



Peer Review Visit

Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority

24-25 June 2019

Summary Feedback Report

1. Key Messages

Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) has experienced a period of significant change since its inception in 2016. The initial Combination Order which formalised the merger between the former Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authorities created an Authority with 30 Members. This was subsequently amended in October 2017 and the Authority membership was reduced to 18. These changes took effect from June 2018, meaning that this Peer Challenge reflects on 12 months of operating under revised governance arrangements.

Our overall impressions are that the Authority is a good, well organised Fire and Rescue Authority. The comments, reflections and recommendations set out in this report represent an opportunity for the Authority to move to the next level in terms of organisational excellence.

We found an Authority that has, understandably, adopted a strong assurance focus in the months following the creation of new authority, thus enabling them to demonstrate to a number of different parties that the merger has been a success and that services have not only been maintained, but are improving.

We heard from a variety of sources that the merger was politically charged, and that time and energy has been needed to be spent repairing and strengthening relationships.

As a result of needing to address anxiety from some quarters, we found a highly data focused and assurance driven culture, but moving forward, we believe less detail is needed. All those we spoke to were confident in the governance arrangements now in place – in fact we didn't hear any concerns expressed about the reduction in Fire and Rescue Authority Members to 18.

The team are of the opinion that the Authority has successfully done the 'nuts and bolts' of creating the new fire authority, and in doing so have established a strong performance-based organisation. The next phase in governance development might be to focus more on using the well-developed performance management process to capture added value, and the comments and recommendations of the Peer Team contained within this report are intended to inform that ongoing improvement process.

2. Purpose and Scope of Visit

2.1 Peer review and challenge

Peer challenges and visits are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet the needs of individual organisations. They are designed to complement and add value to an organisation's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team use their experience and knowledge of the sector to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. The process is not designed to provide a technical assessment or due diligence on specific proposals.

Neither is it intended to provide prescriptive recommendations. The peer challenge process provides feedback, observations and insights from experienced practitioners that will help validate, reality check and further develop the organisation's current plans, proposals and evolving thinking about the future. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the Authority and their recent Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Inspection report. The peer team were clear from the outset that their work should be treated separately from the work of HMICFRS. Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service (the Service) were in Tranche Two of the fire and rescue service inspections and as such, had received their Inspection report prior to the peer team arriving on site. Whilst there are some areas of inevitable overlap, the peer team retained a focus on those issues specified in the scope of the peer review visit.

2.2 Peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected Member and Officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the Authority's requirements and the focus of the peer visit. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with the Authority. The peers who undertook the follow up visit to the Authority were:

- Simon Furlong – Interim Strategic Director of Communities and Chief Fire Officer – Oxfordshire County Council
- Cllr Nick Chard - Chairman of Kent and Medway Fire & Rescue Authority
- Rob Davis – Assistant Chief Fire Officer – Avon Fire and Rescue Service
- Emily McGuinness - LGA Challenge Manager

The team spent one and a half days on-site in June 2019, during which they spoke to more than 25 stakeholders including a range of fire service and fire authority staff and Members along with external stakeholders.

Peers prepared for their visit by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the Authority, including formal papers, Members' Handbook, Member development materials and the Statement of Assurance and supporting documents.

3. Specific findings and observations

This section provides further detail to the key messages section by highlighting findings and observations in respect of the core areas the peer team were asked to comment upon.

3.1 Organisational Governance

In advance of arriving on site, the team were told about the move from 30 to 18 Members, effective from June 2018. This change represented a significant reduction in the number of

elected Members serving on the Authority – at a time when the geographical area of the Authority had substantially increased. Without exception, all those we spoke to from both an officer and a Member perspective viewed these changes as positive – with several people agreeing that with a reduced number of members, each one is playing a full and valuable role.

The Authority has successfully navigated the changes in governance structure, we heard the critical success factors for the reduction from 30 to 18 Members expressed as:

- Streamlining the apparatus of democracy in line with Ministerial expectations
- More efficient decision making
- Retaining and enhancing localism and visibility of services across all constituent council areas

As a matter of completeness, we are recommending that the Authority now carries out a brief evaluation of the current governance arrangements, determining success against these factors. We feel this will allow the Authority to successfully move forward as they seek excellence from an already good foundation.

The democratic structures that have been put in place allow for an effective and productive relationship between the Service and the communities it serves. The Local Performance & Scrutiny Committees (LPS) are regarded favourably as a formal forum which allow for local tailoring of services and are a valued demonstration of the importance the Authority places on maintaining service visibility across the Service area.

Many of our recommendations and thoughts in relation to organisational governance relate to the role and function of the LPS Committees. These Committees have a clear genesis – a visible commitment to recognising the geographically varied communities served by the Authority and a means by which strong local partnerships and informal relationships are forged and maintained. We heard from numerous people that Members of the Committees are able to build on their pre-existing community leadership skills and experiences to address some low-level local issues. For example, we heard about an instance where a Committee Member was able to speak directly with a Parish Council to resolve parking issues and thus alleviate concerns about access for appliances to fires and other emergencies.

We heard how Officers and Members alike value the LPS Committees as a mechanism to expose relatively junior Officers to the political arena earlier than in many other Services, this serves to enhance career development opportunities. All of the Members we spoke to value the time and effort taken by Officers to engage so positively with the Committees, and this goes a long way to developing the good working relationships we go on to explore further in this report.

The Committees are also an excellent setting in which to inform Members about issues at a local level. Both Officers and Members told us that this allows full Authority meetings to maintain a strategic focus. However, encouraging lower level issues to be raised - and resolved- at the local level could lead to missed opportunities to spot trends and share learning across the organisation. The introduction of a more structured, and consistently

applied feedback loop from the LPS Committees to full Authority meetings and back again would address this.

The LPS Committees are reflective of the assurance-based culture of the organisation. The production of detailed performance data is time consuming and the value added by producing such quantities of data for a local strategic committee is debatable. The team, therefore welcomed the fact that a Member Working Group has recently been established to work alongside Officers to review how performance information is presented and used, with a view to adopting a corporate dashboard. This is an opportunity for the Authority to move away from presenting the detail (although if required for in-depth consideration, the detail will still need to be available) and more towards exception reporting, thus enabling Members to consider matters of higher potential risk or concern.

The LPS Committees are predominately retrospective – looking at performance data in the preceding months and undoubtedly add organisational value in this role. Their efficacy in terms of scrutiny is much less clear and therefore consideration should be made to renaming these committees to align to their terms of reference.

The established Members Working Group could also consider how the LPS Committees are constituted – they are currently formal committees of the Authority, and whilst the high quality support provided by the Democratic Services team will remain important to ensure consistency and improved feedback mechanisms – the LPS Committees themselves have proven to be highly effective due their informality and so reclassifying them as working groups rather than committees could further contribute to the aim of reducing organisational bureaucracy.

Whilst the Authority's approach to scrutiny is via a range of seminars and workshops, we found inconsistent understanding of this and in definitions of scrutiny across both Officers and Members. A common understanding of this will strengthen scrutiny to enable Members to better shape and influence emerging policy.

We are suggesting that the remit of the Members Working Group is further widened to include agreeing what scrutiny means to the Authority, and how this can be strengthened via the seminars and workshops, without over complicating or adding to the existing committee structures.

The remit of the Finance & Governance Committee seems disproportionate when compared with full Authority meetings. The Authority could look to review the terms of reference and delegations for this Committee.

3.2 Statement of Assurance

The Authority should reflect with pride on the level of assurance they have garnered amongst their elected Members, Officers and constituent authorities since the creation of the new Authority. It is because of these already high levels of organisational confidence that we feel the Authority should look to move forward in a more streamlined way.

There is a high level of detail surrounding the production of the Statement of Assurance. We recognise the need for this level of detail and commend the organisational assurance provided. The published document produced for the website is used to direct readers to additional information via hyperlinks allowing the report to be only nine pages long.

There was some uncertainty as to the intended audience for the Statement of Assurance – although legislation and guidance are clear that this is very much a public facing document rather than an internal report. We were impressed by the processes undertaken in the past to take the Annual Report ‘on the road’ by the Chief Fire Officer – this was welcomed by all constituent councils and was very successful in increasing the profile and positive perception of the Authority. Similarly, we heard that the format of the Annual Report is tried, tested and well received and replicating this approach for the Statement of Assurance, with the addition of some ‘Plain English’ evaluation, would be advantageous.

We would advise that future iterations of the Statement of Assurance should include a Consultation statement – even if no strategic consultation exercises have taken place in the preceding 12-month period. We accept that the last formal Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) consultation was undertaken almost three years ago (the new Community Safety Plan is due for consultation this year) but this should still be referenced in the Statement of Assurance.

It is the Chair of the Finance & Governance Committee who formally signs off the Statement of Assurance. It is the view of the team that whilst this approach is not contradictory to legislation or statutory guidance, best practice would be for the Fire Authority Chair to have ultimate sign off. Adopting this approach would not only be a more inclusive approach, it would also address some concerns raised with us from Senior Members that they don’t feel as sighted as they should be on this important document.

As set out above when discussing governance more generally, a more exception-based approach to the production and reporting of the Statement of Assurance would now be more appropriate. We were pleased to note that Officers are already working to align assurance work with HMICFRS inspection themes and methodologies. This approach will both reduce duplication on the part of Officers and ensure the Authority remains aligned with the statutory inspection framework. It will be important that any learning from this work is shared across the whole assurance/performance reporting piece.

3.3 Quality of Member and Officer Relations and clarity of respective roles

The relationships between Member and Officer were positive - Members were very complimentary about all Officers and vice versa. This is not the case in all councils or fire and rescue authorities, where at times there are unclear boundaries between roles and responsibilities. We did not find this to be the case, so the Authority has created a sound platform in respect of this.

The Member Handbook sets out clear expectations for both Officers and Members, although clear delineation between operational and strategic responsibilities were more

implicit that explicit. We found that Members and Officers have plenty of opportunity for informal contact and conversation, which both parties cited as helpful and positive.

Overall, we found that good working relationships between Officers and Members positively impact on the Service. We heard some great examples of where a 'one-team approach' between Officers and Members had contributed directly to Service enhancements such as when a Member identified an issue with new appliances lying unused at Poundbury and raised this matter with the Chief Fire Officer. Conversely, we also heard of limited examples where Members had strayed into operational matters such as monitoring turnout times at a local station – but on the whole these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

We initially had some concerns about the Buddying system operated by the Authority. The principle is sound as an extension of the Authority philosophy of ensuring a strong local connection across the whole Service area. The Buddying system works by allocating each Member of the Authority with a group of both wholetime and on-call fire stations and other workplaces. The Members are then expected to develop relationships with the staff on these stations and workplaces and be the conduits between the Authority and the points of delivery.

Whilst acknowledging the potential benefits of enhanced communication at all levels of the organisation, we were concerned about the inherent risks, particularly the risk of Members negatively impacting on the efficient running of stations and workplaces and placing an unhelpful burden on operational staff. There is also the potential for staff to unduly influence Authority Members.

Caveated by the fact that the team did not speak with any operational station-based staff, it would seem our concerns were unfounded. All of the Members we spoke to really valued the opportunity to build relationships with operational crews and support staff. Members now embrace the positive intentions of the initiative.

We were reassured to hear that the Buddy system does have an appropriate level of governance and rigour, with Members needing to book visits to stations and workplaces via Democratic Services. There are also logs to complete following visits, but these are not completed consistently by Members, and a more routinely applied evaluation process would be beneficial.

We concluded that the Member Buddies and Champions effectively contribute to the line of sight at all levels of the organisation and would agree with Authority's own assessment that the benefits outweigh the risks.

Member - Officer relations are good with plenty of opportunity to add value through informal contact. With the appointment of a new Authority Chair, the Authority could consider holding a team development day – for all Members and Senior Officers. Such a session could build on the already evident levels of trust and respect and look to further develop an effective 'one-team' approach.

3.4 The scope and opportunity for member development opportunities

Given the pre-existing good Member/Officer relations within DWFRA, there is potential to build a proactive and innovative Member development programme. We heard that the Democratic Services team are held in very high regard by Members, both for the quality of documentation provided and their accessibility as a source of advice and guidance. Many organisations would be grateful for these levels of trust and confidence which are prerequisites for effective Member development, and this is an area where the Authority has potential for further improvement.

The Officers we spoke with are committed and enthusiastic about working with Members to develop a programme of development opportunities that offer Members and the organisation the maximum benefit. There is some frustration from elected Members that whilst discretionary Member development sessions are offered, take-up can be poor. We also heard from Members that there is some resistance to Member development which is perceived as Officer-led and addresses issues that Officers have identified.

We appreciate that the Authority has already had conversations about whether certain elements of Member development should be mandatory for Authority Members, for example, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, but that these discussions have been inconclusive. Similarly, the offer of 1-2-1 Member Appraisal sessions has been inconsistently embraced, and so the value and impact of this offer is limited.

We also note that the recent Member Induction sessions were well received and that the steps to introduce more consistent evaluation of sessions is a positive step.

It is clear that Member development has been the subject of much discussion over sometime within the Authority and there are examples of good practice, for example, the regular Podcast, which is shown at Authority meetings, and made available to the public via the website.

To move forward more decisively, we are recommending that the Member working group extends its terms of reference to include Member development. This group should be tasked with ensuring that Member development is not only Member-led but also Member owned. A first step for this should be to agree a position on whether any development opportunities will be mandatory, and then apply this approach consistently. Having an overarching body such as a working group will provide the necessary levels of structure and constituency and provide clear direction from Members to a group of Officers who we found to be only too willing to help in this area should it be requested.

Each of the constituent authorities within Dorset and Wiltshire will have their own Member Development programmes and we would encourage stronger links with these programmes to identify opportunities for joint training (e.g. Equality and Diversity, Scrutiny, Social Media etc.)

4. Recommendations

This report has highlighted a range of suggestions to the Authority, following consideration by the peer team. The following recommendations are reflective of these.

The Authority should:

1. Revisit the critical success factors for the Governance Review which was conducted in 2017 and resulted in the reduction in the number of Authority Members from 30 to 18. These factors should then form the basis of a self-evaluation exercise, providing the Authority with an opportunity to recognise and celebrate success, identify opportunities for future learning and move forward from a position of strength.
2. Collectively define what scrutiny means to the Authority and consider how this can be most effectively delivered, without over complicating or adding to the existing committee structures.
3. Widen the Member Working group, currently established to review performance reporting practices and processes, to review the name of the Local Performance and Scrutiny Committees to align more appropriately to its role and function.
4. Ensure that there is an effective feedback loop in place which sets out how local performance issues, that are raised via the LPS Committee, are escalated to other bodies such as the Authority, Finance & Governance Committee, or directly with Senior Officers, and then fed back to the Local Committees and the Members raising the matter.
5. Identify other Authorities where Member development is strong and look to review and understand notable practice in this area and further support Members in taking ownership of their personal and collective development.
6. Review the structure, style and governance process for the Statement of Assurance.

5. Next steps

We appreciate Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with the senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward. There is an expectation that this report will be discussed by Members of Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority at their September 2019 meeting.

The Local Government Association (LGA) is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Andy Bates, Principal Advisor is the main contact between your Authority and the LGA. His contact details are Tel: 07919562849 and Email: andy.bates@local.gov.uk Emily McGuinness, Advisor, is also available to discuss any elements of this report as well as additional support and guidance, her contact details are Tel: 077704 92776 and Email: Emily.mcguinness@local.gov.uk

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority ahead of, throughout and since the peer review visit. We will endeavour to provide additional information and signposting about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.