

Health and Safety in FRS – Health and Safety Executive findings

Purpose of report

For discussion / decision.

Summary

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) published its report *Management of H&S in the GB Fire and Rescue Services* in October 2010 detailing its findings from 8 targeted inspections of FRS in 2009/10. This report summarises the findings and key recommendations relating to health and safety (H&S) practices in FRS.

Recommendation

Members are asked to consider the HSE's recommendations and actions currently underway to address concerns.

Action

LG Group officers to progress actions as appropriate.

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Background

1. Several fatalities during operational incidents in recent years prompted the HSE to conduct a proactive inspection to examine operational competency levels across 8 brigades. Inspectors reviewed key operational topics in depth (Breathing Apparatus, Compartment Crew Behaviour and Incident Control). The full text of the HSE report can be found here:
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/services/fire/management.pdf>
2. The objectives of the inspections were to:
 - Assess compliance with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1976
 - Obtain intelligence and insight into selected key FRS operational issues
 - Seek to ensure that FRS continue to give appropriate consideration to “the safety critical aspects of activities”
 - Provide feedback to the Services.
3. The services inspected were:
 - Cornwall County Fire Brigade
 - County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service
 - Grampian Fire and Rescue Service
 - Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service
 - Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service
 - Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service
 - North Wales Fire and Rescue Service
 - Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service
4. In parallel with this study, HSE was involved in investigations of serious incidents in which firefighters have died.

Key report findings

5. The HSE inspectors’ main concerns centred on competence levels (of both operational and managerial staff) and the relationship between effective risk management and good health and safety practices. Findings considered serious enough to warrant enforcement action were remedied swiftly so there was no need for this action. The report noted that the level of competence of firefighters as well as those who manage and train them varies across services and inconsistencies are compounded by the lack of current central guidance (from the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisers Unit) on standard operational issues (for example, Breathing Apparatus training guidance which was produced in 1974). FRSs are encouraged to use these findings as a trigger for their own reviews into how risks are controlled through the effective training, refreshing and monitoring of competence and performance.

6. The HSE set out its detailed findings under two headings; **management** (policy, organisation, planning and implementing, and monitoring) and **operational** (breathing apparatus; core skills training; incident command training and provision of risk critical information).
7. Under its **management** findings, the HSE found the following:
 - 7.1. Policy – the complicated way in which the FRS arranged their core safety-critical framework policies resulted in operational staff sometimes finding it difficult to locate information they needed. This served to weaken the effective management of health and safety in some FRSs.
 - 7.2. Organisation – The HSE reiterated the importance of significantly reducing the FRS paperwork burden. It felt that better paper document management would improve clarity of thought and action on H&S matters. The HSE also found that sometimes policies were not embedded and clearly expressed, which compromised clarity and consistency as well as accessibility for operational staff. The report observed “*there were occasions where in response to an enquiry... a further piece of paper emerged, or occasionally was hastily written from new as if the paperwork itself provided the solution*”. Furthermore, the HSE inspectors “*were surprised to see less commonality and evidence of cross-FRS learning than (we) expected*”.
 - 7.3. Competency is considered the “*the biggest single operational safety challenge*” faced by the FRS. Inspectors looked at how competency was assessed, maintained, monitored and refreshed by services, as an effective risk management tool. Taking competency in Incident Command, inspectors found gaps in the consistency of training provision and questioned the currency of some of the central guidance.
 - 7.4. Whilst reviewing the various safety committees in the FRS, inspectors found that the terms of reference were sometimes unclear leaving some senior managers vague about their purpose. Additionally, the HSE observed that there was sometimes a lack of joined-up engagement with trade unions.
 - 7.5. Planning and implementation – it was found that there were differing approaches to managing H&S across the FRS. To manage H&S effectively inspectors concluded that this could be done by using fewer but better indicators to ensure reviews of key actions and a more coherent system for managing competence.
 - 7.6. It was also suggested by inspectors that the FRS need to ensure they are making effective use of their in-house H&S advisers especially when drawing up performance indicators and for internal challenge.
 - 7.7. Monitoring – following a review of monitoring arrangements in the FRS, inspectors recommended that they should focus on demonstrating

competence through the completion of core training and assessment and post-incident review and analysis to inform training needs.

Key recommendations

8. Following their inspections of the 8 brigades, the HSE inspectors made a number of recommendations:

Training provision and assessing competence

8.1 All FRSs should ensure that training is effectively planned, managed, quality-assured, recorded and includes adequate assessment. Training should be based on an effective 'core skills' framework that enables firefighters to deal with all reasonable risks during incidents.

8.2 The HSE recommended the production of national guidance on common minimum standards and the dissemination of best practice on training delivery. This would improve interoperability and ensure operational commonality of firefighter safety and competence.

8.3 In relation to incident command, the FRS needs to ensure that high quality training and assessment is delivered and national guidance should be produced on good practice in training provision.

Risk management

8.4 FRSs should ensure that their systems to capture and maintain risk-critical information are robust, permitting access to comprehensive and appropriate information. Incident Commanders need to have access to accurate, timely and relevant information. These arrangements should be continually monitored for effectiveness.

8.5 The production of national guidance on the classification of risk in premises and the collection and sharing of risk information is recommended by the HSE in this report.

8.6 The report also recommends the use of leading indicators to measure and monitor performance instead of lagging indicators. Lagging indicators are reactive and reflect failed outcomes and not achievements.

Other issues

8.7 Some other matters for the FRS as a whole also. These are:

- The extent to which firefighters should or should not take risks to save property;
- Whether retained duty staff can fulfil all of the operational duties of a firefighter given the time they have available for training;
- Clarity about how the FRS can meet public expectations on water rescue; and

- How best to develop and implement consistent national guidance and improve interoperability on those matters that affect every FRS.

8.8 These are all areas where HSE recognises the importance of maintaining a productive and continuing dialogue with FRS employers and employee representatives both at national and individual FRS level.

Post report actions and activities

9. Following the publication of the report in October 2010, those FRSs inspected were provided with individual summary reports with recommendations. Each were asked to submit an action plan addressing each of the individual recommendations to the HSE for a future follow-up. Repeat inspections will not take place in the same 8 FRSs but at the time of publication, the report stated that a further 4 FRSs would be visited to measure general progress against the broader recommendations.
10. All FRSs are expected to conduct internal reviews using the findings and recommendations set out in the HSE consolidated report. In May 2009, CFOA's Response Directorate published follow-up reports examining the findings from each of the 8 inspections.
11. The Fire Service College is working with both the CFOA Operations and HR Directors to support the development of a common and consistent approach to training and standards, working within an accredited framework. FRS training requirements, future training concepts and delivery models are actively being considered. Funding has yet to be addressed; however, the College has already developed courses, accredited to new nationally recognized vocational qualifications developed by the sector, to meet some of the HSE requirements.

Recommendations

12. Members are asked to consider the HSE's recommendations and actions currently underway to address concerns.