

CPA Report

July 2005



Fire and Rescue Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Essex Fire Authority

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Introduction

- 1 In the Fire and Rescue National Framework for 2005/06¹, published in December 2004, the Government outlines how performance management in the fire and rescue service will be assessed by the Audit Commission. This report arises from a CPA ('Comprehensive Performance Assessment') review carried out as outlined in chapter 8 of the National Framework. It gives the results from our review of the Essex Fire Authority. We used the CPA methodology published by the Audit Commission.
- 2 Our on-site work took place in early 2005. We received a self-assessment from the Fire Authority and a set of judgements from the external auditor. Both were taken fully into account in the course of our work. A summary of the auditor's judgement is given as Appendix 1 to this report. The judgements we have made are based on the evidence we saw before and during our visit, and on any further information supplied to us by the Fire Authority during our discussions with them in the course of preparing this report.
- 3 CPA is an assessment, at the corporate level, of how well the Authority is being run. It does not give an opinion on how well the fire service responds to emergency incidents. The official version of this report is also available on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/fire.

¹ The Government is responsible for setting clear priorities and objectives for the Fire and Rescue Service. The Fire and Rescue National Framework does this by making clear the Government's expectations for the Fire and Rescue Service; what Fire and Rescue Authorities are expected to do; and what support Government will provide.

Executive summary

- 4 Essex Fire Authority is rated by this assessment as **fair**. CPA is an assessment, at the corporate level, of how well the Authority is being run. It does not give an opinion about how well the fire service responds to emergency incidents.
- 5 Essex Fire Authority (the 'Fire Authority') has a declared vision, mission statement and strategic aims but, in practice, they are being used in an inward-looking way. More work could be done, with the different communities concerned, to make the vision and aims more externally focussed and, consequently, more clear to both the Authority and its various business and strategic partners.
- 6 Aspects of the management of the Authority are autocratic. In times of change, particularly where many of the changes are cultural, requiring alterations in behaviour and long time spans, leadership has not been flexible in handling colleagues and staff. Key parts of the workforce feel disengaged from the modernisation process.
- 7 Performance management is an area where significant improvements could be made. Plans that are set at community and station level do not have clear targets, derived from and linked back to the over-arching vision and objectives. Local targets, and good performance data to support them, make it possible for local achievements to be measured and for meaningful feedback on performance to be given.
- 8 The Fire Authority has a comparatively good performance in some key operational areas despite the lack of a fully effective performance management system. This includes the work that has contributed to the Fire Authority reporting the second lowest number of accidental dwelling fires when compared to all other fire authorities in England.
- 9 People management is strengthening. Using the integrated personal development system (IPDS), the Authority is showing its commitment to developing staff skills. The staffing structure has been realigned to make sure community safety work receives the attention and resources it needs.
- 10 The Authority's response to the modernisation agenda is appropriate and moving in the right direction. There is a well-balanced strategy, incorporating prevention and protection work and flexible enough to cope with continuous change. Financial management is strong and integrated well with service planning, presenting a seamless structure and a sound budget base. The Authority can demonstrate savings, often arising from imaginative new arrangements for working with others.
- 11 Operational performance compares favourably with that of other authorities. There is much good work in progress on community safety initiatives. Partnership working is in evidence too and sensible steps are being taken to align partnership work with the Authority's strategic need. There is work to be done on collecting and marshalling the data needed to make sure community safety work is being directed towards the individuals or communities that need it most.
- 12 The Authority is able to analyse its own position objectively, as evidenced in its self-assessment, and to make a realistic appraisal of the constraints within which it must operate, for example, its industrial relations environment.

Summary of assessment scores

A - What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Theme	Score
Leadership and priorities	1
A balanced strategy	3

B - How has the Fire Authority set about delivering its priorities?

Theme	Score
Capacity: Governance and management	3
Capacity: Resources and value for money	4
Capacity: People	2
Performance management	2

C - What has the Fire Authority achieved and, in the light of that, what does it plan to do next?

Theme	Score
Achievement of objectives	3
Achievement of improvement	3
Future plans	3
Overall CPA score	Fair

Scoring key:

- 4 Well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 3 Consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 2 At only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 1 Below minimum requirements, inadequate performance.

In coming to an overall CPA score, we applied the rules table set out below.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Essex is the second largest English county, covering 3,469 square kilometres with over 7,500 kilometres of road including the major arterial routes such as the M25, M11, A12, A13 and A127. The 2001 census recorded a population of 1,614,220, of which 5.5 per cent are people from black and ethnic minority (BME) groups. Wards within Harlow, Tendring and Thurrock are amongst the 10 per cent most deprived in England.
- 14 The towns of Chelmsford, Colchester and Basildon each have populations of around 150,000 people but there are also large rural areas notably to the north of the county. The population is growing faster than the national average, particularly amongst older people. There are 220,000 people over the age of 65, with the fastest growth being amongst the over 80s. In 2002, Essex had 564,404 dwellings. This represents a 9 per cent growth over the period 1992 to 2002. The two largest areas of expansion have been Braintree and Maldon. This includes improvement of the A120 and A130 to support the volume of new traffic.
- 15 Stansted is the fourth busiest passenger airport in the country and the fastest growing airport in Europe. It has a capacity of 25 million passengers per annum. In 2001/02 there were over 14 million passengers, with the total number of air transport movements increasing by two per cent to over 150,000. A number of smaller airports such as Southend, North Weald and Stebbing add to the air traffic operating over the county.
- 16 Essex supports a diverse range of industries, from agriculture in the north to the large oil refinery at Corringham and the commercial shopping centre at Thurrock Lakeside in the industrial south. The county's coastline supports the busy shipping terminals of Tilbury and Harwich. Over 400 million tonnes of shipping movements each year pass through Harwich alone, as well as 1.5 million passengers. This adds to the road and rail freight movements within the county.
- 17 There are 13 major industrial risk sites within the county. Bradwell nuclear power station, located on the east coast, is in the process of being decommissioned. The Fire Authority takes a key role in planning and preparing for incidents involving these sites. This includes exercises and visits to maintain familiarity with layout and procedures.

The Fire Authority

- 18 The Combined Fire Authority (CFA) that administers the service is composed of 25 elected members of which 16 are Conservative, 6 Labour and 3 Liberal Democrats. There are 20 members from Essex County Council, 3 from Southend-on-Sea Borough Council and 2 from Thurrock Borough Council, which are both unitary authorities.
- 19 The Fire Authority's budget for 2004/05 was just over £64 million of which almost £34.5 million comes from council tax, the remainder coming from revenue support grant and business rates. This equates to a cost of £56.43 per Band D domestic property. The level of precept set by the Authority for 2004/05 attracted a notional capping for 2005/06. This may restrain the ability of the service to raise funds through its precept as part of its budget setting practices.

- 20 Community safety work and emergency response is managed through seven community commands, each of which covers two district or borough council areas. The Fire Authority has its administrative headquarters at Brentwood and training centres at Wethersfield, Witham and Orsett. A vehicle workshop at Lexden, near Colchester maintains operational equipment and the fleet of 125 fire appliances and 146 cars and vans.
- 21 There are 51 fire stations, of which 34 are retained and 17 are whole-time - 13 of which are staffed day and night, the remaining four being day crewed. The station at Ongar is in the process of moving from whole-time to retained status. There are 926 full-time firefighters, 479 retained firefighters, 222 support staff and 46 control staff.
- 22 In 2003/04, the service attended 28,665 incidents. This included approximately 12,500 fires, over 5,000 call outs to false automatic alarm calls, over 1,500 attendances to hoax calls and approximately 4,000 false alarms with good intent.
- 23 References in this report to 'authority' mean the members of the Authority and the fire service.

What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Leadership and priorities

- 24 This theme is scored by this assessment as 1 – below minimum requirements, inadequate performance.
- 25 There is an autocratic leadership style on the part of some members of the management team. Engagement with some key staff groups is confrontational and non-participative. There was a lack of fully participative involvement of the community commanders in developing the IRMP. This has resulted in them having no effective role in shaping service delivery and policy and instead they consider that the management require its implementation without question. This acts as a barrier to achieving changes in line with the modernisation agenda, to which many throughout the organisation, at all levels, are committed.
- 26 The Fire Authority does not engage effectively with many of its staff. Staff are aware of key issues but many do not understand their strategic significance, neither can they link them to organisational priorities nor to the work for which they are responsible. For some groups of staff, poor communication and lack of engagement with management is a significant concern. This has resulted in no action being taken to some concerns raised. This is having an adverse impact on the morale of the workforce.
- 27 The nine strategic aims that support the vision, '*continuously making our communities safer*' reflect the structure of the Fire Authority, resulting in an internal focus and not demonstrating a balance between local needs and the National Framework. For example, one of the strategic aims is to 'to ensure that we have the right people with the right skills to effectively carry out their roles and achieve their full potential'. The lack of clear, externally-focused strategic aims is recognised at most levels, including management and frontline staff.
- 28 Although the Fire Authority's priorities are set out in the IRMP, the lack of clear aims means that the Fire Authority does not have an unequivocal understanding of what are and are not priorities. A strategic risk planning profile has been developed under the corporate governance framework, focusing on key priorities. This should enable the Fire Authority to refine the priorities set out in the IRMP, but will not take effect until the next IRMP, in 2006/07.
- 29 Communication methods within the Fire Authority are not robust. The lack of access to information communication technology (ICT) in some areas is a major barrier to effective communication. The working patterns of retained firefighters put them at a particular disadvantage in receiving communications and effective use of ICT could overcome this. Lack of clear and consistent communications, especially during periods of organisational change, is resulting in staff uncertainties and affecting morale.
- 30 There has been limited engagement with partners and the wider community in setting the Authority's strategic aims. Had this been done, it would be easier to address community expectations and to be assured that partner organisations understand the Fire Authority's strategic position. Consultation with stakeholders on key issues such as the IRMP and best value have revealed that there is a lack of understanding of the purpose and range of services that the Fire Authority delivers. This has resulted in the Fire Authority being unable to demonstrate how it has focused on the needs of users to improve the quality of its services.

- 31 There are some effective and innovative forms of internal communication. The distribution of 'z' cards, which summarise the vision and strategic objectives of the organisation, was well received by some staff. There is a good awareness and understanding of CPA throughout the workforce. The Fire Authority recognises it could be more effective in communicating with its staff and has used a Local Government Association consultant to carry out a review of its consultation processes. The opportunities for improvement highlighted in this review are being addressed and are resulting in a new communications strategy and proposals for a new team briefing structure.
- 32 Effective mechanisms are now in place to improve engagement with communities. A community consultation group has members that are randomly selected from each of the seven community commands. This panel provides a readily available, cost effective means of consultation on a range of corporate and local proposals. During the IRMP process, difficult issues were debated with the help of focus groups and arrangements are in place to use this technique to consult hard to reach groups. Use of this resource, including during the IRMP setting process, has enabled the Fire Authority to take into account the views of its communities when determining priorities.
- 33 The Fire Authority recognises the importance of considering the views and concerns of all sections of the community. The IRMP 2005/06 details the strategic intention of developing the role and functions of corporate communications to enable the Fire Authority to deliver quality services to address locally-focused needs. This should assist in achieving increased involvement and support for proposals.

A balanced strategy

- 34 This theme is scored by the assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 35 The Fire Authority is demonstrating a clear and strategic shift of emphasis from intervention to prevention of incidents. The results of the second round of pay verification demonstrate that the Fire Authority has embraced the modernisation agenda and has actively promoted partnership work for the prevention of fire and other incidents. The Fire Authority is developing the use of a home safety management information system, using the identification of socio-demographic/ economic patterns to help focus prevention work on those areas where the data shows it is most needed. The Authority uses a statistical analysis of incidents to help enable its planned shift from intervention to targeted prevention in areas of greatest risk.
- 36 The integrated safety plan 2004/05 clearly reflects the balanced approach being taken. Strategic aim one is 'to reduce the risk to the community from fire and other emergencies through a balanced combination of protection, prevention and emergency response.' This demonstrates that the Fire Authority is maintaining a balance by developing strategies in areas other than operational response.

- 37 Overall it is clear that the Fire Authority is developing a balanced strategy to address the competing demands identified by the IRMP. The IRMP process is being used to shape service delivery in line with the modernisation agenda. Savings in the region of £300,000 have resulted from taking difficult decisions such as changing the status of the station at Ongar from full time to retained firefighters and a reduction in the number of appliances at Dovercourt. These savings are largely being reallocated to increase capacity in community safety work. Further examples of re-allocation of resources are contained within the draft IRMP and budget settlement for this year.
- 38 The Fire Authority has a clear view of its community safety obligations and is ready to work with other agencies to mutual benefit. The Fire Authority is involved in many effective partnerships and initiatives that contribute to the wider agenda of social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and the reduction of crime. The contribution includes active representation on all crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs), participation in local strategic partnerships and in community safety groups. Initiatives addressing arson reduction, anti-social behaviour, environmental impact and the prevention of road traffic collisions are ongoing.
- 39 The Fire Authority responds flexibly to a changing environment and new pressures. New priorities are incorporated into existing plans, for example, specific targets resulting from the National Framework - or risk assessed where appropriate. Up-to-date plans are in place to meet the demands of a category 1 responder as outlined in the civil contingencies bill. New posts are being created to deal with civil contingencies and emergency planning and an assistant chief fire officer chairs the Essex emergency services co-ordinating group.
- 40 There has been slow progress on implementing some aspects of change emerging from the modernisation agenda. This particularly includes issues where lengthy negotiation is necessary to achieve the support of the Fire Brigade Union. This is recognised by the Fire Authority as a barrier to progress, and is a national issue.
- 41 The Fire Authority's approach towards safeguarding the environment has resulted in increased awareness and improvement. For example, the 25-year asset management plan carefully considers energy use and potential savings, and specialised equipment (for example, water filled booms, to assist fluid containment and disposal) is used. A foam policy exists, with the aim of reducing the impact of foam on the environment. The Authority, as yet, does not have a specific policy that deals with environmental issues, but is involved in several partnerships where the approach towards protecting the environment is agreed and taken forward.
- 42 The Fire Authority's IRMP sets out the strategy for reducing the number of fires, deaths and injuries from fire. It is based on Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) guidance and updated annually. The strategy has yet to cascade down to clear, target based, outcome focused lower level plans. A performance management system to keep this work on track is being developed through the corporate governance framework and unequivocal targets are to be integrated into the planning process in the 2005/06 plans.

- 43 The Fire Authority has not been successful in ensuring that it communicates effectively with all key communities. The response rate was low when consulting on the development of the IRMP and the needs of hard to reach groups have been insufficiently researched. The Fire Authority carries out its statutory consultation obligations but recognises it cannot be sure that it is capturing the needs and expectations of key stakeholders. A corporate communications department is being set up to address this issue.
- 44 Progress is being made in developing a user focus within hard-to-reach groups. For example, the Braintree Primary Care Trust (PCT) is now engaged with the Fire Authority to fit fire detectors and hold fire training for the travelling community. This new initiative will be rolled out across the county when the initial programme is developed. Approaches such as this should ensure that people within small diverse communities benefit from fire prevention schemes.

What is the capacity of the Fire Authority to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity: governance and management

- 45 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 46 The Fire Authority has a constitution which establishes the structure of the organisation. There is clear delegation to committees and groups, with terms of reference in place. Members are aware of matters for which they are responsible and accountable. The appointment of a core group of members has given a greater degree of clarity about individual area of responsibility. This has been assisted by new measures put in place to address issues raised by the external auditor.
- 47 Progress has been made in formalising corporate governance arrangements. Arrangements have been reviewed by members and the senior management team and agreed by the Fire Authority. Members are now using the new arrangements which are more formalised and aligned with the CIPFA/SOLACE code of corporate governance. Members are engaged in looking at more effective executive and scrutiny arrangements and there is cross party agreement to take this further, thereby enhancing the decision-making process. Clear governance arrangements, including scrutiny, should enable the Fire Authority to be effective in decision-making processes.
- 48 An effective standards committee is in place and information on its work is disseminated widely. The standards board has produced a work book designed to assist with training and induction in the member code of conduct. This has been integrated to the member training programme. The committee meets in public and agendas, reports and decision sheets are circulated to department heads, officials of all the trades unions, other public bodies (libraries, etc), the county council, district and borough councils and the press. An effective standards committee ensures that robust corporate governance arrangements are maintained.
- 49 Management has organised the service to reflect the shift from intervention to prevention and put in place the necessary structures to facilitate local delivery and partnership working. Management has been successful in implementing a service restructure, aligning service delivery to local authority boundaries. This has enabled more effective partnership working, such as with the CDRPs. Responsibility for delivery has been devolved, giving a focus on the specific needs of the communities served.
- 50 The service has demonstrated effective management and governance in taking some key decisions. This has included the development of commercial services involving both commercial and industrial training, and engineering services. Following an extensive options appraisal, involving a member led working party, the Fire Authority transferred its commercial services to an arms length management organisation (ALMO). Transferring specific operations into an ALMO has allowed the profits it makes to financially support other operational areas. For example £70,000 has been distributed between the CDRP's from the ALMO's profits in 2003/04. An effective political and managerial approach has enabled clear focus on delivering the Fire Authority's corporate priorities.

- 51 The Fire Authority takes a positive approach to the arrangement of support services. This has included an improved 'in-house' provision, with the appointment of a new director of finance, and collaboration from within the regional management board (RMB). It keeps itself appraised of external opportunities presented by bodies such as Chief Fire Officer's Association, the integrated personal development system (IPDS) hub and LGA. Maintaining an outward focus and utilising new initiatives has enabled it to maximise capacity through effective use of corporate services.
- 52 The Fire Authority has built ICT capacity through an effective data management support system. The introduction of a geographical information system (GIS) is being used as a driver to shape the IRMP and other plans. Data from partners and other external sources is being used, including the recently installed call recognition software. Further applications to detect the location of mobile phones to within a few hundred metres are to be installed shortly. Maximising the use of this should add to effective management of resources especially in targeting community safety work and assisting in response to emergencies.
- 53 Effective ICT is not used consistently throughout the Fire Authority. Its widespread availability to maximise member's capacity has not yet been achieved. The impact of this will have greater significance once the service intranet and document management system come online. There is a lack of ICT capacity to deliver an effective IPDS system electronically to retained staff. Providing better information and systems to members and staff improves the service's capacity to deliver.

Capacity: Resources and value for money

- 54 This theme is scored by this assessment as 4 – well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 55 Financial and service planning are integrated. A medium-term financial plan and budget has been agreed by the Fire Authority. This supports the IRMP planning process and has resulted in financial savings that have been prioritised and allocated in accordance with the modernisation agenda. In particular, additional capacity has been put in place to deliver the community safety agenda through a community safety officer now in place in each of the seven community command areas. This effective integration of service and financial planning should enable the Fire Authority to finance its corporate aims and objectives and meet the key objectives of the National Framework.
- 56 Financial management systems are sound. Essex County Council monitors and reviews the Fire Authority's financial systems on a risk based approach - high risk systems are reviewed annually and lower risk systems reviewed on a cyclical basis. Use of the same systems in both the county council and the Fire Authority assists review and monitoring. The external auditor has assessed both the systems employed and their review and monitoring as adequate with no weakness that need to be addressed.

- 57 The financial standing of the Fire Authority is good. Prior to 2004/05, the Fire Authority was unable to build up reserves although it had built up a level of pension provision. Since becoming a precepting authority in 2004/05, the budget setting process is ensuring that an appropriate level of reserves is maintained based upon an overall risk assessment. The level set, and the use of reserves and balances including specific reserves in respect of the firefighters pension fund and insurance liabilities is included in the overall budget setting process. This is reviewed as part of the medium-term financial planning process. A good financial standing enables the Fire Authority to adequately fund its priorities.
- 58 The Fire Authority is effective in ensuring value for money in its business processes. This is demonstrated through the savings and reallocation of resources identified in the IRMP process; through effective procurement arrangements both independently and jointly with others, and through successfully securing external funding. Actively seeking value for money both within the Fire Authority's functions and through partnerships is supporting the provision of efficient services.
- 59 A comprehensive review of the Fire Authority's property portfolio and management arrangements has been made. The Fire Authority has undertaken an exhaustive stock condition survey and overhauled contract documentation, contractor selection and contract management procedures. The results of the survey, which includes estimated costs of repair and renewal over a 25-year period, have contributed to the asset management plan now in place. This provides a platform to ensure that assets reflect the needs of the service, as identified by the IRMP, as well as ensuring the appropriate level of maintenance.
- 60 Effective partnership arrangements are in place, as recognised by the Audit Commission's pay verification phase 2 report, and more are being sought. The Fire Authority is in the process of developing a partnership register to enable more effective management of partnership arrangements. Partnerships that are not effective or do not clearly contribute to the Fire Authority's priorities have been terminated. Continuing work in this area will complement the service's aims and address the modernisation agenda. Partnerships with demonstrable outcomes include the Firebreak scheme, Young Firefighters and the Juvenile Fire Setters schemes. The participation of the Fire Authority in these partnerships is valued by its partners. Outcomes are measured and are driving future plans within the 2005/06 draft IRMP.
- 61 The Fire Authority endorses and encourages partnerships at an international level. There is a reciprocal agreement with Colorado fire service in the United States. Officers attending this facility gain a recognised qualification to undertake fire investigations and train fire investigators. Training is subsequently provided by the Fire Authority to Essex Police detectives and scene of crime officers to identify arson related incidents. The Fire Authority is therefore building capacity through quality training being cascaded to partner organisations.
- 62 Members are beginning to take ownership and an active role in partnerships. They are changing the attendance protocol for meetings where the management of partnerships has been recognised as underdeveloped. For example, some CDRP's were highlighted in a strategic review of partnership working which showed that 57 per cent of partners did not know of the strategic vision and aims of the Fire Authority. The result of this has had some impact on service delivery and partner engagement. Members are demonstrating a commitment to partnerships and now attend all CDRPs with officers. This action will help ensure that members are better informed in their decision-making and ensure that partnership working is supported at a political level to maximise its value.

Capacity: people

- 63 This theme is scored by this assessment as 2 – performing at only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 64 Not all human resource (HR) policies are implemented effectively. Management acknowledge that considerable work is required to ensure that effective HR working practices, which underpin management action, are in place. Although new policies have been developed some have yet to be implemented. For example, an absence policy has been in draft for a considerable period of time but not implemented due to a failure to agree with the unions. An HR advisor has been appointed to provide support to managers in the implementation of policies, to monitor equal opportunities, and to ensure consistency of approach across community commands. Until effective HR policies are implemented, the Fire Authority is not well-placed to ensure effective delivery of some aspects of the modernisation agenda.
- 65 The Fire Authority is failing to manage staff absences effectively. Sickness absence remains a particularly challenging issue. In 2001/02, time lost by whole-time uniformed staff was 13.4 per cent of working days or shifts. This rose to 14.5 per cent in 2002/03. For the same period, the percentage of working days or shifts lost by all staff rose from 13.7 per cent to 14.6 per cent. This is above the national and family group average for each of those periods. The Fire Authority has identified absence management as a priority area for improvement. The HR department is to lead a partnership with the occupational health service and staff representatives to address the issue. The Fire Authority acknowledges that the costs arising from ineffective absence management in terms of money and expertise are significant. Sustained high levels of absence have an adverse impact on the organisation's ability to deliver its services effectively.
- 66 The Fire Authority's workforce is not reflective of its communities. While 51 per cent of the population of Essex is female (43 per cent are economically active), and 5.5 per cent are from BME backgrounds, women constitute 11.4 per cent of the workforce and 1.2 per cent of employees are from BME backgrounds of which 0.8 per cent are uniformed staff. Between 2001/02 and 2003/04, the proportion of the top 5 per cent earners who were women fell from 11.1 per cent to 8.5 per cent. Despite this fall, the figure is above the national average for fire authorities. The Authority does not have any staff from ethnic minority communities in the top 5 per cent of earners. The Fire Authority has implemented targeted action to increase the numbers of women and people from minority communities across the organisation but action has yet to result in notable improvements. This situation mirrors the national position overall in the fire service.
- 67 The Fire Authority is ensuring the necessary skills are in place to deliver its priorities. It has ensured that training for members is undertaken to develop their knowledge and inform them of the Fire Authority's direction within the national agenda for fire and rescue services. Members highly valued the successful away day that 60 per cent of them attended. Staff training and development is delivered through a partnership arrangement with Anglia Polytechnic University. This ensures that members and staff are adequately trained to deliver corporate priorities.

- 68 The Fire Authority is forward-thinking in that it is looking to the longer-term advantages that staff development will bring to the organisation and communities it serves. To this end, it has made good progress and is committed to ensuring implementation of a rigorous IPDS programme that addresses staff development needs. It has taken a broad-based approach to ensuring development programmes are relevant to individual needs and accessible to all staff. In addition to in-house training programmes, it has initiated partnerships with external education and development providers. Gaps have been identified within the IPDS process and an action plan to address these is to be implemented in 2005/06 based on a diagnostic and monitoring data.
- 69 Health and safety training is having a positive impact on the safety, competency and awareness of staff across the Fire Authority. Between 2001/02 and 2003/04, the total number of reported accidents reduced from 280 to 187. Within the same period, there was a reduction in the number of non-operational accidents from 211 to 59. However, near-miss reporting has increased from 103 to 160.

Performance management

- 70 This theme is scored by this assessment as 2 – performing at only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 71 The Fire Authority does not have a robust performance management framework in place. BVPIs are monitored at a strategic level, but to a lesser extent at operational level. Community command areas, which are responsible for a significant part of the organisation's operations, do not have routinely devolved performance management responsibilities.
- 72 Strategic objectives do not routinely cascade down to lower level command and station plans. There is no consistent use of local indicators or long-term specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) targets supporting the shift from intervention to prevention. The Fire Authority acknowledges that further work needs to be undertaken to move the current processes and procedures from performance monitoring to performance management. As well as identifying key information for effective decision-making, this will require a culture change, with individuals accepting more responsibility and accountability for the actions they, and others, take. Lack of robustly managed performance information means that vital data to inform the Fire Authority's wider strategic direction is not being captured and acted upon.
- 73 The Fire Authority does not have routinely applied operational risk management processes embedded throughout the organisation. Community command activity for much of the prevention work is not based upon a clear understanding of risk. Instead, activity is determined by local knowledge and professional experience rather than being embedded in precise statistical information. A risk management framework, rigorously implemented and monitored, is an essential component of the organisation's ability to plan effectively for current and future risks.

- 74 The Fire Authority has taken action to ensure a clear approach to address business risks. A risk management framework was implemented in November 2004 supported by a risk management group, comprising of senior officers and members. The effectiveness of the framework has yet to be tested, and risk management practices have yet to be fully devolved to an operational level. Corporate responsibility for risk management has now been allocated to the deputy chief fire officer. There are plans in place to strengthen the performance and review team structure in light of the increased emphasis on corporate governance and risk management. The Fire Authority has completed a strategic risk profiling exercise and as a result of this has completed its draft strategic risk and planning profile. This document goes further than a strategic risk register by including a planning profile, which will enable the Fire Authority to set out what are and are not its priorities.
- 75 Corporate-level risk procedures have clear outcomes, such as the risk-based transfer of external services to the ALMO. Risks were owned by a member-led management board to identify and monitor corporate risks. The result of this now successful transfer to the new company is clear evidence of a corporate risk management policy working well.
- 76 The Fire Authority's property services have implemented a good quality approach to risk assessment. The 25-year stock condition survey referred to above has been further supported by a nine-year repairs programme, and is subject to annual review and reported to members. Risk assessments, using a traffic light system for each property project undertaken, were implemented in January 2005.

What has the Fire Authority achieved and, in the light of that, what does it plan to do next?

Achievement of objectives

- 77 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 78 The Fire Authority is able to demonstrate that it delivers an effective service in key operational areas – this is despite the lack of a robust performance management system being in place. A high level of performance was achieved in 2003/04 for the low number of accidental dwelling fires. With only 12.7 fires per 10,000 dwellings this performance was the best in the family group and the second best performance when compared to all fire authorities in England. A good, below median performance when compared to the family group, was reported for the total number of calls to fire, the number of primary fires and the number of false alarms caused by automatic fire detection apparatus. This supports the first strategic aim in protecting and making the communities safer.
- 79 In 2003/04, the service received a high number of malicious false alarms and also did not compare favourably to the family group for the number of injuries reported in accidental dwelling fires. The service reported 0.49 deaths per 100,000 people in 2003/04. This equates to eight deaths, reflecting an above median performance when compared to the family group. The number of deaths has increased in 2004/05. Up to the end of January, 13 lives had been lost in dwelling fires.
- 80 The Fire Authority's first strategic aim is to 'reduce the risk to the community from fire and other emergencies through a balanced combination of protection, prevention and emergency response'. The following section covers achievement against this aim.

Prevention

- 81 The Fire Authority has been effective in delivering community safety initiatives both centrally through the community safety team, and through the community safety liaison officers in each of the seven community commands. The service has appointed a dedicated education officer and youth coordinator for community safety. Backfire, an initiative aimed at 11 and 12-year olds has successfully focused on the high number of hoax calls made to the service. The initiative has reached approximately 15,000 pupils in Essex schools. This, together with other targeted campaigns and partnerships with British Telecom and other mobile service providers to tackle numbers from which hoax calls are made, has resulted in significantly fewer hoax calls being received.
- 82 The Fire Authority has a clear approach to assessing the impact of community safety initiatives. The Juvenile Fire Setters scheme has targeted 784 individuals between 1998 and 2004 who have either started fires or have a fascination with fire or the emergency service. The scheme, involving counselling from trained fire fighters has been successful, with a re-offending rate of only 2.2 per cent. The service has also targeted campaigns to risk areas including the '2 fast, 2 furious, 2 dead' campaign delivered in partnership with the South East Essex community safety partnership aiming to reduce the locally high number of road accidents. Although it is too early to be able to show the impact of the campaign, a survey indicates that it has been successful in reaching the target audience.

- 83 The service is proactive in developing and implementing best practice. It was a key player in developing the national child safety protocol with the ODPM and seeks best practice both nationally and internationally including through close links with East Kentucky University, USA.

Protection

- 84 The service has a clear approach to protecting the communities its serves. People at greatest risk are being targeted both through specific initiatives and by working in partnership with other agencies. The service has trained staff from social services to identify those at most risk, particularly elderly and disabled people. Following referral to the Fire Authority, home assessments have been undertaken which include the installation of smoke detectors. The importance of protecting people with disabilities in their homes has been raised through a competition with key partners to install two free domestic sprinkler systems. Effective use is being made of retained firefighters and non-uniform staff in delivering the community safety work and this is contributing to the low number of accidental dwelling fires reported.
- 85 Resources for community safety have been released from the savings identified in the IRMP, and through external funding, particularly the £640,000 over four years secured from the government's innovation fund for smoke detectors and other community safety equipment. Staff support the shift in resources from intervention to protection but there has been a delay in introducing home safety assessments in part due to the time taken for the management and FBU to reach agreement over the use of suitable equipment.
- 86 Robust systems have yet to be put in place to determine whether the Authority's community safety activity is being directed towards those who need it most. Progress on populating a system with rigorous performance data, such as the government Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC) software system, has been slow. A GIS system was being rolled out at the time of the assessment which is a step in the right direction.

Intervention

- 87 Intervention response for fires and other emergencies is consistently high, as measured against the former national standards of fire cover. The IRMP has been used to determine a lower but still fully acceptable level of response to the high percentage of false alarms from automatic fire detection equipment, and the new response is about to be implemented. This saves resources and maintains cover in the event of a real emergency.
- 88 The Fire Authority is clearly able to demonstrate value for money. Efficiency savings have been secured from areas of operational response and reinvested into community safety, for example, the re-designation of Ongar fire station from wholetime to retained status. Through this redirection of resources the Fire Authority is able to respond flexibly to the focus on community fire safety. Effective procurement is also delivering value for money, for example through the procurement of personal protective equipment. The service cost £33.50 per capita in 2003/04. This was about median when compared to the family group and to all fire services in England.
- 89 The Fire Authority is an active member in the RMB. It leads on the human resource function and contributes significantly in the other five key areas of work undertaken by the RMB. The Fire Authority is therefore leading by example and sharing and implementing best practice on a regional basis.

Achievement of improvement

- 90 This theme is scored by this assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 91 The Fire Authority demonstrates areas where the service has both improved performance and where it has maintained an already high performance. The low number of accidental dwelling fires described above has been maintained over the last three years. The maintenance of a low number and accidental false alarms has been maintained for the last three years with approximately 103 false alarms per 1,000 non-domestic properties reported in 2003/04. The targeted and proactive action to address hoax calls has resulted in a significant reduction in such calls received by the Authority. The initiatives mentioned earlier and the introduction of a call challenge procedure have seen an approximate 50 per cent drop in the number of hoax calls to December 2004 compared to 2003.
- 92 The service has contributed to the increase in the number of homes that have smoke detectors. An independent survey in 2003 found that only 11 per cent of homes did not have a smoke detector. This was an improvement on the 2000 survey when 14 per cent did not have one. The service is targeting vulnerable communities in this work, including the installation of over 200 smoke detectors in the homes of the travelling community. Increasing smoke detection ownership is important in reducing the number of deaths and injuries in domestic fires.
- 93 Communities are satisfied with the fire service, with 68 per cent of Essex residents expressing satisfaction, in an independent survey in 2003. Some initiatives have resulted in an increased level of satisfaction in the local area reported by communities. The fire service led the Safer Thurrock Partnership in the successful Environmental Action days. As well as being awarded a ‘best community initiative’ award in 2004 from the Association of Public Services Excellence, the action days have resulted in community satisfaction levels increasing from 37 per cent in 2002 to 60 per cent in 2004. The Fire Authority has received 19 complaints over the last three years many of which were of a minor nature. They were dealt with promptly and in accordance with the complaints procedure.
- 94 The Fire Authority is aware of the constraints on its ability to improve. This includes the challenging industrial relations environment, nomination for the setting of a notional budget for 2005/06, and capacity when considered against Government and local priorities and aspirations. Despite these constraints the Fire Authority is making some progress such as against financial constraints by the savings secured through the IRMP process which have been reallocated to deliver community safety work. It has recognised that cultural change is necessary if it wants to implement change effectively across the organisation. Both an awareness of constraints and progress against them places the Authority in a good position to deliver future improvement.
- 95 There are areas where performance is not improving although these are not exclusively under the Fire Authority’s control. The number of calls to fire has increased from approximately 66 to 77 calls per 10,000 population between 2001/02 and 2003/04. Injuries from accidental dwelling fires have also increased over the same period from 8 to 11 injuries per 100,000 population. There has also been an increase in the number of fire deaths although the numbers are low overall.

- 96 The service is not able to consistently demonstrate improvement because of the lack of SMART targets in its operational plans. This prevents effective monitoring of the impact of work against many of its own strategic aims and objectives. This is acknowledged, and command and station plans being developed for 2005/06 will address this.

Future plans

- 97 This theme is scored by the assessment as 3 – consistently above the minimum requirements, performing well.
- 98 The Fire Authority has put in place robust future plans. For example, it has developed a clear business planning process which is closely linked to the IRMP. Performance is reported against both BVPI's and the new local strategic indicators that are being put in place. Clear projects and actions are laid out within the service delivery plan; these are SMART and are supported with project planning guidance for those responsible for their delivery. This goes some way to address the identified lack of performance management and should enable the delivery of national targets and corporate priorities in an effective manner.
- 99 The Fire Authority is able to demonstrate that it has the political will and management capacity to take difficult decisions and make significant change. For example in establishing the successful ALMO the profits it makes are being used to deliver corporate priorities. This effective approach to driving through some major issues places the Fire Authority in a good position for future improvement.
- 100 The Fire Authority is building sound information on which to base its future long-term decisions. There are established plans in place, such as the integrated safety plan, medium-term financial plan and a 25-year asset management plan. An overall robust framework for future planning beyond the short and medium-term is beginning to develop. For example, a draft strategic planning profile has been produced which will feed into the IRMP for 2006/07. The Fire Authority is also implementing an improvement programme for its HR strategy and policies to better reflect the organisation's current and future staffing needs.
- 101 The Fire Authority is developing a clear framework to enable it to respond to change. A future planning group is being established to assess the impact of future pressures on the Fire Authority, such as those associated with climate change. The risk management group is expected to lead on this work, with its threat assessment subgroup taking a lead on the detailed work. Such an approach should enable the Fire Authority to develop robust future strategies.
- 102 The Fire Authority is active at seeking out learning opportunities. For example, it has innovative partnerships with Anglia Polytechnic University to provide training, development and consultancy services. It seeks external good practice from other fire authorities for such things as the Firebreak scheme, which is designed to assist young people in their development and to promote fire safety. The Fire Authority shares learning through its partnerships. The Fire Authority leads on human resources on the RMB and the monthly meetings often include external speakers. This provides an opportunity for continued professional development to be gained by human resource professionals across the region, and enables the Fire Authority as a whole to continuously learn and improve.

- 103 The Fire Authority has demonstrated self-awareness. For example, it identified that continued personal development has been inconsistent and has therefore established a professional management network for managers so that they may share learning, to mutual benefit and for the benefit of the Fire Authority as a whole.
- 104 The Fire Authority has effective project management arrangements in place to manage and reassess its strategic objectives. However, capacity issues have resulted in the 46 IRMP strategic objectives being reviewed annually rather than every 6 months. A revised structure is being considered to address this, which will enable the Fire Authority to review its objectives on a more frequent basis and keep members up-to-date with progress.
- 105 Internal challenge has not been fully effective due to human resource capacity issues. For example, best value reviews have not been used to challenge internal performance for the past three years. The Fire Authority has a partnership arrangement with the Hampshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire and Luton fire authorities to carry out joint European foundation for quality management (EFQM) assessments. This positive arrangement has not been progressed for some time. Without a systematic review programme the Fire Authority cannot sufficiently challenge and improve internal performance.
- 106 There are examples of innovation, but there is no mechanism in place for staff across the organisation to report this in a systematic way and to thus share learning. The lack of a robust staff suggestion scheme and ineffective departmental meetings are regarded by staff as contributory factors to poor communication. The role of the senior management team, which includes the seven community commanders, has been revised to incorporate suggestions on best practice and innovation. This will enable the Fire Authority to capture and implement innovations in a more methodical way.

Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses

A - What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Leadership and priorities <i>Score 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New mechanism for community consultation is now in place through the community consultation group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autocratic management style. • The strategic aims, supporting the vision, are too inwardly focused. • Partners and communities could be engaged much more in shaping the vision and strategic direction. • Priorities and non-priorities not clear. • Staff engagement and communication with staff could be more effective.
A balanced strategy <i>Score 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced strategy has resulted in a clear shift of resources from intervention to prevention. • Clear examples where IRMP has resulted in driving through difficult decisions to release efficiency savings for reallocation to prevention. • Active involvement in effective partnerships contributing to the wider social agenda. • Flexible approach to changing environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRMP targets have yet to be reflected in service plans. • Lack of an effective strategic approach to engaging all sections of the community.

B - How has the Fire Authority set about delivering its priorities?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity: Governance and management <i>Score 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear governance arrangements in place. • Members' awareness of responsibilities and accountabilities and cross party support. • Management generally effective – eg delivered a service restructure to support modernisation agenda. • Track record in development of commercial services – established a profitable ALMO. Profit distributed to support CDRPs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICT limitations – widespread effective availability to members and to key staff yet to be achieved.

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Capacity: Resources and value for money</p> <p>Score 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and service planning effectively integrated to enable delivery of the modernisation agenda. • Sound financial management systems. • Value for money is effective and embedded in Fire Authority's work. • Comprehensive review of property and its management undertaken. • Clear approach taken to ensure effective partnership working that contributes to the Fire Authority's vision. • Members are active in partnership working. 	
<p>Capacity: People</p> <p>Score 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to IPDS through a rigorous system being put into place to address staff development. • Ensuring necessary skills are in place through training. • Health and safety training having positive impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all human resource policies are effectively implemented eg absence policy written but yet to be implemented. • High and rising staff absences not being managed effectively. • Workforce not reflective of the communities it serves.
<p>Performance management</p> <p>Score 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management framework recently implemented but its effectiveness has yet to be tested. • Some corporate level risk procedures have resulted in clear outcomes eg a property condition survey and resulting repairs management programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robust performance management framework not in place. • Strategic objectives do not cascade to SMART command/station plans. • Risk management processes not yet embedded across the organisation.

C - What has the Fire Authority achieved and, in the light of that, what does it plan to do next?

Theme	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement of objectives <i>Score 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reported performance compares well in key areas eg second best performing fire authority in England in 2003/04 for low number of dwelling fires. Wide range of effective community safety initiatives delivered. Community safety targeted to address identified need in some specific communities. Effective intervention response under national standards of fire cover. Value for money, linked to IRMP and median cost of providing the service. Effective member of regional management board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some important areas of performance do not compare well eg high number of hoax calls and comparatively high number of injuries. Lack of robust targets and systems to routinely demonstrate performance achievements and target community safety initiatives.
Achievement of improvement <i>Score 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key areas have seen improvement in performance eg reducing number of hoax calls, and areas where good performance consistently maintained eg accidental dwelling fires. Increase in smoke alarm ownership. Community safety initiatives such as environmental action days resulted in increased levels of reported satisfaction. Awareness of constraints on improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unable to demonstrate achievement against many of its strategic aims and objectives due to lack of clear targets and the associated measurements.
Future plans <i>Score 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coherent range of long-term future plans in place. Demonstrated political and management capacity to deliver change. Strengthened future planning capacity. Active learning from external sources. Examples of self-awareness and innovation. Effective project management arrangements in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited use of internal challenge to drive up performance.

Scoring key

- 4 Well above minimum requirements, performing strongly.
- 3 Consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.
- 2 At only minimum requirements, adequate performance.
- 1 Below minimum requirements, inadequate performance.

Appendix 1 - Appointed auditor assessment

107 Appointed auditors were asked to score five areas which relate to the statutory code of audit practice. When scoring each area, a range of issues are taken into account. These issues and the score that has been given in each area are set out in the table below.

Area for auditor judgement	Grade	Issues included in this area
Financial standing	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting a balanced budget. • Setting a capital programme. • Financial monitoring and reporting. • Meeting financial targets. • Financial reserves.
Systems of internal financial control	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring of financial systems. • An adequate internal audit function is maintained. • Risk identification and management.
Standards of financial conduct and the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical framework. • Governance arrangements. • Treasury management. • Prevention and detection of fraud and corruption.
Financial statements	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timeliness. • Quality. • Supporting records.
Legality of significant financial transactions	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles and responsibilities. • Consideration of legality of significant financial transactions. • New legislation.

Scoring and calibration

- 4 Good.
- 3 Adequate.
- 2 Adequate overall, but some weaknesses that need to be addressed.
- 1 Inadequate.

Appendix 2 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 108 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and the Fire and Rescue Act 2004. The Fire and rescue Act 2004 extends the Commissions powers under sections 10 to 13 of the Local Government Act to inspection of a fire and rescue authority's compliance with its duty to 'have regard to' the Fire and Rescue National Framework prepared by the Secretary of State.
- 109 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the Authority;
 - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the Authority's self-assessment;
 - ◆ a corporate assessment of the Authority's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements; assessed with the aid of the following diagnostic tools:
 - ◆ Community Fire Safety (CFS);
 - ◆ Equality and Diversity (E&D);
 - ◆ Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS);
 - ◆ Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP);
 - ◆ Partnership working;
 - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice; and
 - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 110 The assessment for Essex Fire Authority was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 31 January to 11 February 2005.
- 111 This report has been discussed with the Authority, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Authority.