled the delivery of training materials, the introduction of the Scotland-wide Learning Content Management System and PDRpro recording system. A further by-product of the upgrade has been the opportunity to improve communications between personnel.

46. During our field visits it was identified that the use of the system varies with some users stating they did not access material on a regular basis. We acknowledge this is only a sample of the organisation, nonetheless the variation in participation by station personnel represents a potential risk to the successful delivery of learning and development, and wider corporate communications.

Conclusion

47. Overall, we are impressed by the developments in firefighter safety and training. The Fire Board is commended for the commitment of resources and the focus it has given to this matter. The management team and all of the staff who have been involved in delivering training have shown a high level of professionalism.

48. Central to this progress has been the recently established governance arrangements, increased internal capacity and access to additional resources from outwith the Service. Together these arrangements have led to the successful delivery of the acquisition phase of training.

49. Significant progress has been made with respect to the delivery of all the key components of the SFP which should be a factor in ensuring the safe delivery of an effective emergency response.

50. The introduction of the SFP performance management structure and processes is improving workplace attainment and accomplishment, and the use of supporting ICT systems is a crucial element of this progress.

51. We are concerned about continuation of the programmes and the long term sustainability of refresher training and the need to move beyond core risk-critical skills, and expect that these issues will need to be taken up by the new Service.

Our Recommendations

52. We recommend that:

- HIFRS continues to engage with the Service reform team to ensure that the significant progress achieved to date is maintained following transition to the new SFRS. This should include the identification of all outstanding areas of training and consideration of medium and long term programmes;
- The SFRS should be clear on the appropriate structure, staff levels and general resources required in the Highlands and Islands area to maintain the positive progress achieved to date, and to deliver ongoing refresher training in the long term;
- Performance management arrangements and targets with respect to the 'Safer Firefighter Programme' (SFP) should be considered by the SFRS;
- The SFRS should examine provision with respect to RDS crew and watch manager incident command training and development in line with the Scottish approach;
- HIFRS should continue to support and encourage its staff in the use of ICT systems.

The Role of the Fire Board

Structure

53. The number of fire stations operated by Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service (HIFRS) was determined by a decision to restructure the Service's provision which, most significantly, included the upgrading of 61 volunteer stations to RDS.

54. This decision to upgrade the stations did not involve a robust assessment of potential risks to the community. For example, social, environmental, infrastructure and hazardous sites. This decision created additional burdens in areas such as training and capital investment. This is evidenced by the challenge experienced in resourcing adequate learning and development provision.

55. This matter is now being addressed by the actions of the Fire Board and the Service's management team. The result is more effective use of resources and increased activity with respect to learning and development. This improvement has in part been supported by further finance from the Fire Board and additional resources provided by neighbouring services. The primary aim is to meet the objectives of improving the delivery of the Safer Firefighter Programme (SFP).

56. More generally, the Service is improving its approach to performance management, for example, through the production of quarterly performance reports for scrutiny and review by the Fire Board.

57. There is an improved understanding of what is meant by performance management and clarity around where the organisation needs to be. Developing this clarity in HIFRS will require continued engagement and effective communication in order to ensure the alignment of performance measures with objectives.

58. The Fire Board has acknowledged the need to review the station network which has resulted in the rationalisation of six community response units and has re-examined service provision in four station areas. This review has involved an innovative approach to service delivery and produced on each occasion, a tailored prevention and protection plan which includes the reassignment of staff to work at district level. The Fire Board has recognised it can discharge its duties through robust prevention and protection in areas where it considers this to be appropriate. This decision provides good evidence of an improved level of scrutiny and challenge being undertaken by the Fire Board.

59. These recent station closures represent straightforward cases where there have been longstanding difficulties in recruiting sufficient numbers of firefighters. Reducing existing local resources is more often than not a challenging political issue, and it is likely that the more difficult decisions will be for the new Service to address. There will be a continuing need for the new Service to engage with local and national politicians on any plans to modify the approach to service delivery. This may include a greater focus on public education through prevention and

protection activity. This strategy may provide the opportunity to reconsider the number of fire stations required. We expect that this work will not be confined to the Highlands and Islands area but is likely to be part of a broad and consistent approach across Scotland.

Highlands and Islands Management Structure

60. The Peer Support Team (PST) identified that a number of significant challenges existed for the Service and to that end the Fire Board agreed to a restructure of the HIFRS management team. The new structure commenced on 10 September 2012 and a further adjustment was made by the Fire Board at the end of November.

61. The main focus of the restructure is to enable the Service to provide appropriate advice to the Fire Board and give strategic leadership to the Service prior to becoming part of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

62. While this new structure has been created to meet the existing needs of the Service, there will inevitably need to be further adjustment to align these arrangements with the planned structure of the new single Service. There is an inherent risk with this new structure as it relies on a number of secondees from neighbouring Services as well as input from the PST. The overall allocation of staff and resources is a matter for the new Service and therefore these resources may not be available post-reform. In the short term, there is a clear argument to provide additional management support.

Capital Investment/asset appraisal

63. The level of capital investment required to ensure HIFRS's asset base which includes the operational fleet and property, is fit for purpose is substantial⁷. The Fire Board estimates that it currently carries a capital backlog of £17 million. This will no doubt be a legacy concern for the new SFRS although the magnitude of the estimate may change as a result of future strategic decisions.

64. In the short term, HIFRS is working with local partners to develop arrangements to augment existing training capacity and infrastructure. The Service has also developed a capital scoring programme that is linked to community risk in order to prioritise spend. This is a matter that the new Service will wish to give consideration to.

Occupational Health

65. The Service has embarked on an ambitious plan to apply national medical standards to existing RDS personnel and has developed an occupational health timetable to achieve this. Practical implementation of this plan may present a

⁷ Audit of Best Value Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue

significant challenge to the Service and to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in general.

66. The Service has applied national medical and fitness standards as a criterion in its ongoing review of station sustainability. On the face of it, the impact of this policy is likely to involve considerable and new HR management burdens, for example, in potential severance, relocation and the management of health issues.

Conclusion

67. There has been a step change in governance by the Fire Board – where it is engaging very well with the challenge it faces and is tackling difficult issues. The Fire Board is taking on the politically contentious work of closing some of its existing stations albeit, and understandably, focussing initially on the most obvious cases.

68. The Fire Board has supported a management restructure in order to provide the Service with strategic direction and leadership in the period up to HIFRS becoming part of the new single Service. That structure is likely to change beyond 1 April 2013. We believe that the scale of the challenges which will inevitably be taken on by the new Service justifies the provision of a management and supervision structure beyond what will be the standard model for Scotland.

69. We consider there is an opportunity for the SFRS to develop a strategic assessment of risk which could be consistently applied across Scotland.

70. We are concerned about potential new burdens in relation to HR management which may arise from the application of newly developed occupational health policies.

Our Recommendations

71. We recommend that:

- The SFRS undertakes a comprehensive assessment of risk within Highlands and Islands and across Scotland. This assessment of risk should be used to inform a review of the number and location of fire stations needed as part of a national approach to risk management;
- The SFRS continues to treat the area as an exceptional circumstance and considers putting in place, for a period of time, a supervision and management structure beyond what will be the standard model for Scotland;
- HIFRS assesses the potential impact of HR policies in the lead up to reform and advises the new Service accordingly.

Legislative Fire Safety

72. HIFRS carries out the legislative fire safety enforcement function in its area in respect of the majority of non-domestic premises. It does this on behalf of the Fire Board which is the fire safety enforcing authority by virtue of section 61 of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005.

Audit activity

73. Fire and Rescue Services set their own fire safety audit priorities, taking into account guidance issued by the Scottish Government⁸. The guidance advises that there should be a programme of enforcement audit and that resources should be targeted at premises which offer the greatest risk to the safety of persons in the event of fire.

74. In accordance with the concept of Integrated Risk Management, it is for the Fire Board to determine how it matches resources to risk and the manner in which it discharges its obligations. Accordingly, there are no targets and no set frequencies for audit in the strategic guidance.

75. In the 2012 Best Value report, HIFRS is shown as the Service with the second lowest audit activity in respect of the percentage of known premises audited. However, the report does not indicate whether low or high relative activity is an indication of good performance.

76. There has been an assumption that the low relative audit activity in HIFRS was a performance failure. While in the specific case of HIFRS, low audit activity was associated with difficulty in resourcing and performance managing the legislative fire safety workload, in other cases a relatively low audit activity in itself will not necessarily be an indication of poor performance, other factors need to be considered.

77. HIFRS has taken steps to address some aspects of its legislative fire safety work and to improve its delivery. These steps are indicative of an improved management attitude to legislative fire safety work.

a) Increasing capacity

78. There are three areas where HIFRS has taken steps to increase the resources available for legislative fire safety work.

i. There has been an increase in the number of functional HIFRS enforcement officers available to carry out dedicated fire safety enforcement work.

ii. A short term partnership arrangement is in place for support from other Fire and Rescue Services in Scotland. During 2012/13, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue

⁸ Strategic Enforcement Guidance for Fire and Rescue Authorities and Joint Fire and Rescue Boards

and Tayside Fire and Rescue are providing personnel to undertake fire safety audit work in the HIFRS area, the greater resource coming from Strathclyde.

iii. Management has refocused the work of those district-based multi-functional officers who are qualified to carry out fire safety audits. Fourteen officers have been allocated a revised workload of fire safety audits and this is resulting in an increase in the amount of fire safety work being undertaken.

79. One of the features of the assistance from other Services has been the different approach to audit work. Tayside operate single person working during audits while Strathclyde operate a two person working arrangement. It is unclear whether the two person audit approach is cost effective. It would be useful for the parties to analyse the effectiveness and efficiency of these working arrangements to inform future audit arrangements.

80. A proportion of the audit work by the supporting Services will result in a requirement for ongoing involvement with the premises and possible follow-up work. All the follow-up work is falling to HIFRS personnel. For future planning purposes HIFRS assume that 30% of audits will require follow up.

81. While the fire safety partnership approach is being effective at achieving its objectives, it comes at a financial cost. The arrangement is cost neutral to the donor Service, with the cost, which includes elements of overtime payment being met by the Fire Board.

b) Fire safety audit 'catch-up' strategy

82. HIFRS has put in place a programme of fire safety audits for 2012/13. Decisions on this programme and the short timescale over which it is being carried out were strongly influenced by the future reform of the Fire and Rescue Service in Scotland.

83. The fire safety audit activity taking place is targeted at 1373 sleeping risk premises. These generically provide a higher level of risk in relation to life safety than other non-domestic premises. The programme comprises:

- An annual audit of all care homes and hospitals in recognition that HIFRS now consider this audit frequency appropriate for this type of premises; and
- An audit of those hostels, houses in multiple occupation (HMO) and hotels which are due or overdue an audit or follow-up visit in accordance with HIFRS policy, or have no audit history.

84. The chart shows audit activity in these 'critical risk' premises⁹ since March 2010 and demonstrates an impressive increase in activity associated with the increased resources and the catch-up programme.

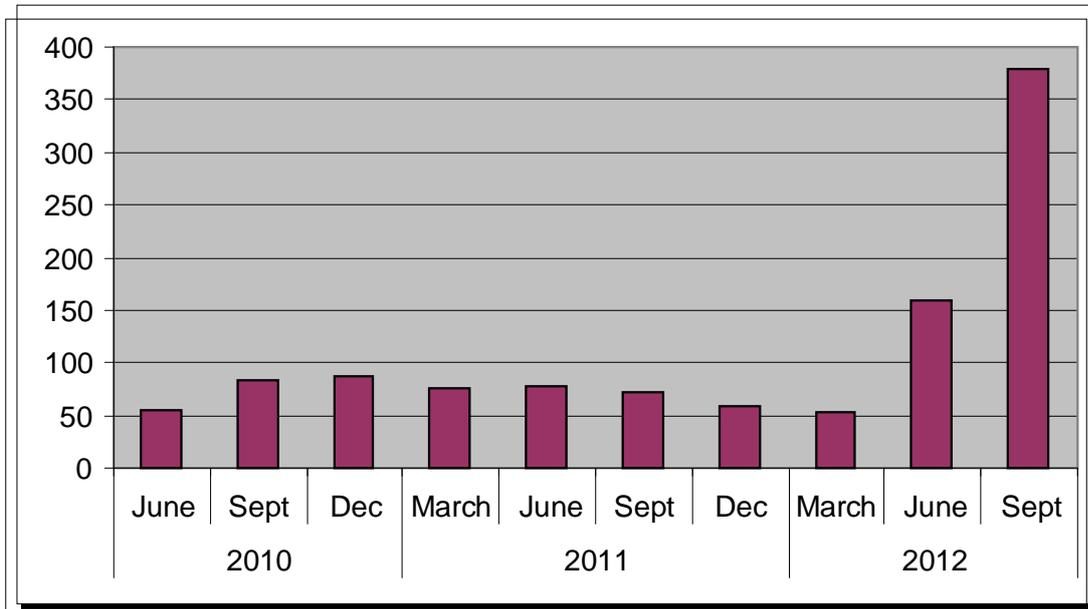


Chart: Fire safety audit activity per quarter in critical risk premises - June 2010 to Sept 2012

Source - HIFRS performance reports and fire safety database records

c) Improving records

85. An effective enforcing authority will have an accurate risk profile of its area which includes the number of premises, the geographical location and an assessment of the level of risk. This allows the Service to strategically plan its enforcement policy, decide on audit frequencies and determine the resources necessary.

86. The risk rating for premises may influence or determine whether there is a need to carry out a physical audit and may also influence the frequency of audit. In Scotland there is a standard approach available to allocating a risk category to premises. This was developed by the Chief Fire Officers Association Scotland (CFOAS).

87. Because Services do not inspect all premises, there will not be an audit-based risk score for all premises. Having an audit-derived score is important for premises with a critical risk profile. While HIFRS has a database of non-domestic premises with location and premises type, many of the premises listed have no specific risk rating (other than a generic default score relating to the premises type). The result is that HIFRS is currently unable to operate a totally risk-based enforcement approach.

⁹ 'Critical risk premises' is used to describe collectively, hospitals, care home, hotels, hostels and HMOs.

88. The catch up audit work that is taking place will produce as one of the outcomes, a new or revised risk rating for the premises audited. This will improve the intelligence on non-domestic premises and assist with the future operation of a risk based scheduling system in which resources can be targeted effectively.

89. The database used by HIFRS for premises records contains two different premises categorisation systems. One of these is the FSEC¹⁰ occupancy category system which is used with the CFOAS system. The other system uses different premises categories, some of which are incompatible with Scottish fire safety legislation.

90. Within the database, HMOs are recorded under a number of different FSEC Occupancy Types. Issues have previously been identified¹¹ regarding HMO categorisation in Scotland generally.

Fire safety delivery

91. HIFRS has a consistent approach to carrying out fire safety audit having adopted the methodology developed by CFOAS.

92. While audit activity is monitored, the quality control of the fire safety audit work carried out by HIFRS personnel is less developed. The effect of this is that issues regarding consistency and proportionality that may arise may not be identified.

93. The previous delivery model for legislative fire safety in HIFRS relied heavily on the carrying out of fire safety audit work by multi-functional officers based in the districts. There are competing demands on these officers as a result of the number of fire stations and structures in place and the scale of resulting work.

94. While the use of multi-function officers to carry out legislative fire safety work may be an attractive cost effective use of resources, the competing demands on these individuals and the potential for skills and knowledge erosion are a challenge to the delivery of fire safety enforcement and the maintenance of competence. It is challenging for personnel carrying out a function on a part-time basis to match the general expertise of dedicated functional staff.

Conclusion

95. There has been a change in attitude to legislative fire safety by the Fire Board and the new management team and the legacy issues of limited premises information, resource and capability issues and low audit activity are being addressed. The steps taken to address these issues, increasing resources and the catch-up programme are being effective, and this has involved a major contribution from other services.

¹⁰ Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC), an evidence based methodology of assessing risk

¹¹ [Fire and Rescue Services Statistics, Scotland 2011-12](#)

Our Recommendations

96. We recommend that:

- The new SFRS takes into account the circumstances regarding legislative fire safety that exist in HIFRS and is aware that the regulatory function is in the process of ongoing development.
- In its allocation of resources, SFRS specifically considers to what extent the use of multi-functional officers matches its expectation regarding the delivery of fire safety enforcement as opposed to the use of dedicated enforcement staff.
- The SFRS takes steps to ensure consistent risk classification of HMOs for legislative fire safety.
- HIFRS relies on the FSEC system for categorising premises within its fire safety database and should not use any categorisation system that is incompatible with fire safety legislation in Scotland.

Community Safety Activity

97. A principal function¹² for the Service is to make provision for promoting fire safety in its area. Also, through the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, the Service is involved in Community Planning which is a process where the local authority and other organisations in partnership plan, provide and promote the well being of their communities.

98. Our inspection examined the work that had been undertaken by HIFRS in relation to the way in which community safety activity is used as a complementary measure to operational cover.

99. The Service has in place a Community Safety Strategy which was introduced in 2011. The strategy document sets out HIFRS's community safety objectives, reduction targets and planned activity for the period 2011/14. The three elements that form the foundations of the Community Safety Strategy are prevention, protection and intervention.

100. Through its Sustainability Review, the Fire Board has considered the most appropriate method to deliver its services in identified areas. This has resulted in an increased focus on prevention and protection activities primarily through the provision of education and advice to the communities concerned. This will lessen the local reliance on intervention arrangements.

101. An outcome of this analysis has been the opportunity to develop bespoke prevention and protection plans. The purpose of these plans is to ensure effective

¹² Fire (Scotland) Act 2005

risk management for individual remote rural communities. For example, a decision to remove the primary response of intervention activity from the Island of Flotta had been predicated on managing risk through appropriate and sustainable prevention and protection activity.

Organisational Issues

102. Bespoke prevention and protection action plans for the areas where the Fire Board has taken the decision to remove the primary response of intervention activity were passed by the Fire Board at the meeting of 30 November 2012. The Service is now engaged in delivering these plans. Ideally, the development and approval of plans should have pre-dated actual changes to service provision.

103. Community safety activities are insufficiently mature to allow an evaluation and that is likely to be the case across much of Scotland. This theme of the evaluation of effectiveness has been a feature in a number of reports into fire and rescue services.

Information Management

104. There is a general improvement in the use of performance management information within the Service. The Service has made efforts to improve communication and dialogue between all stakeholders. Part of this process has been to develop protocols which support the exchange of information with relevant partners to inform community safety activity. As these arrangements are still in the early stages it is not possible to assess their impact. However, we are encouraged by this approach to improve organisational effectiveness.

105. The Service has recognised a need to strengthen its relationships with local partners in order to develop information sharing protocols. The intention is to develop shared risk assessments and to produce joint working initiatives that will manage community risk with regard to vulnerable persons. At the time of inspection there was insufficient evidence available to evaluate the progress of this work.

Conclusion

106. The increased focus on preventative activities in identified areas resulting from the Sustainability Review is evidence that the Fire Board intends that service delivery is tailored to the needs of local communities. The Service needs to ensure that any shift in focus from intervention to prevention is planned and timed to enable a smooth transition.

107. The systems in place within the Service are insufficiently mature to allow for evaluation of the cost effectiveness of this work.

108. In common with other Services, the Service is experiencing early challenges in developing joint working relationships with partners as it attempts to improve outcomes for local communities.

Our Recommendations

109. We recommend that:

- Any changes to service provision are timed to ensure that prevention and protection plans are in place prior to implementation.
- The SFRS develops a robust approach to assessing the benefits of community safety activity in relation to effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, appropriateness, sustainability and impact.
- The SFRS ensures that the opportunities presented by the new arrangements for local engagement being introduced in April 2013, are used to ensure effective information sharing and partnership working to drive down community risk.

5. Our Overall Impression

110. The overall impression we have developed during this work is of a management team, Service and Fire Board who have grasped the issues facing them and are taking appropriate steps to address those issues.

111. There has been a step change in the way in which the Fire Board is engaging with the Service and its management team, and the Fire Board is properly focussed on the governance and improvement of the Service.

112. We have also received many comments on the improvement in communications and management culture since the arrival of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and it is clear that he is having an impact.

113. The introduction of the Safer Firefighter Programme (SFP) has enabled the various areas of the Service to align and has supported a recognisable cultural change and engendered a positive atmosphere within the Service.

114. We are impressed by the speed of progress. The issues and challenges which the Service is tackling have built up over many years but solutions are being delivered in months.

115. We want to give proper credit for all of that but we do not want to understate the scale of the challenges which remain to be addressed. We also need to stress the resourcing issues for the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service which will face those challenges at a time of reducing public sector budgets.

116. In summary, this report recognises the very significant progress which is being made, the approach taken by the Fire Board and management team, the staff of HIFRS and those supporting from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services, the Fire Brigades Union and the Peer Support Team. It also records the positive feeling within the Service despite previous criticisms, and commends the staff and the Fire Board for that approach. However, nothing in the report should be taken as underestimating the scale of the challenge which remains in delivering a sustainable Fire and Rescue Service across the Highlands and Islands area.

6. How We Inspected The Service

117. The inspection team members were:

Erlend Barclay, communications advisor; Dorothy Edwardson, administrative support to the team; Kenneth Fraser, Assistant Inspector; Brian McKenzie, Assistant Inspector; Gordon Neill, Audit Scotland; Brian Paton; administrative support to the team; Alasdair Perry, Assistant Inspector; Steven Torrie, Chief Inspector.

The team received advice on equality and diversity matters from Elaine Gerrard.

The team's work was reviewed by a quality assurance panel whose members were:

Brian Fraser, FRS advisor to the Welsh Government and Paul Bullen, HMIC Scotland.

In an Inspection Outline document, we listed areas for examination derived from the terms of reference. These were:

- Firefighter safety, training and competence;
- The long term sustainability of operational stations and resources and the Fire Board's considerations in that respect;
- Legislative fire safety enforcement;
- The way in which community safety activity is used as a complementary measure to operational cover.

118. We asked HIFRS management team to complete a pre-inspection self assessment and submit evidence. From the evidence provided we developed a number of key lines of enquiry. We found the submission made by HIFRS very helpful.

119. The field visit inspection team members visited HIFRS on the week beginning Monday 29 October 2012. We are grateful to the staff and representative body members who gave us their time, to Stewart Edgar and his team for the presentations, evidence gathering and time they gave us and to the Convener, Andrew Drever, Vice Convener, Audrey Sinclair, Councillor Alasdair Cooper and Councillor Norman McLeod for representing the Fire Board.

7. Other Information

120. All of the members of the inspection team contributed to the development of this report and the quality assurance panel provided a professional challenge to the contents, assumptions and conclusions made. However, the Chief Inspector takes sole responsibility for this published version, its contents and conclusions.

HM Fire Service Inspectorate

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