



# Evaluation of the effectiveness of the LGA and CFOA OpA and Fire Peer Challenge Programme

# Update on OpA & Fire Peer Challenge

- LGA and CFOA developed the process jointly
- Significant buy in from FRSs- all 46 have/are taking up the scheme
- 2011/12 - Development and pilot - 3 FRS's
- 2012/13 - Launch March 2012 - 13 FRS's
- 2013/14 - 18 FRS's
- 2014/15 - 12 FRS's

Plus Defence Fire Service and Fire Fighters Charity

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# Introduction to the evaluation

The evaluation was designed to:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the fire peer challenge methodology and the Operational Assessment Toolkit; and
  - Assess the overall impact of fire peer challenges in helping the sector with self-monitoring and improvement
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# The Team

- Gary Hughes, LGA Programme Manager
  - Joy Brindle, CFOA
  - Matt Vincent, LGA Project Manager
  - Dr James Downe, Cardiff University
  - Professor Steve Martin, Cardiff University
  - Dr Heike Doering, Cardiff University
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# Methods

The evaluation is based on three main types of evidence:

- A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the Chair, Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and the officer who was most closely involved in the fire peer challenge in a sample of ten\* Fire and Rescue Services (FRS);
- An on-line survey sent to senior officers and councillors in each of the FRS that had completed a fire peer challenge by the time of the study; and
- The results of a feedback survey that the LGA conducts on completion of every fire peer challenge.

\* Bedfordshire and Luton FRS, Cheshire FRS, Cornwall FRS, Hampshire FRS, Hertfordshire FRS, Merseyside FRS, Staffordshire FRS, Surrey FRS, West Yorkshire FRS, Wiltshire FRS

# Timescales

- March 2013 – Inception meeting, LGA workshop
  - April 2013 – Select case studies and set up interviews; design topic guide for case studies; analysis of feedback surveys
  - May-June 2013 – Interviews in ten Fire and Rescue Services
  - July-October 2013 – On-line survey of Fire and Rescue Services
  - October – December 2013 – Analysis of on-line survey and interview data
  - January 2014 – Initial findings
  - February 2014 – Draft report
  - March 2014 – Final report launched at LGA Fire Conference
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# Operational Assessment

- Overall, the OpA was viewed as working well
  - Interviewees welcomed the opportunity to look at how they were performing and felt that it provides a fair and balanced assessment of their service's performance
  - They agreed that the seven key assessment areas were the right ones to focus on
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# Operational Assessment

- There were some concerns that services could manage the OpA to obtain a favourable report
  - However, the overwhelming view was that the sector has matured to the point where services are much more willing to admit to weaknesses
  - Nearly all survey respondents (96%) agreed that the OpA had helped them to undertake an honest appraisal of their performance
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# Operational Assessment

- Interviewees were satisfied that the OpA is fit for purpose and their suggestions for improvements involved fine-tuning rather than any radical change
  - A revised OpA could include more emphasis on efficiency and innovation, collaborative working and the challenges of working with a reduced budget.
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# Fire Peer Challenge - Preparation

- Interviewees told us the guidance and their discussions with the LGA lead were very helpful in enabling them to scope the challenge, set clear expectations and make sure all the necessary preparations were made
  - ‘The more focus you have in a challenge, the more that you will get out of it’
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Process

- The process was seen by respondents as one designed to help them
  - The success of the peer challenge depends very much on how a service approaches it. To be effective it requires honesty, openness and a willingness to learn.
  - Peer challenge teams approached their task as ‘critical friends’ and provided a robust examination of the service
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Process

- A councillor told us: “I think the sector themselves are responsible enough to say these are the areas we need help with moving forward. Can you bring new ideas? Can you help us develop these areas?”
- In two cases, chairs of fire services suggested that they didn't get much added value from contact with the peer member. However, there were other instances where councillors had valued the input and experience of a fellow politician. It is, therefore, important to get the right member peer on the team

# Fire Peer Challenge – The Team

- The fire peer challenge process stands and falls by the quality of the team. As one CFO told us “The process is only as good as the people”
  - The expertise and experience of team members has been very strong
  - One interviewee said “It was not a cosy experience and I wouldn’t want it to be”
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Team

- The Knight Review concluded that ‘for the process to be meaningful and inspire confidence, services should not be able to continue to choose the review team’
  - We understand this concern. However, if the lead of the challenge is not the right fit for the service, it is likely to lead to frustration and a lack of understanding. The LGA and CFOA should continue to discuss the composition of the team with the service and then work to deliver the most appropriate team for each challenge
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Team

- On the political side, the majority of councillors explained that the key criterion for an effective member peer was their level of experience
  - Respondents thought that the process could be improved by having wider representation on teams from outside the fire sector such as the police and voluntary sector
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Report

- Nearly all survey respondents (96%) said that the report provided a fair reflection of the organisation's strengths and areas for improvement
  - Nearly a third of officers (30%) suggested that the report could have been more challenging and harder hitting
  - A significant amount of learning takes place through informal discussions, this was very much valued
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Report

- The Knight Review suggested that ‘Reports should be published together with an action plan as a matter of course’
  - All services have published their reports on their website and we believe it is important that reports continue to be put in the public domain
  - 92% reported that their service had developed an action plan in response to the report, others had picked out the main issues and put them into their service plan
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Impact

- As part of the corporate peer challenge evaluation we developed an impact assessment framework which identified four components of the peer challenge process: resources, activities, impacts and outcomes
  - We used this framework to analyse the impacts of the fire peer challenge
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Impacts

- **Self-awareness and external reputation -** 79% of survey respondents reported that the challenge provided reassurance about the authority's overall direction of travel
  - **Behaviour change -** 34% thought that the process identified issues that they were aware of but which had been difficult to address without an external stimulus
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# Fire Peer Challenge – The Impacts

- **Organisational change** - 75% of respondents reported that the fire peer challenge had led to improvements in the way the service is run
  - **Service Transformation** - The fire peer challenge does not seem to have had a strong impact in financial areas. Only 25% agreed that it had impacted on financial planning.
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# OpA & Fire Peer Challenge Recommendations

- Our findings suggest that the OpA and fire peer challenge are working well and could be further improved with a few refinements.

## **Fire & Rescue Services** need to:

- Continue to be committed to complying with ground rules concerning transparency and integrity
  - Continue to support the process by offering up senior officers and councillors to join teams
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# OpA & Fire Peer Challenge Recommendations

**The LGA and CFOA should:**

- Scope the challenge carefully ensuring that they are clear on what the challenge is focussed on
  - Continue to work with the FRS to select the team and ensure that all team members are trained, are operating at the same level and understand how different type of authorities work
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# OpA & Fire Peer Challenge Recommendations

- Assess whether different types of peer challenges might be appropriate and introduce more flexibility within the process
  - Reflect on the learning from across all fire services and update the OpA accordingly
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# OpA & Fire Peer Challenge Recommendations

- Widen the composition of the team to include peers from outside the sector
  - Ensure that the reports are robust and challenging
  - Formalise the current arrangements so that services may receive additional support from members of the peer challenge team where there is demand such as follow up visits
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# OpA & Fire Peer Challenge Recommendations

- Introduce more performance comparison so that fire authorities can see how they are performing at the local, regional and national level
  - Improve the dissemination and signposting to good practice across the sector so that all services can share learning on issues which are relevant to them
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# Finally - OpA & Fire Peer Challenge

- Provides a structured and consistent basis to drive continuous improvement (88%)
  - Provides councillors and chief officers with information that allows them to challenge their operational service delivery to ensure it is efficient, effective and robust (88%)
  - Is an effective way of ensuring the sector as a whole improves (82%)
  - Is a transparent and robust mechanism for providing challenge to the sector (79% & 71%)
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