



Northern Ireland Audit Office

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
20 December 2011



Northern Ireland Audit Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight

This report has been prepared under Article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 for presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with Article 11 of that Order.

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Comptroller and Auditor General

Northern Ireland Audit Office
20 December 2011

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Abbreviations

ACFO	Assistant Chief Fire Officer
C&AG	Comptroller and Auditor General
CFO	Chief Fire Officer
DCFO	Deputy Chief Fire Officer
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
DID	Delivery and Innovation Division
DFP	Department of Finance and Personnel
GB	Great Britain
KLOE	Key Line of Enquiry
NHS	National Health Service
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIFRS	Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service
RoI	Republic of Ireland
The Order	The Fire and Rescue Service (Northern Ireland) Order 2006
UK	United Kingdom

Preface



Preface

The Audit Commission has specialist expertise and experience of inspections and assessments of Fire and Rescue Services in England. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) asked the Audit Commission to lead an Organisational Assessment of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) to review its performance and, where possible, benchmark this against the 46 Fire and Rescue Services in England. The approach used in England by the Audit Commission's fire inspection team was applied to NIFRS. This report also considers the oversight of NIFRS by its sponsor department – the Department of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety (the Department).

Section One provides background on the provision of fire and rescue services in Northern Ireland including the roles, responsibilities and accountability structures in place;

Section Two considers the Organisational Assessment of NIFRS carried out by the Audit Commission's fire inspection team in November 2010. This process was facilitated by the professionalism and cooperation of NIFRS. The Audit Commission's review is provided at **Appendix 1**; and

Section Three considers what can be done moving forward, primarily by the NIFRS' sponsor Department, (the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety) to ensure that outcomes and value for money in the delivery of fire and rescue services in Northern Ireland are optimised.

Section One:
Background and Introduction



Section One: Background and Introduction

Fire and rescue services in Northern Ireland are provided by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS)

- 1.1 Fire and rescue services in Northern Ireland are provided by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (the Department), and carried out under the Fire and Rescue Services (NI) Order 2006. With an annual budget of approximately £80 million, NIFRS accounts for less than two per cent of the overall Departmental budget of approximately £4.3 billion.
- 1.2 NIFRS serves a population of 1.7 million over an area of 5,500 square miles. The Service's stated mission is 'to deliver a fire and rescue service and work in partnership with others to ensure the safety and well-being of our community'.
- 1.3 NIFRS employs around 2,200 staff with approximately 900 Wholetime firefighters¹, 1,000 Retained firefighters², and over 300 support staff. The organisation is divided into four operational Area Commands, supported by 14 District Commands with Headquarters in Lisburn and a Training Centre in Belfast (see **Figure 1**).
- 1.4 NIFRS has 68 fire stations which provide an emergency response to operational incidents and undertake a range of community safety activities. Fire Stations

can be categorised on the basis of their mix of Retained/Wholetime firefighters:

- 45 Retained fire stations (Part-time firefighters respond to calls when alerted);
- 8 Wholetime fire stations (Full-time firefighters on station 24 hours a day);
- 14 fire stations staffed by a mixture of Full-time and Part-time firefighters³; and
- 1 Volunteer fire station (Rathlin Rescue Station is manned by Volunteer firefighters who live on Rathlin Island).

- 1.5 Approximately 80 per cent (£64 million) of the funding received by NIFRS is spent on staff costs and pensions. With a capital asset base in excess of £110 million, capital investment focuses on replacement of the emergency fleet, improving communications and information technologies capabilities, updating firefighter equipment, and ensuring that appropriate training facilities and Fire Stations are maintained. Over the last six years, the NIFRS has had an annual capital spend of approximately £5.6 million.

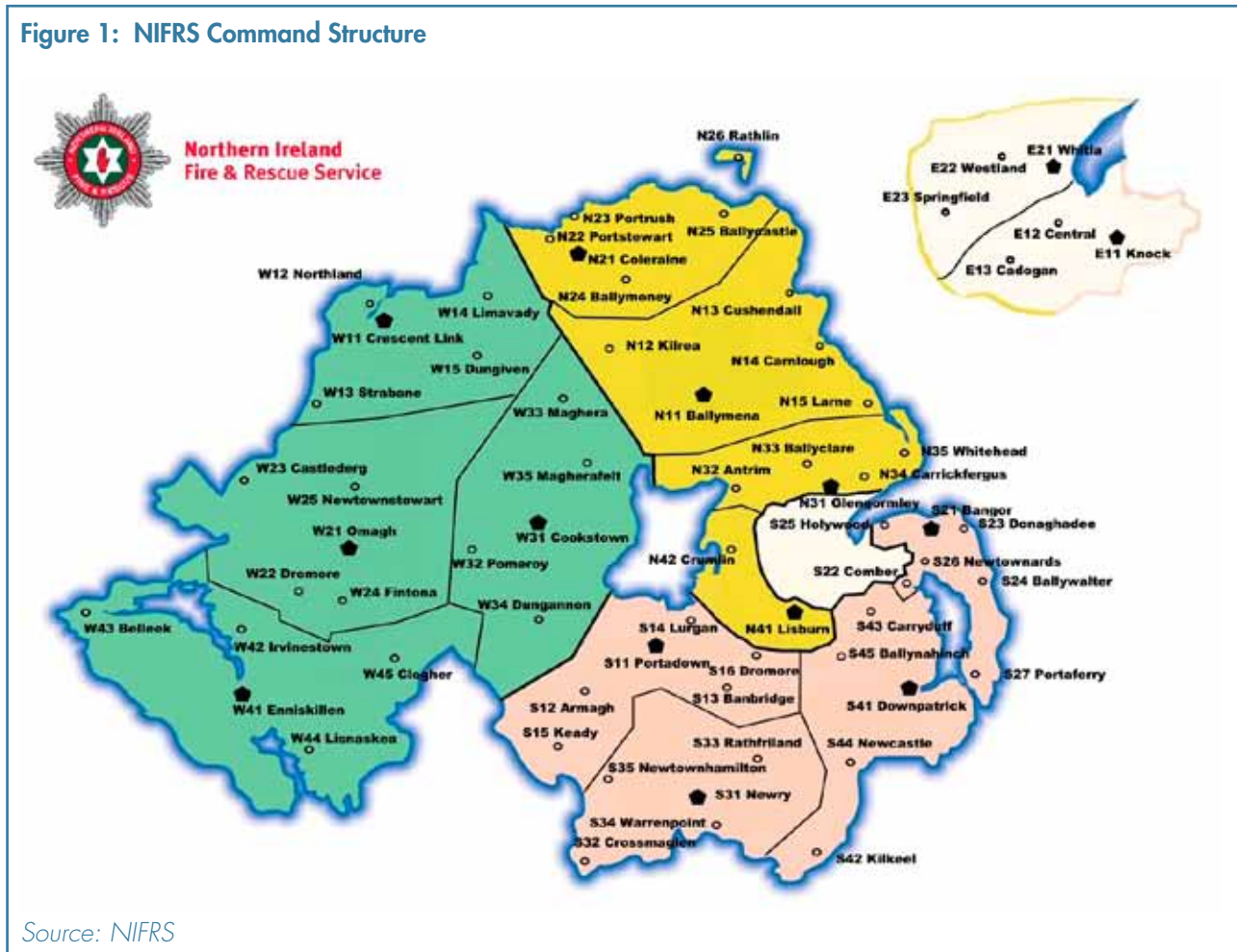
In recent years NIFRS has been implementing a modernisation agenda

- 1.6 The Fire and Rescue Service (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 gave effect to many of the proposals outlined in the

1 Wholetime (Full-time) firefighters are employed in a full-time capacity and are organised into watches (shifts) and crew fire stations 24 hours a day.

2 Retained (Part-time) firefighters respond to pagers when an emergency call is received. It is common for Retained firefighters to be either self-employed or have an employer who is supportive and willing for them to leave work at a moment's notice to attend an emergency.

3 Seven of these are Variable Crewed stations - crewed by Full-time firefighters from 11am-11pm, with Retained firefighters providing backup and, for the rest of the day, responding first to emergencies.



Department's policy consultation paper, *Northern Ireland's Fire and Rescue Service*, published in 2004. It takes account of:

- the *Independent Review of the Fire Service* led by Sir George Bain in 2002. This recommended that Fire and Rescue Services across the United Kingdom (UK) should give greater priority to improving the safety of communities by reducing the risks from fire and other emergencies, and
- the independent Quinquennial Review of the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland (the body responsible for fire and rescue in Northern Ireland prior to NIFRS), completed in 2003.

train and develop their workforce to achieve this objective. This required a clear shift in the allocation of resources from intervention to prevention, with the focus of risk prevention targeted on people rather than property; and

Section One: Background and Introduction

1.7 The 2006 Order aimed to ensure NIFRS remained broadly in line with the fire and rescue modernisation developments in Great Britain (GB) by reinforcing a modern risk-based approach to the organisation's resource deployment and increasing the emphasis on fire prevention and safety. In addition to firefighting the Order provided a statutory basis for other core duties such as:

- promoting community fire safety;
- responding to road traffic accidents and other emergencies; and
- enforcing new fire safety requirements.

1.8 There were, however, some differences in the timing of the introduction of legislation compared with England, Scotland and Wales. Whilst the majority of the 2006 Order came into force in July of that year, Part 3 of the Order, regarding fire safety, was not enacted until 15th November 2010. As a result, the statutory requirement to deliver various aspects of community fire safety came into effect in Northern Ireland almost five years after the rest of the UK. The Department told me that Part 3 of the legislation had been delayed while the Department focused on other priorities such as establishing the new structures under the Review of Public Administration.

Local Authorities and accountable to local taxpayers through these authorities and local councillors. There are 46 regional Fire and Rescue Services in England, 8 in Scotland and 3 in Wales. In Northern Ireland, NIFRS is a non-departmental public body (Arms Length Body) which is the responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where a Fire and Rescue Service is under the control of central government. Consequently the accountability framework for NIFRS differs from every other Fire and Rescue Service in GB. NIFRS is responsible to the Northern Ireland Assembly, through the Department's Minister and the NIFRS Board, for ensuring that it provides an effective and efficient service and represents best value for money.

1.10 HM Treasury guidance on Corporate Governance⁴ indicates that "where part of the business of the department is conducted with and through Arms Length Bodies, the department should ensure that there are robust governance arrangements with each Arms Length Body board, setting out the terms of their relationship, in order to promote high performance and safeguard propriety and regularity".

1.11 The governance and accountability framework agreed between the Department and NIFRS is contained in the NIFRS Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (this formal allocation of responsibilities reflects requisite HM Treasury/Department of

The accountability framework for NIFRS

1.9 Fire and rescue in the rest of the UK is a Local Government activity funded by

4 Corporate governance in central government departments: Code of good practice, HM Treasury, July 2005.

Finance and Personnel (DFP) practice for a sponsor Department and an Arms Length Body). The NIFRS Management Statement and Financial Memorandum were reviewed in 2009 and agreed and adopted in June 2011. The Management Statement sets out the relationship between the Department and NIFRS while the Financial Memorandum sets out the broad framework within which NIFRS will operate and outlines the following:

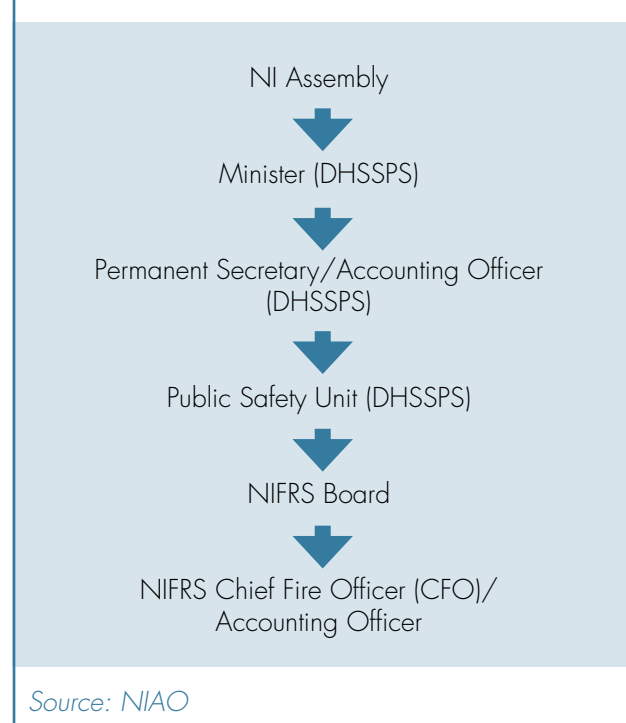
- rules and guidelines on the exercise of NIFRS functions, duties and powers;
- conditions under which public funds are paid to NIFRS; and
- how NIFRS is to be held to account for its performance.

The role of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (the Department)

- 1.12 The Department works with NIFRS to develop priorities and objectives in accordance with the Executive's Programme for Government, and in line with best practice elsewhere. The Department is responsible for the development of policy and legislation, including implementation of the reform and modernisation agenda emerging from the Bain Report, and for exercising a robust challenge function to NIFRS on its performance. This oversight function is undertaken by the Department's Public Safety Unit.

- 1.13 The governance and accountability structures for the Department/NIFRS reflect the standard sponsor department/Arms Length Body model, and are illustrated in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Governance and Accountability structure for DHSSPS and NIFRS



- 1.14 The Public Safety Unit has a number of procedures in place to facilitate the Department's oversight function. These include:

- quarterly Accountability Review meetings between the Department and NIFRS with financial management, risk, and human resource issues included as fixed agenda items;

Section One: Background and Introduction

- a Strategic Issues Group to facilitate dialogue between the Department and NIFRS on key strategic and operational issues arising, to consider emerging issues, for example efficiencies, budget and senior staffing, and to identify relevant issues and potential problems at an early stage to assist forward planning as appropriate;
 - the NIFRS Management Statement and Financial Memorandum;
 - a Strategic Investment Group to address infrastructure investment, capital expenditure, asset management plans, project proposals, plans and post-approval monitoring;
 - the receipt and review of the draft NIFRS three year Corporate Plan and annual Business Plan, along with agreed Key Performance Indicators, and the NIFRS risk register;
 - strengthened financial reporting framework including reduced delegation limits and revised monthly NIFRS financial monitoring returns;
 - attending as an observer all NIFRS Board and Committee meetings;
 - peer review of the NIFRS Internal Audit function and receipt of NIFRS Internal Audit reports;
 - meeting with the NIFRS Chair to discuss Key Performance Indicators for the incoming year and outline where
- the Department considers the Board's focus should be; and
- commissioning independent reviews and inspection reports in respect of NIFRS.
- 1.15 In addition, the Public Safety Unit completes an Arms Length Body checklist annually as part of its NIFRS accountability reviews, and attends meetings of Arms Length Body sponsor branches, organised by the Department's Governance Unit, to ensure there is a consistency in the approach taken by all the Department's sponsor branches to the exercise of their oversight responsibilities.
- The role of the NIFRS Board***
- 1.16 In accordance with the 2006 Order, NIFRS Board members, including the Chair, are appointed by, and are accountable to, the Department. The Board is responsible for:
- providing NIFRS with leadership and setting its strategic direction;
 - steering NIFRS management and operational direction;
 - overseeing and monitoring the effectiveness of NIFRS services;
 - ensuring efficiency and value for money; and
 - ensuring NIFRS maintains high standards of corporate governance and adherence to the NIFRS Financial
-

Memorandum and the NIFRS Management Statement.

- 1.17 The NIFRS Board has 12 members comprising a non-executive Chair, the Chief Fire Officer, (CFO) and 10 non-executive members, four of whom are district councillors.

Support, and for Community Safety), and three non-uniformed (Directors of Finance and Performance Management, Human Resources, and Planning and Corporate Affairs). The rest of the Senior Management Team comprises the four Area Commanders.

NIFRS Management Structure

- 1.18 The NIFRS Senior Management Team is headed by the Chief Fire Officer (CFO), who is also the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer. In addition, there is a Deputy CFO and five Directors: two uniformed (the Assistant Chief Fire Officers (ACFOs) for Technical

The NIFRS Board and Senior Management Team have been through a period of major transition from the start of 2010

- 1.19 Over the period from February 2010 to January 2011 there have been three Chief Fire Officers (CFO) and three Chairmen. A timeline of these changes is set out in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3: Timeline showing changes to NIFRS Chair, Board, and Chief Fire Officer in the year from February 2010 to January 2011.

NIFRS Chair and Board	
Previous Chair and Board ended their terms of office	14 May and 30 June 2010 respectively
Interim Chair appointed	15 May 2010 ⁵
Interim Board appointed	1 July 2010
Current Board appointed	1 October 2010
Current Chair appointed	1 January 2011 ⁶
NIFRS Chief Fire Officer	
CFO retired	26 February 2010
Acting CFO appointed ⁷	26 February 2010
Acting CFO retired	27 July 2010
Acting CFO appointed ⁸	27 July 2010
CFO appointed ⁹	25 January 2011

Source: NIAO

5 With the approval of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, emergency appointments of an interim Chair and Board were made on the basis of their experience in similar positions in other Departmental Arms Length Bodies and not by a recruitment competition.

6 The Chair accepted the post on 30 September 2010 but was not available to take up the appointment until 1 January 2011. A Vice Chair was appointed for the interim period.

7 Deputy CFO took up the post of Acting CFO

8 With the retirement of the Acting CFO in July 2010 in effect both the CFO and Deputy CFO posts were vacant. One of the ACFOs was appointed as Acting CFO with the other filling the Deputy CFO post on a temporary basis.

9 Acting CFO was appointed CFO on a permanent basis on 25 January following a recruitment competition.

Section One: Background and Introduction

NIFRS provides a unique oversight challenge to DHSSPS

1.20 NIFRS is the only one of the 17 Arms Length Bodies sponsored by the Department which is not related to the health and social care services. The Department bases its oversight approach for health bodies on mechanisms used by the Department of Health in England to provide direction to the National Health Service (NHS) and monitor NHS performance. There is no equivalent central government / sponsored body relationship in GB for NIFRS and the Department to refer to. In addition, as noted above paragraph 1.1, NIFRS only accounts for approximately two per cent of the Department's expenditure. For all sponsor departments and their Arms Length Bodies it is important to get the correct balance between ensuring accountability and good governance and allowing the Arms Length Body sufficient freedom to discharge its functions effectively.

1.22 The NIFRS financial statements were given a qualified opinion by the C&AG in 2008-09 due to irregular expenditure on salary awards to non-uniformed Directors. The C&AG expressed concern that the systems of corporate governance in NIFRS were unable to prevent these salary increases being made in the absence of approval by the Department and before the matter was referred to the NIFRS Board or its Remuneration Committee.

1.23 NIFRS was the subject of value for money studies by the C&AG most recently in 2006 in the Northern Ireland Brigade Training Centre report¹⁰ and in 2000 in the Fleet Management report¹¹ which was also subject to a hearing at the Public Accounts Committee¹².

1.24 In England the local authority basis for the delivery of fire and rescue services means that the 46 regional Fire and Rescue Services, in common with all parts of the local government sector, have been subject to annual performance reviews by the Audit Commission, in addition to their annual financial audit.

Audit Scrutiny of NIFRS

1.21 NIFRS is subject to the central government audit regime. The C&AG for Northern Ireland is head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and is responsible for the external audit of NIFRS in accordance with the 2006 Order. The C&AG also undertakes value for money studies within central government and the results of his work are reported to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

DFP's Delivery and Innovation Division reviewed NIFRS, including financial management arrangements, corporate governance, and its relationship with the Department

1.25 Following the irregular payments and qualification of the 2008-09 financial statements (see paragraph 1.22) the Department significantly strengthened its NIFRS monitoring arrangements in

10 NIAO: *The Fire and Rescue Service Training Centre*, 14 December 2006, Report HC 80.

11 NIAO: *Fire Authority for Northern Ireland: Fleet Management*, 8 June 2000, Report NIA 9.

12 Public Accounts Committee: *Second Report 2001-02*.

general, with particular attention to the Public Safety Unit. This included a restriction of NIFRS delegation limits and assurances from NIFRS that measures would be put in place to ensure breaches of control would not be repeated. In addition the Department initiated an end-to-end review of NIFRS, examining all aspects of the NIFRS/ Departmental relationship, including financial management arrangements and corporate governance. DFP's Delivery and Innovation Division (DID) was commissioned to undertake this work which was carried out between July and December 2009.

- 1.26 The Delivery and Innovation Division review consisted of two distinct, albeit related stages. Stage One of the review involved an examination of all aspects of NIFRS as an organisation, including its fitness for purpose and its relationship with the Department. This included financial management, risk management and corporate governance arrangements. The outcome of Stage One was to be used to inform Stage Two, a job evaluation of both uniformed and non-uniformed Director posts, with a view to underpinning future pay levels for these roles. Stage One was completed with the Delivery and Innovation Division report issued in May 2010 setting out the main findings and recommendations (paragraph 1.28). Stage Two had not yet been completed when the recruitment processes to appoint the Chief Fire Officer (CFO), a Deputy CFO, and two other uniformed members of the senior management team began in October

2010 in response to the retirement of the CFO in February 2010 and Acting CFO in July 2010 (see **Figure 3** and paragraph 1.19 above).

- 1.27 Following the retirement of the CFO in February 2010 the NIFRS initiated a series of temporary promotions into its senior uniformed team, including two acting CFOs. After the successful external competition for the CFO at the end of 2010, the three remaining uniformed posts were advertised – Deputy CFO, Assistant CFO (Technical Support) and Assistant CFO (Community Safety). Both the Deputy CFO and Assistant CFO (Technical Support) posts were filled but the appointment panel was unable to fill the Assistant CFO (Community Safety) position. As a result the NIFRS senior team still carries two vacancies: Director of Community Safety and the non-uniformed position of Director of Human Resources. The process to fill these vacancies has begun. The Department has asked NIFRS to confirm its senior management configuration in accordance with Delivery and Innovation Division recommendations and this is expected by December 2011. Once the Department has approved the structure it will initiate Stage Two - a job evaluation of both uniformed and non-uniformed Director posts, with a view to underpinning future pay levels for these roles.
- 1.28 The Delivery and Innovation Division report, issued in May 2010, recognised the need for both NIFRS and the Department to continue to implement and further embed good corporate

Section One: Background and Introduction

governance and risk management practices across the organisation. The report made 85 recommendations for change, highlighting a number of key areas which needed to be addressed including:

- strengthening corporate governance arrangements including the development of Corporate Governance Frameworks within the Department and NIFRS;
- changing the Board structure and improving the way it operated;
- changing some senior management roles in order to bring together a number of closely related functions; and
- strengthening the Human Resources function.

The Department endorsed the findings of the report and is committed to the implementation of the Delivery and Innovation Division recommendations, with particular importance being given to those relating to NIFRS Corporate Governance and the NIFRS Board.

- 1.29 Establishment of an implementation plan and a Project Board, specifically to oversee and monitor progress on implementation of the Delivery and Innovation Division recommendations, was deferred due to instability issues at NIFRS Board and Senior Management level (see paragraphs 1.19 and **Figure 3**).

The Project Board¹³ held its first meeting in November 2010, at which stage the new NIFRS Board had been appointed and 17 recommendations had already been implemented. Since then, regular meetings have taken place to review progress and to discuss plans for taking forward the recommendations. Of the 85 recommendations, 42 have been implemented to date, with action initiated on a further 31. Action has not however been initiated on 12 recommendations for a variety of reasons, including the need for legislative changes which will take time. The NIFRS Board have set up a specific internal working group to take forward the recommendations relating to the Board and governance issues. In our opinion, in order to drive through the changes, it is vital that recommendations have a roadmap to implementation, including milestones, and the mechanisms to achieve these.

- 1.30 The Delivery and Innovation Division report viewed the role of the NIFRS Board in the years ahead as overseeing the strategic direction of NIFRS, performance monitoring and ensuring good governance arrangements, including risk management, were in place. We would concur with both the Delivery and Innovation Division report and the Audit Commission review which identified a number of recurring strategic issues which, in our opinion, need to be addressed by NIFRS given the challenging financial environment. In particular there needs to be a focus on:

13 The Project Board was set up by, and is Chaired by, the Department. Its membership includes representatives from the Department, NIFRS, and Trade Unions.

- improving value for money by widening efficiency proposals in certain areas, for example by further strengthening relationships with external partners and drawing on best practice from others;
- enhancing the organisational focus on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support business strategy; and
- the need for Programme Management of the significant change agenda.

1.32 In addition, the report would examine if the fire and rescue service modernisation agenda was being progressed by NIFRS to the same extent as other services in GB. NIAO viewed this as a specific risk arising from the fact that NIFRS is the only fire and rescue service in Northern Ireland and operates in greater isolation than any similar service in England, Scotland or Wales and with a unique accountability framework.

Informed by an assessment of risk, the C&AG decided to prepare a report on NIFRS

1.31 The C&AG's decision to prepare this NIFRS report in 2011 was informed by an assessment of the risks facing the organisation:

- the control issues noted in the qualification of the audit opinion on the 2008-09 financial statements;
 - the findings of the Delivery and Innovation Division report; and
 - the major transition in the NIFRS Board and senior staff during 2010.
-

Section Two: Audit Commission Review



Section Two: Audit Commission Review

NIAO utilised Audit Commission expertise to provide an Organisational Assessment of NIFRS to assist comparison with English Fire and Rescue Services

- 2.1 In England, Fire and Rescue Services are the responsibility of local authorities and therefore fall under the audit remit of the Audit Commission. Consistent with the principles of the Public Audit Forum¹⁴, the C&AG asked the Audit Commission to use their specialist expertise and experience of inspections and assessments of Fire and Rescue Services in England, built up over a number of years, to assess the NIFRS and, where possible, benchmark this against other Fire and Rescue Services.
- 2.2 The Audit Commission is an independent body with responsibilities which include ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively by Local Authorities in England. In addition, the Audit Commission assesses and reports on the performance of health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services. The Audit Commission has completed and published annual inspections and assessments of the 46 Fire and Rescue Services in England since 2003. It also publishes national studies, such as *“Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency”* (2008), which highlight where improvements and efficiencies can be made across Fire and Rescue Services in England if they followed the best practice examples noted by the Audit Commission in other services.

Audit Commission’s Organisational Assessment approach and methodology

- 2.3 The NIFRS review undertaken by the Audit Commission is viewed by the Audit Commission as an Organisational Assessment. It followed the same methodology as that used by the Audit Commission to review Fire and Rescue Services in England but was tailored to take into consideration local circumstances such as differing governance structures. The Audit Commission review also had reference to the six strategic themes identified in the NIFRS’s Corporate Plan:
- Responding to Emergencies;
 - Developing a Safer Community;
 - Leading and Managing Change;
 - Supporting our People;
 - Managing our Resources and Monitoring Performance; and
 - Protecting the Environment.
- 2.4 The approach to the Audit Commission assessment involved key lines of enquiry to enable comparison, where possible, of NIFRS performance with that of similar services in England. The Audit Commission used two key questions as a basis for the Organisational Assessment of a Fire and Rescue Service:

14 The Public Audit Forum was established by the UK public audit agencies, to provide a focus for developmental thinking in relation to public audit, and to build on the existing co-operation between the national audit agencies to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public audit, disseminating good practice in tackling common issues. The Forum enables public audit agencies to utilise audit expertise developed elsewhere in the UK and seek the assistance of other UK audit agencies to support the discharge of their own statutory functions.

- How well is the service delivering its priority services, outcomes and improvements that are important to local people?
- Does the organisation have the leadership, capacity and capability it needs to deliver future improvements?

2.5 The assessment team consisted of Audit Commission staff supported by a representative from NIAO and a peer officer from an English Fire and Rescue Service. The team had significant expertise and experience in assessing fire and rescue services and the peer officer came from a high performing service.

2.6 The assessment team collated evidence obtained during fieldwork in November 2010 from various sources such as:

- data analysis;
- documents;
- interviews;
- focus groups;
- station visits; and
- service meetings.

2.7 Some issues were then subject to further engagement with NIFRS before completion of the review in March 2011. The findings therefore largely derive from the position in November

2010. This process was facilitated by the professionalism and cooperation of all staff from NIFRS during the course of the assessment.

Audit Commission's key findings and recommendations

2.8 The Audit Commission's review is at **Appendix 1**. The assessment will help NIFRS to build on its strengths and better focus its improvement plans. The Audit Commission's report "*Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency*" (2008) shows that the best performing Fire and Rescue Services in England have proved it is possible to save money without jeopardising standards of service cover, for example by reducing the number of staff on duty when fires are least likely.

2.9 With the pressure on finances mounting for all public services, NIFRS will need to continue to identify how it can be more efficient and reduce costs, including staff overtime for example, through its Resource Management Review Project which is on-going. The Audit Commission review echoes the Delivery and Innovation Division report in several areas and in our opinion, both documents provide a framework for NIFRS to move forward in the current, challenging economic climate.

Section Two: Audit Commission Review

The Audit Commission assessed the Service as performing adequately overall. If the Audit Commission had been scoring¹⁵ the NIFRS as they would have done in a review of English Fire and Rescue Services, they would have given it a score of level 2 overall - an organisation that meets minimum requirements, and performs adequately.

2.10 The Audit Commission assessment derives from a combined assessment of the Audit Commission's conclusions on the assessment questions directed to NIFRS (i.e. "How good is the service?"; and "What are the prospects for improvement?" – see paragraph 2.4). In response to the question "How good is the service?", the Audit Commission noted:

- NIFRS provides an effective emergency response;
- NIFRS engages in Community Safety Education Campaigns using a variety of methods such as advertising campaigns, and direct community re-engagement initiatives such as leaflet drops, attending local community events and organising their own fire safety events; and
- Working with local communities, especially with young people, NIFRS is reducing historically high levels of arson, hoax calls and attacks on firefighters.

NIFRS provides an effective emergency response

2.11 Key features include:

- NIFRS' latest customer satisfaction survey found that 98 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the overall Emergency Response Service received from NIFRS;
- over the past five years the number of accidental dwelling fires has reduced by 2.7 per cent and fewer people in Northern Ireland have died or suffered injuries from fires in the home. However, the Audit Commission noted that more people, per head of population, die as a result of fires and more are injured in fires in Northern Ireland than in England;
- NIFRS' Regional Control Centre deals with 999 calls, taking all the relevant caller information and quickly mobilising the appropriate NIFRS resources to respond to a wide range of situations including fires, road traffic collisions and other specialist rescues such as flooding. Call handling times over the last five years have improved;
- over the five year period from 2006-2011 the number of calls received by NIFRS fell by over 8 per cent to 48,632 and the number of crews mobilised fell by 4.3 per cent to 30,784 in 2010. It cost on average £2,521 for each Fire Appliance to respond to an emergency incident during 2010-11;

¹⁵ The Audit Commission started scoring Fire and Rescue Authorities in 2005 with the introduction of its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) approach. Annual National Reports produced since then tracked changes to performance and scores. These showed a clear upward trend and that Fire and Rescue Services were improving and had benefited from assessment, peer comparison and public reporting. For example Lancashire was judged "Fair" in 2005 moving to "Good" in 2008, and in 2009 had achieved a rating of "Performing Excellently".

- whilst the number of primary (major) and secondary fire calls mobilised reduced by almost 13 per cent, the number of Special Service¹⁶ calls increased significantly (17.6 per cent) over the last five years. There has been a significant increase in wild land fires and flooding incidents in recent years. In 2010-11 the number of gorse fires tackled was 5,092 representing an increase of 158 per cent from the previous year;
- the number of Road Traffic Collisions attended had remained relatively steady since 2006, averaging 760, but in 2010-11 this fell significantly by 17.6 per cent to 612, with the number of road traffic fatalities being halved to 31; and
- in April 2006 NIFRS committed to achieving local Emergency Response Standards¹⁷ and has consistently achieved the 75 per cent response target for appliances attending an incident. During 2010-11 the first and second Fire Appliance met NIFRS Emergency Response Standards on 91 per cent and 83 per cent of occasions respectively.



¹⁶ Special Service calls include those to: road traffic collisions, wild land fires, flooding incidents, animal rescues, and making incidents, such as gas leaks, safe.

¹⁷ Emergency Response Standards are the times Fire Appliances should arrive at an incident and are categorised into High, Medium and Low Response areas.

Section Two: Audit Commission Review

NIFRS engages with local communities to help keep people safe in their own homes and reduce their risk from the dangers of fire

2.12 Key features include:

- NIFRS offers domestic dwelling owners a free Home Fire Safety Check and in 2010-11 carried out 12,869, more than double the previous year;
- NIFRS personnel fitted some 5,411 smoke alarms in homes across Northern Ireland in 2010-11, down from 7,580 in the previous year. The number of households in Northern Ireland owning smoke alarms has increased to 99 per cent of those surveyed, with an increasing percentage of dwelling fires where a smoke alarm had activated (66 per cent in 2010-11); and
- NIFRS engages in Community Safety Education Campaigns using a variety of methods such as advertising campaigns, and direct community engagement initiatives such as leaflet drops, attending local community events and organising their own fire safety events. In 2010, NIFRS distributed 122,550 Fire Safety leaflets – over four times the number in the previous year.



Working with local communities, especially with young people, NIFRS is reducing historically high levels of arson, hoax calls and attacks on firefighters

2.13 Key features include:

- over 60 per cent of calls received are False Alarms¹⁸ which place pressure on NIFRS resources. The number of False Alarm calls has fallen by 9.4 per cent - from 32,484 in 2006 to 29,423 in 2011, but mobilisation rates to False Alarm calls have increased from 37 per cent to 40 per cent. Mobilising a fire crew to what subsequently proves to be a False Alarm is a waste of resources;
- False Alarm responses due to fire alarm systems are the most resource intensive, with over 97 per cent of False Alarms resulting in the mobilisation of crews in

response to fire alarm systems – 8,018 in 2010-11;

- the number of hoax calls received has fallen by 31 per cent from 4,412 in 2006 to 3,036 in 2011. Since 2006 the number of malicious (hoax) False Alarms responses has reduced significantly by 36 per cent from 1,279 to 819;
- the number of deliberate (arson) fires has fallen by 34 per cent in the last five years from 2,761 to 1,832, but remains substantially higher than levels elsewhere in the UK; and
- there has been a marked decrease in the number of attacks on NIFRS personnel, from 285 in 2006 to 178 in 2011 (a 38 per cent overall reduction since 2006).



18 False Alarms can be categorised into:

- Malicious (Hoax Calls) (3,036 received in 2011 with 27 per cent being mobilised)
- False alarms with good intent (18,154 received in 2011 with 16 per cent being mobilised)
- False alarms due to apparatus (8,233 received in 2011 with 97 per cent being mobilised)

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2.14 The key features in paragraphs 2.11 to 2.13 are drawn from NIFRS Operational Statistics and Key Performance Indicators for the last five year period from 2006-07 to 2010-11. Detailed figures are at **Appendices 2 and 3** respectively.

In response to the question “Does NIFRS have the leadership, capacity and capability it needs to deliver future improvements?” the Audit Commission’s view was that the prospects for future improvement were poor. This assessment is based on NIFRS’s past record of successful change management.

2.15 In November 2010, the Audit Commission noted that the current NIFRS leadership had no track record for delivering NIFRS improvement, given the significant changes during 2010 (see paragraph 1.19), and had no basis upon which to project the delivery of future prospects for improvement. The Audit Commission also concluded that not enough had moved forward in key areas in the past three years when compared with the progress being made by Fire and Rescue Services in England. The last NIFRS inspection report, undertaken by Her Majesty’s Fire Service’s Inspectorate (Scotland) at the request of the Department in 2007, found the NIFRS to be a ‘Highly Achieving’ Service. It did, however, note a number of challenges and areas for improvement, some of which the Audit Commission found were still evident. These included matters such as: performance management; the scrutiny role of members; how good practice

could be shared within NIFRS; the loss of staff confidence; and the benefits of the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) not being fully realised.

2.16 The instability experienced by NIFRS during 2010 and the lack of continuity at Board and Senior Management Team level (see Figure 3 and paragraph 1.19) made it difficult to make progress. At the time of the Audit Commission assessment all four chief operational officers were in acting positions, the Director of Human Resources was also a temporary appointment, and NIFRS had other vacancies including the post of Strategic Planning Manager.

2.17 With a new NIFRS Board in place and most senior staff posts permanently filled NIFRS is at an important point. Strong and visible leadership is needed. The Audit Commission noted that NIFRS had the benefit of dedicated, loyal, hard-working staff who are proud to work for the Service and deeply committed to delivering a good service to their communities. Staff want to do the best they can to serve local people and are achieving a great deal for the benefit of their communities.

2.18 The Audit Commission found that Area and District Commanders provide good local leadership and are building good connections in their communities. Partnership working is making progress and delivering better outcomes for communities.

2.19 The Audit Commission concluded that, in future, NIFRS could deliver further improvements to services by adopting:

- a clearer direction and developing a well focused set of corporate priorities so managers can then prioritise actions;
- a more robust approach to securing value for money, focusing on understanding and scrutinising costs and priorities;
- improved longer term financial planning and more reliable and up-to-date risk information on which to plan ahead, in order to have greater assurance that resources are in the right place and targeted where they are needed the most;
- a significant improvement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT);

- better performance management and reporting, especially in relation to project management, to ensure delivery of actions plans and projects; and
- further improvements to people management including the need to do more to build the capability, skills and expertise NIFRS needs for the future.

2.21 A summary of the Audit Commission recommendations for NIFRS arising from the assessment undertaken in November 2010 are at **Figure 4**.

2.22 The Department told me that since the current NIFRS Board and current CFO were appointed a number of strategic issues have been progressed, including:

- NIFRS has filled two senior uniformed posts: the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Technical Support). It is anticipated

Figure 4: Audit Commission Recommendations – NIFRS Organisational Assessment

R1	Improve the scrutiny of NIFRS so there is a much stronger focus internally on driving improvement.
R2	NIFRS needs to pick up the pace of change and modernisation, harness the loyalty and commitment of the workforce, and build the capacity and capability of the Fire and Rescue Service.
R3	Update risk profiles for Northern Ireland and use as a basis for setting priorities and targets.
R4	Improve value for money - having defined the overarching priorities, managers and Board Members need to make sure that efforts and money are directed towards achieving them. They need to make sure NIFRS is as effective, efficient and economical as possible.
R5	Strengthen performance management to prove to the people of Northern Ireland how well their fire and rescue service is doing and to be assured that NIFRS is doing what it has said it would do.

Source: Audit Commission – Appendix 1 pages 36-38

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that the full Senior Management Board will be filled substantively by 31 May 2012;

- a first draft of a strategic review of its HR function has been completed. Subject to Board and Departmental approval, this is expected to be completed by 31 January 2012;
 - NIFRS has developed a programme of Assessment Centres to make permanent appointments to the large number of posts filled through temporary promotions;
 - NIFRS is recruiting trainee firefighters for the first time in four years;
 - wholtime overtime has been reduced by the strategic placement of new personnel in variable crewing stations. The first stage of crewing model changes was implemented on 1 November 2011 and a revised annual leave and crewing coping policy will be introduced in January 2012. The full suite of changes will be completed by 31 March 2012;
 - a draft Integrated Risk Management Plan has been completed. It is expected that this will be approved in February 2012 and published in April 2012;
 - Key Performance Indicators and monitoring arrangements have been agreed with the Department;
 - the Board has completed a review of its information needs and reviewed its Standing Orders, establishing two new scrutiny Committees – Finance and Human Resources - and identifying two members with specific responsibility for Risk and Business Continuity;
 - two Resource Management Reviews of the deployment of Operational personnel are nearing completion. Implementation of the review of Operational personnel began on 1 November 2011 and will be completed by 1 January 2012. It is expected that the Review of support staff will be completed by 31 March 2012.
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Section Three:
DHSSPS Oversight – The Way Forward



Section Three: DHSSPS Oversight – The Way Forward

The Department needs to further enhance the way it challenges how NIFRS uses its money and other resources

3.1 Following the qualification of the accounts in 2008-09, the Department has, over the last two years, taken several steps and committed additional resources to improve its oversight of the NIFRS (paragraphs 1.14, 1.25, and 2.22). Most notably, the Department has:

- increased its formal engagement and communication links with the NIFRS. It now attends all meetings of the NIFRS Board and its sub-committees as an observer. In addition, the Department increased the frequency of Accountability Reviews to four per year, with the Permanent Secretary chairing the mid and end year Accountability Review meetings;
- reduced NIFRS delegation limits and requires:
 - requests for job evaluations to be copied to it for approval;
 - sight of all single tender actions; and
 - NIFRS to provide evidence that economic appraisals for capital, revenue and consultancy projects have been properly approved; and
- supported the identification of two successive senior Human Resource managers from the Health and Social Care sector to provide NIFRS with strategic HR support while the post remained vacant.

3.2 Whilst NIFRS has a good record of staying within its budget, the Department needs to further improve the way it challenges how NIFRS uses its money and other resources, and how it implements change effectively. Given the specialist nature of fire and rescue services, and in line with work already ongoing in the Department, we recommend the direct use of an expert to provide strategic advice and guidance on the structure, organisation and performance of NIFRS. This would ensure that the Department, as an “intelligent client”, is able to fully engage with NIFRS on fire and rescue service issues and enhance the robustness of its challenge function by providing expert advice on emergent issues and assurance that potential management action or policy changes contribute effectively to the delivery of improvements for the future. The Department told us that it has in the past accessed the Chief Fire Adviser for England, for example on the Delivery and Innovation Division report, and has initiated a policy paper on the justification for a Fire and Rescue Adviser in Northern Ireland. It is our view that the appointment of an expert is pivotal to how the Department will deliver an effective oversight function.

The Department and the NIFRS Board should monitor and review NIFRS performance more systematically against other UK and Republic of Ireland (RoI) Fire and Rescue Services to support improvement and optimise the potential benefits of benchmarking

3.3 NIFRS internally compares its performance with a 'family group' of 16 other comparable Fire and Rescue Services in England. Benchmarking is possible but not always easy, for example, there are differences from Fire and Rescue Services elsewhere in terms of size and geographic area¹⁹. In addition, NIFRS did not have to meet other UK Fire and Rescue Services' national performance indicators, and has yet to adopt the UK Incident Recording System introduced in 2009. However NIFRS is currently piloting the Incident Recording System and this is due for completion in December 2011, with full implementation planned for the commencement of the 2012-13 financial year. The information provided will mirror that which is currently available across the rest of the UK.

3.4 In our opinion, the Department and the NIFRS Board should monitor, review, and report NIFRS performance more systematically against other UK and RoI Fire and Rescue Services to support improvement and optimise the potential benefits of benchmarking. There is a need to look closely at how other Fire and Rescue Services are saving money and improving their services, and make a

consistent effort to learn from those who are more efficient and effective.

3.5 The Department has overseen several developments in this area. For example:

- the Delivery and Innovation Division team had contact with the NIFRS's 'family group' in developing its report; and
- NIFRS reported on its performance against its 'family group' during Accountability Review meetings with the Department, and reviewed the Audit Commission's *Rising to the Challenge* (2008) report, using this to consider benchmarking with NIFRS's 'family group' members, and to inform internal discussions about NIFRS delivering improved value for money and about potential changes to NIFRS funding.

The appointment of a Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser for Northern Ireland could further support these developments.

The Department should further develop Key Performance Indicators for NIFRS that ensure transparent comparisons with other Fire and Rescue Services and which challenge NIFRS

3.6 Key Performance Indicators have been developed in conjunction with the Department and form the framework of performance reporting in NIFRS. However, the information is not shown in the context of any other comparable fire

¹⁹ Fire and Rescue Services in England are categorised into 'family groups' to facilitate benchmarking according to the size of the population served and levels of deprivation. NIFRS examines Key Performance Indicators against the 'family group' which includes the largest Fire and Rescue Services in England.

Section Three: DHSSPS Oversight – The Way Forward

and rescue services either in the UK or within the RoI; neither is it scaled to show how it relates, for example, to the size of the population.

- 3.7 NIFRS report internally on a number of Best Value Indicators which it uses to monitor performance year-on-year and to compare performance with other Fire and Rescue Services of a similar size in the UK. Whilst there are some discrepancies in terms of the data provided by NIFRS and that provided by other Fire and Rescue Services in GB, which derives from the use of different definitions, such comparative performance information is not reported on externally. For example, in 2006 NIFRS stopped reporting on its main efficiency indicator - the average cost of services provided per head of population compared with their 'family group'.
- 3.8 NIFRS currently contributes to the delivery of a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target set under the Programme for Government 2008-11. Under PSA 16, NIFRS has responsibility for reporting against the following indicator: *By 2011, reduce by 5 per cent the number of accidental fires in dwellings*. Historically NIFRS has achieved its Programme for Government target and several other Key Performance Indicators with relative ease, consistently bettering targets. The Department should develop Key Performance Indicators and standards for NIFRS which provide a real challenge to the Service and focus on efficiency.

- 3.9 The Department told us that discussions had taken place between it and NIFRS to make any target in the next Programme for Government (PfG 2011-14) challenging, meaningful and linked to improved service delivery. As noted above (paragraph 3.5) NIFRS has reviewed the Audit Commission's *Rising to the Challenge* (2008) report to consider benchmarking with NIFRS's 'family group' members as well as to inform internal discussions about value for money and potential changes to NIFRS funding. The Department considers that NIFRS's focus should be on a small number of targets directly relevant to Northern Ireland. However, in our opinion, all targets set for NIFRS should facilitate comparison with the performance of other Fire and Rescue Services if the drive for efficiency and the implementation of best practice is to be maximised.

Good performance requires a strong scrutiny role by Board members supported by good management information

- 3.10 Features of good performance include a strong scrutiny role by Board members, close monitoring of funding streams and detailed reports for managers and members to identify efficiencies. Efficiency saving measures should be linked to strategic objectives ensuring that there is no negative impact on performance. Good financial information gives managers and members a clear picture of costs and performance throughout the year and supports sound investment decisions. It is important that NIFRS has

the management information it needs to fully determine how resources are used and to make a clear judgement on the extent to which the service provides value for money.

3.11 The Department told me that:

- a new Board had been recruited specifically to improve NIFRS strategic and corporate performance and that members bring valuable experience from the private and community sectors, local government and trade unions;
- the Department provided the Chair and Board with detailed briefings on their roles and responsibilities within the NIFRS and the Minister's expectations relating to governance and accountability, and that such engagement will be repeated at regular intervals;
- the Chair now meets regularly with the Department. The Chair's Key Performance Indicators, agreed with the Department, are monitored at his performance appraisal with the Permanent Secretary; and
- the Board had completed a review of its information needs and the Chief Fire Officer's report to the Board reflects this.

A system needs to be developed to assess improvement or deterioration in NIFRS's service delivery and the ability to improve further

3.12 Given the findings of the Delivery and Innovation Division report and the Audit Commission review, the Department should consider instigating a direction of travel assessment for NIFRS to measure the extent of improvement or deterioration in service delivery. This could assess not just the rate of progress made in the previous year but also outline how NIFRS plans to improve further.

3.13 In August 2010, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) announced its intention to introduce new arrangements for auditing England's local public bodies. Following consultation DCLG intends to publish a draft Bill, in 2011, outlining how the current audit regime and Audit Commission will be replaced. In the absence of any further organisational assessments by the Audit Commission in England there has been a renewed emphasis on sector-led improvement with peer support and peer review as key elements. Peer review is based around a "critical friend" challenge – where peers provide a balanced view of areas of strength and what needs improving – of the self assessment produced by the Fire and Rescue Service. For example the CFO's Association is working in partnership with Local Government in England to deliver an Operational Assessment peer review process to meet the needs of the fire and rescue sector.

Section Three: DHSSPS Oversight – The Way Forward

NIFRS and the Department need to investigate how NIFRS can feed into this process in order to drive improvement and ensure that NIFRS keeps up with the pace of change set by the best Fire and Rescue Services.

- 3.14 The Department told me that it kept abreast of fire and rescue issues through colleagues in the Department of Communities and Local Government (the Westminster department with a Fire and Rescue remit) and government information sites, and that they would continue to examine the need for an independent fire adviser/expert in Northern Ireland. In addition, NIFRS have been in contact with the Chief Fire Adviser, Sir Ken Knight, seeking a recommendation for a service to deliver a sector-led review of the NIFRS.
-

APPENDIX 1: Audit Commission's Organisational Assessment of NIFRS (November 2010)

Organisational assessment

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Audit 2010/11

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Preface

Consistent with the principles of the Public Audit Forum, UK audit institutions ask colleagues to support them in their statutory duties where they wish to use audit expertise developed elsewhere in the UK. The Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland asked the Audit Commission to use their experience of inspections and assessments of fire and rescue services in England to lead a review of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone. Since 2004 it has been the main regulator of the 46 fire and rescue services in England. It has published inspections and assessments of individual services and national studies that highlight where improvements and efficiencies can be made.

This assessment focuses on how well the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is delivering outcomes for local people and value for money for taxpayers. It looks at how well the Service is performing now and what the prospects are for future improvement. The Audit Commission led the assessment team which included staff from the Northern Ireland Audit Office and a representative from an English fire and rescue service.

APPENDIX 1: Audit Commission's Organisational Assessment of NIFRS (November 2010)

Summary

1. Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service provides an effective emergency response. Over the past ten years fewer people have died or suffered injuries from fires in the home. Working with local communities, especially with young people, is reducing historically high levels of arson, hoax calls and attacks on firefighters. Operational training is improving and firefighters are trained to maximise their safety and that of the public.
 2. We assess the Service (the Service) as performing adequately overall - meeting minimum requirements. At the time when the fieldwork to support this review was undertaken in November 2010, we assessed the prospects for future improvement as poor. At that time the Service's Board had been in place only a few weeks and was being led by a Senior Management Team of seven, of which five were in temporary positions, including an Acting Chief Fire Officer.
 3. In the past three years the pace of improvement has slowed. Steady progress is being made but not enough has moved forward in the past three years and the instability of the last 12 months, which saw four Board Chairmen, three Boards, and three Chief Fire Officers, has compounded this. The lack of continuity at senior manager and board level has made it difficult to make progress.
 4. The Service is at an important point. Strong and visible leadership is needed. This includes renewed political leadership and scrutiny. The Service has the benefit of dedicated, hard-working staff who want to do the best they can to serve local people. Area and District Commanders provide good local leadership and are building good connections in their communities. Partnership working is making progress and delivering better outcomes for communities.
 5. But more needs to be done across the organisation in some important areas. Future improvement could be enhanced by:
 - giving a clearer direction and developing a well focused set of corporate priorities. Managers can then prioritise their actions;
 - a more robust approach to securing value for money. Costs are high and the reasons why are not well understood or scrutinised. In addition longer term financial planning is not well developed;
 - more reliable and up-to-date risk information on which to plan ahead. The Service cannot be sure that its resources are in the right place and targeted where they are needed the most;
 - significant improvement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This is slowing down decision making;
 - better performance management and reporting. Current weaknesses in project management mean that delivery of action plans and projects often slips;
-

- people management is improving. But the Service needs to do more to build the capability, skills and expertise it needs for the future.

Scoring the service

Description of scores:

Score	Description
1	Performs Poorly: An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements
2	Performs Adequately: An organisation that meets only minimum requirements
3	Performs Well: An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements
4	Performs Excellently: An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

- This review is referred to as an Organisational Assessment to make it easier to compare with the assessments of all 46 Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in England. It follows the same framework as that used in England but is tailored to take into consideration the local context. The assessment was made with reference to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's six strategic themes and in consideration of its legal background.
 - If we had been scoring the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service as we do in England we would have given it a score of level 2 overall - an organisation that meets minimum requirements, and performs adequately.
 - This score is made up of a score of 2 for current performance and a score of only 1 for the prospects for improvement. Our score for current performance has a higher weighting because there are enough examples of the Service delivering positive outcomes for communities and it provides an effective emergency response. The score for prospects for improvement is a 1 because at this time we cannot yet be certain the Service will deliver the necessary improvements.
 - We have based these scores on the evidence gained during the assessment which we outline in the main body of this report.
 - We would like to acknowledge and thank the professionalism and cooperation of all staff from Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service during the course of this assessment.
-

APPENDIX 1: Audit Commission's Organisational Assessment of NIFRS (November 2010)

Recommendations

- 11.** Our recommendations aim to help the Service to meet these challenges. They focus on benefits for both local people and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. We recommend the Service should do the following:

Recommendation

R1 Improve the scrutiny of the Service so there is a much stronger focus internally on driving improvement.

The Service should:

- provide more regular, up-to-date, accurate performance information to managers and Board Members;
- introduce mechanisms for them to analyse the information, challenge the reported outcomes and drive actions to address underachievement; and
- make sure that performance is well reported to the public.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Higher performance - staff and partners clearer about what is expected and what is being achieved.
- Improved accountability and transparency.

Recommendation

R2 The Service needs to pick up the pace of change and modernisation, harness the loyalty and commitment of the workforce, and build the capacity and capability of the Fire and Rescue Service through:

- strong leadership at the top, including the Chief and the Board, so that the whole organisation commits to change and sets a clear strategic direction for the Service over the next five years; and
 - managing and developing people more effectively - workforce planning and development that focuses on the priorities and aims to equip the Service to deliver its longer term goals.
-

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Higher performance - staff and partners clearer about what is expected.
- Increasing levels of expertise and skill - more efficient and effective workforce.

Recommendation

R3 Update risk profiles for Northern Ireland and use as a basis for setting priorities and targets. The Service should:

- Compile a new, up-to-date risk profile for Northern Ireland and review and revise this as appropriate;
- Assess current risk-reduction arrangements - including emergency cover, response standards, and deployment of staff and assets against the risk profile; and
- Set clear priorities and incorporate the risk profile in any new corporate plan that targets the highest risk and the most vulnerable and directly integrates other key strategies including financial plans, the Community Development Plan and Human Resources Strategy.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Risk is reduced - people are safer.
- Money is saved - staff, assets and efforts match need.
- Priorities are clear with plans and projects more likely to be delivered.

Recommendation

R4 Improve value for money - having defined the overarching priorities, managers and Board Members need to make sure that efforts and money are directed towards achieving them. They need to make sure the Service is as effective, efficient and economical as possible.

The Service should:

- Link reporting of costs and performance outcomes and focus it on the priorities so managers and Board members can better direct the use of staff and money;
-

APPENDIX 1: Audit Commission's Organisational Assessment of NIFRS (November 2010)

- Evaluate costs and benefits at the start of projects and again when they are completed, make sure that they add value and support delivery of the corporate priorities;
- Manage firefighters more efficiently to reduce overtime, increase availability of those working the Retained Duty System through better monitoring;
- Target efficiency savings across all activities; and
- Invest to save, for example in ICT.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- Better quality outcomes for less cost.

Recommendation

R5 Strengthen performance management to prove to the people of Northern Ireland how well their fire and rescue service is doing and to be assured that the Service is doing what it has said it would do.

The Service should:

- review its current targets to make them measurable and achievable but also challenging;
- hold staff to account for delivery of corporate priorities by setting individual and team targets at all levels and monitoring their delivery; and
- make sure that performance is reported regularly, and in an open and transparent way that allows local people to see what is being delivered and what they get for their money.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Improving outcomes, higher performance.
 - Greater efficiency and economy - learning about and sharing what works.
-

Report

Context

- 12.** Northern Ireland covers 5,500 square miles and has a population of 1.71 million. The population is expected to grow to 1.84 million by 2013. More people are coming to live in the region - about 500 a year and there is a growing older population. The number of people of pensionable age is expected to rise by 11 per cent in the next five years and 40 per cent in the next 15 years.²⁰ Older people are especially vulnerable to fire in the home.
- 13.** Numbers of people from minority ethnic groups are relatively low. According to the last Census (2001) the largest minority ethnic group is the Chinese. The black minority ethnic population is less than 1 per cent. More recently there has been an influx of people from Poland and Eastern Europe seeking work.
- 14.** In the last quarter of 2009 the Northern Ireland unemployment rate was 6.0 per cent. This was lower than the UK average rate of 7.8 per cent and below the Republic of Ireland rate of 12.9 per cent. However 2010 has seen a sharp increase in the number of people claiming unemployment benefits²¹ reflecting the impact of the current economic downturn.
- 15.** The population in the most deprived areas is falling while the population is increasing across all other areas. The Falls, New Lodge, Shankill and Whiterock wards in Belfast have the highest urban deprivation. The most deprived wards in rural areas are Castlederg and Glenderg in Strabane and Crossmaglen in Newry and Mourne. Areas of highest deprivation have the most fires. People on the lowest incomes and living alone are more likely to experience a fire and to die or suffer injuries as a result. Smoking, poor health, disability and poor housing raise the risk.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

- 16.** The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (the Service) operates under the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The Order confers four core functions on the Service: Promoting Fire Safety; Firefighting; Attending Road Traffic Accidents; and Attending Emergencies. It establishes the Service as a non-departmental public body under the management of a Board. The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (the Department) appoints the Chair and Members of the Board.
- 17.** As well as introducing changes to the fire and rescue service in Northern Ireland, the 2006 Order reforms fire safety legislation in line with the increased emphasis on fire prevention replacing the Fire Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1984. Aims to modernise the Service are broadly in line with England and Wales.

20 Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA) figures

21 Northern Ireland Executive

APPENDIX 1: Audit Commission's Organisational Assessment of NIFRS (November 2010)

- 18.** However there are some differences in the timing of the introduction of legislation. The Fire & Rescue Services (NI) Order 2006 came into force in July of that year; Part 3 regarding fire safety did not. The Regulation to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK was not enacted until 15 November 2010. This means that the requirement to deliver various aspects of community fire safety came into effect later in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK.
- 19.** The Service headquarters is in Lisburn and the main training centre is in Belfast. The 68 stations are grouped into 14 'Districts' managed by District Commanders. The Districts are grouped into four Area Commands overseen by Area Commanders who report to the Deputy Chief Fire Officer. The Service has 126 appliances and employs 1,911 firefighters. Of these 917 are wholtime staff and 994 work the retained duty system (RDS). RDS staff carry a pager and respond to calls from work or home, day and night.
- 20.** Recruiting and maintaining the competence of retained staff is an increasing challenge for all fire services especially those like Northern Ireland that rely on them in rural areas. Most of the Service's stations - 45 of 68 - are staffed entirely by retained firefighters. Of the rest 7 are whole time stations and the rest a mix of whole time and retained apart from the station on Rathlin Island which is run by volunteers from the local community. The Service has 58 control centre staff and about 260 support staff.
- 21.** The Chief Fire Officer manages the Service assisted by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer who is Director of Operations. Two Assistant Chief Fire Officers are responsible for Community Development and Technical Development. The Service has three non-uniformed directors - Human Resources, Corporate Planning and Finance. At the time of this assessment all the chief officers were in acting positions and the Director of Human Resources was also a temporary post. The service is carrying other vacancies including the post of Strategic Planning Manager.
- 22.** The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board steers the management and operational direction of the Service for the Department. It ensures the Service has the funds, staff and equipment it needs. The Board consists of a non-executive Chair, the Chief Fire Officer and 10 non-executive members, 4 of whom are district councillors proposed by the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. In July 2010 the previous board reached the end of its tenure and the Department appointed a temporary board. The Department appointed a new board in October 2010 which at the time of the review has met once. The new Chair started in January 2011.
- 23.** In 2009/10 the Service received 46,453 calls and attended 29,447 incidents. Over half the calls were false alarms - either malicious hoax calls or from automatic fire detection equipment. It attended 1,854 'special service incidents', mainly flooding, animal rescue and people trapped in lifts. There has been an increase in wild land fires and flooding incidents in recent years.
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- 24.** There are differences in funding between Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales. NIFRS gets nearly all of its income from the Department in the form of an annual grant. For 2009/10 this was £80.95 million. This funding does not specify funding for community safety and engagement activities. The Service spends around £60 million on staff costs. Expenditure increased significantly between 2008/09 and 2009/10.
- 25.** The Service's stated mission is "to deliver a fire and rescue service and work in partnership with others to ensure the safety and well-being of our community". Its Corporate Plan identifies six 'strategic themes' and we have written this report around these themes. They are:
- Responding to Emergencies
 - Developing a Safer Community
 - Leading and Managing Change
 - Supporting our People
 - Managing our Resources and Monitoring Performance; and
 - Protecting the Environment
- 26.** The Service has identified its key challenges as:
- Efficiency – Ensuring value for money without increasing the risk to the public or firefighters.
 - Performance – Developing strategic performance management, defining what matters, measuring this and then managing it to improve overall performance.
 - Managing People – Improving equality and diversity; and
 - Working in Partnership – Improving scope for collaboration to generate improvements and savings, and systematically identifying costs and benefits associated with partnerships.
- 27.** Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) compares its performance with a 'family group' of 16 other comparable Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in England. Comparison is possible but not always easy. Compared to other FRAs, NIFRS deals with a relatively high number of domestic and non-domestic properties, and a large geographical area. In addition, NIFRS does not have to meet UK wide national performance indicators, and has yet to adopt the UK wide electronic Incident Recording System (IRS).
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APPENDIX 1: Audit Commission's Organisational Assessment of NIFRS (November 2010)

How good is the service?

How well is the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service delivering priority services, outcomes and improvements that are important to local people?

Responding to emergencies

- 28.** Overall the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (the Service) provides an effective response to emergencies. In 2010 it exceeded its target of answering emergency calls in less than 64 seconds. It met its response times for first appliances on 80 per cent of occasions compared to 72 per cent in the previous year. Second appliances arrived within the target time on 78 per cent of occasions compared to 70 per cent in the previous year. Whilst it is difficult to compare response standards with other fire and rescue services because of different levels of local risk that services respond to, this performance compares reasonably well with the rest of the UK.
- 29.** People who call the Service are overwhelmingly satisfied with the response they get. Customer satisfaction with the Service overall for 2009/10 was 98 per cent. Public satisfaction with the way the Service deals with special service incidents is high. Most people thought the fire appliance arrived more quickly than they expected and 99 per cent were satisfied with the Service's response. The majority (99 per cent) of customers using the fire safety inspection services were satisfied. This compares well with England, where the national average for satisfaction with the local fire and rescue service is 80 per cent.

Developing a safer community

- 30.** Performance has improved in some important areas in recent years. NIFRS's ten year target to reduce the number of fires in the home was achieved several years ago. Numbers reduced significantly between 1999 and 2006/07 - 37 per cent - but since then has slowed - falling by 9.8 per cent in the past three years. Deaths from fire have followed a similar pattern - 7 in 2007/08, 9 in 2008/09 and 7 in 2009/10. The total number of primary fires²² is reducing year-on-year and in 2009/10 they fell again by 3 per cent.
- 31.** The Service attends a high number of false alarms. It is reducing malicious hoax calls but is not doing enough work in the community to reduce false alarms from automatic fire detection equipment. It did not achieve its 2009/10 target. These false alarms make up over a third of all incidents attended and have been increasing over the past three years. The total and the rate of increase is far more than is typical for the rest of the UK. Attending false alarms wastes money and distracts fire crews from real emergencies.
- 32.** Table 1 below illustrates NIFRS's performance against a number of indicators compared to the UK as a whole and against their family group. Exact comparison with the rest of the UK is

22 Primary fires include all fires in buildings, vehicles, outdoor structures and any fire involving a casualty.

possible but not always straightforward. For example, NIFRS is funded differently to England and Wales, it records its performance manually, and some aspects of fire safety legislation were introduced later than the rest of the UK.

- 33.** Historically there has been a higher incidence of fires and deaths and injury from fire in Northern Ireland when compared to similar services in England. Performance is still below the family group²³ average in these important areas and more significantly the rate of improvement is also lower. For example in 2009/10 there were 27 casualties per 100,000 population - over three times higher than the group average of 7.

TABLE 1

Performance Indicator	Northern Ireland 2007/08	Northern Ireland 2008/09	Northern Ireland 2009/10	Family Group mean 2009/10	UK mean ²⁴
NI33 - Deliberate fires per 10,000 population	79.8	68.9	66.2	31.0	26.5
NI33i - Deliberate primary fires per 10,000 population	14.3	11.6	12.0	7.7	7.1
NI33ii - Deliberate secondary fires per 10,000 population	65.6	57.3	54.2	23.3	19.0
NI49i - Number of primary fires per 100,000 population	251.1	213.4	223.6	192.4	195.3
NI49ii - Number of fatalities in primary fires per 100,000 population	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.6
NI49iii - Number of non-fatal casualties in primary fires per 100,000 population	23.1	23.6	26.7	7.3	12.9

- 34.** Historically there has been a high incidence of arson (known as deliberate fire setting) hoax calls and attacks on firefighters but this is changing. The Regional Control Room's Call Challenge Policy has reduced hoax calls by 20 per cent in the past five years. In 2009/10 there were 3,179 compared to 3,744 in 2008/09. This compares to a fall of 27 per cent in England between 2008/09 and 2009/10. Service figures show a drop in attacks on firefighters of 57 per cent and in damage to appliances of 41 per cent in the past five years.
- 35.** Incidence of arson fell by 20 per cent in the past three years with about 100 fewer deliberate fires in 2009/10. However it remains comparatively high. In 2009/10 it was more than double the family group average - at 12,299 incidents, the highest number by far.

23 The Service benchmarks with a 'family group' of 16 English fire and rescue services that have similar sized populations and levels of deprivation.

24 The UK mean is based on data from the family group, from CLG actual data, and from figures for members of the comparator group were available to one decimal point.

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- 36.** These achievements have come from some good work by the Service and its teams working closely with their local communities. Work with young people through projects such as LIFE (Local Intervention Fire Education) is helping to change their views of the Fire and Rescue Service. The Service has delivered 99 LIFE schemes across the region often targeted at vulnerable or problematic young people.
- 37.** Of particular note is the success of the LIFE project which the Service delivers in Hydebank Young Offenders Institution. This scheme works with vulnerable and high-risk young people teaching them teamwork and self-control, building their self-esteem and confidence. There have been seven schemes delivered at Hydebank giving opportunities to over 60 young offenders. Formal evaluation shows a measurable impact on attitudes and behaviour.
- 38.** Most private homes (99 per cent) in Northern Ireland now have a working smoke alarm. This is because new homes are being built with hard-wired smoke detectors and because of successful public campaigns by the Fire and Rescue Service. In common with services across the UK, it carries out Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSC). Firefighters visit people at home to check or fit a smoke alarm, alert them to particular risks from fire and help them form an escape plan. In 2009/10 the number of fires in the home where a smoke alarm activated was 64 per cent. This is good performance - the best in the family group.
- 39.** The Service could do more to help vulnerable people by targeting its Home Fire Safety Checks better. It is not always the highest risk homes that benefit. It sets an increasingly tough annual target to complete checks across the region and it has met them for the past three years up until 2008/09. During 2009/10 firefighters completed 8,450, just short of their target of 9,000. This target comes from census information defining households rather than risk information about where the most vulnerable live. Although Area Commanders try to focus some HFSC in areas where people are at high risk, this blanket approach means the most vulnerable are not always the most protected.
- 40.** Partnership working is developing well. The Service is represented on the local community safety partnerships and plays a lead role in the Belfast Resilience Forum which has developed and tested multi-agency emergency plans and developed the Community Risk Register. The Service recognises it could do more by working closer with colleagues in health and social care.
- 41.** The Service also makes a major contribution to the Northern Ireland Road Safety Partnership. A total of 55 people were killed on Northern Ireland's roads in 2010, according to the government. This is 60 people less than in 2009, and has contributed to a 17.3 per cent decrease in deaths over the last 3 years which compares well to England which had a 5.5 per cent decrease in deaths and serious injuries. A Specialist Road Rescue Team has been established. As a result, better knowledge about the causes that influence road traffic collisions is helping to guide joint interventions with the police and other partners.
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- 42.** The Service can show some good outcomes from working with others to tackle common problems. In 2009/10, fire safety work on Halloween contributed to a 45 per cent fall in calls. Examples of cross-border work include road safety initiatives in the west of the region and the marine response team in Belfast. NIFRS provides advertising and educational material to fire and rescue services in the Irish Republic. This results in savings through joint funding of campaigns. It also supports the annual joint National Fire Safety week. NIFRS also provides 'Safety Team', a Year Five Primary School Fire Safety Educational Programme to the Irish Republic.
- 43.** Fire stations and other NIFRS buildings across Northern Ireland are seen as 'neutral' meeting places in local neighbourhoods. Area Teams have built good local connections and know their communities well. The Area Team in Belfast has an effective role in local community cohesion projects. It has built the trust of local community groups.
- 44.** In high performing fire and rescue services, cost-benefit analysis and regular evaluation helps make sure that partnership projects represent value for money and help to deliver service aims. In the Northern Ireland Service joint work can be too reactive without a clear business case. The Service does not regularly review all its partnership projects for their effectiveness. This means it cannot always link outcomes to its investments or show good value for money from its work.
- 45.** The Service does not have freely available, reliable, up-to-date risk profiles for the region. It last reviewed its risk profiles in 2006 and last changed its Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) in 2007/08. For Northern Ireland this means that key strategies for prevention, protection and emergency response are not well aligned. This includes the Community Development Plan and emergency response standards. It prevents the Service from making sure its stations, its appliances and its firefighters are positioned where they can have the most impact. This is a major issue. All fire and rescue services in England and Scotland have to renew their IRMP every three years and produce an annual action plan that states how risks are being reduced. Fire and rescue services in Wales produce an annual risk reduction plan.

Protecting the environment

- 46.** The Fire and Rescue Service has a clear commitment to reducing its impact on the environment. It has reduced its energy consumption year-on-year for the past three years. A pilot recycling scheme is in place at headquarters. The Service has car share and cycle-to-work schemes. It is developing its Environmental Management System. It has arrangements with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency for safe clean up of chemical spills on roads and in waterways.
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What are the prospects for improvement?

Does the Fire and Rescue Service have the leadership, capacity and capability it needs to deliver future improvements?

Leading and managing change

- 47.** The Service has a track record of managing change and modernising its services, but progress is slowing. Not enough has moved forward in the past few years and the instability of the last 12 months has compounded this. The lack of continuity at senior manager and board level has made it difficult to drive improvements. Decisions have been put on hold awaiting confirmation of a permanent top team. This includes going forward with key strategies to develop its workforce and implementing recommendations of external reviews.
- 48.** Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has suffered from a lack of direction and clearly set out corporate priorities. As a result managers do not always prioritise their actions and their spending. Too often they focus on spending the budgets that they have rather than targeting their efforts efficiently. Longer term financial planning and capital spending programmes are therefore not well developed.
- 49.** Despite this lack of stability and direction the loyalty and commitment of the workforce is impressive. Staff are proud to work for the Service and deeply committed to delivering a good service to their communities. Staff are achieving a great deal for the benefit of their communities. The Service carried out a 'Quick Pulse Staff Survey' in May 2009 that showed that most staff are satisfied with their job and working environment. Areas that staff identified as needing to improve include communications, reward and recognition and leadership.
- 50.** There are some examples of good leadership at local level. Area and District Commanders have good links with their communities and good networks with community leaders. They show a good understanding of the challenges and the risks that local people face. However Area Teams are becoming increasingly disconnected from the centre of the organisation. A degree of autonomy and local leadership is essential to their role but they are working too independently from the centre and from each other. Different areas develop different solutions to the same problem. They do not always share good practice and learning from outside the service is patchy.

Supporting our people

- 51.** People management is improving but is still largely based on traditional approaches. For example there is no long term workforce planning to enable the Service to plan for the skills and expertise it will need in the future. Workforce development is not in place to support delivery
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of the corporate plan. Too many posts are temporary and the Service is carrying too many vacancies. A large backlog of Assessment and Development Centres has built up. This makes it difficult to appoint to posts even when there are potentially suitable candidates and impacts on staff development.

- 52.** The Service is strengthening its focus on equality and diversity. It set up an Equality and Diversity Forum in 2009. It has recently drafted its 10 year 2020 Vision Equality and Diversity Strategy. This recognises the increasing diversity of the population and the significance this has for the Service in its engagement with local people. It has a clear commitment to deliver the requirements of Section 75 and Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998²⁵).
- 53.** The Service understands how important a more diverse workforce is in helping it to engage with local communities and people from different backgrounds. Like many UK fire and rescue service it has some way to go to make this a reality. It has set good targets (10 per cent) for increasing the number of women firefighters in each new intake. It has had some success especially in the retained duty staff where it saw an increase of 13.5 per cent in 2008/09. Whole time recruitment was less successful at 4.5 per cent and this is because NIFRS has not been through a full recruitment process for over three years. Following research conducted by the Diversity Officer, the Service intends to set targets for recruitment from minority ethnic communities based on trend analysis of minority ethnic working population in Northern Ireland.
- 54.** The Service is improving its approach to training for firefighters and support staff. Whole time firefighters and support staff all have personal development plans although retained staff do not. These enable staff to identify individual training needs and feed into corporate training plans. The Service is developing the competence of firefighters. It delivers a wide range of core skills training. It has recently put plans in place to address a long-standing backlog of fire behaviour training.
- 55.** The Service has a positive health and safety culture and carries out regular audits. It has received a RoSPA Gold Award for the last four years and in May 2009 received a RoSPA Emergency Services Award in recognition of its continuously improving health and safety record. However it is not yet achieving its targets for reducing accidents at work despite greater efforts being made.
- 56.** The Service also did not achieve its target for reducing sickness absence in 2009/10. It achieved 8.6 days against a target of 8 days, a rise on the previous year. This comes after significant success in previous years with a fall from 12.2 days in 2006/07. Performance is still better than some other local public services, but tougher targets have been set to reduce sickness levels in NIFRS to 7 days
- 57.** Business management and front-line service delivery are hampered by poor Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The Service works over a wide geographical area and

25 This legislation requires public organisations in carrying out their duties to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation

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some stations and offices are isolated. A new Communications Strategy has brought benefits for example through regular team briefs. But the Service does not have an intranet. Staff that can use it welcome the email system but many stations have only one computer and so it is largely headquarters staff who benefit. The Service has defined a need for videoconferencing but this project has not got underway. Better ICT would benefit communications and reduce costs.

Managing our resources and monitoring performance

- 58.** Financial management and budgetary control is satisfactory. Managers track and report spend rigorously down to station level and the Service keeps within its annual budget.
- 59.** Governance is steadily improving. The Comptroller and Auditor General qualified the audit opinion on the accounts for 2008/09. This was because of irregular payments arising from an increase in non-uniformed Directors pay scales. The Comptroller and Auditor General expressed concern that systems of corporate governance did not prevent the pay awards. Since then governance has been strengthened. The Comptroller and Auditor General gave an unqualified audit opinion for 2009/10.
- 60.** The Service makes efficiency savings in line with the Department's expectations. But it achieves this largely by reducing spending on specific things rather than fundamentally reviewing the way it delivers its services. Releasing and saving money through changes in traditional working practices is an issue in most UK services but it is particularly significant in Northern Ireland. The Service does not routinely review its fire cover arrangements. It upgraded the crewing arrangements at five stations in 2008/09 from retained staff to a variable crewing model. But it did not base this decision on enough local risk analysis. As a result, costs are now increasing with no visible benefits to community safety.
- 61.** Despite tight financial management and some efficiency savings, the Service does not consistently provide good value for money. It does not have an overarching approach and there is no demonstrable leadership around value for money as a corporate goal. The Corporate Plan and the Community Development Plan set out what the Service intends to do but do not analyse the costs of planned actions. This is typical of most of the Service's main strategies. Progress reporting does not link performance and cost and there is not enough analysis to enable managers and board members to make good strategic decisions about value for money.
- 62.** Some costs are high. Based on annual CIPFA statistical returns made by Fire and Rescue Services across the UK the Service spent £59,434 for every 1,000 people in 2009/10 - the seventh highest when compared to all English Fire and Rescue Services.²⁶ The UK mean expenditure per 1,000 population in 2009/10 was £41,039 whilst the NIFRS's Family Group mean was £41,039.²⁷ Paragraph 32 earlier in this report also highlights some difficulties with cost

26 Source: 'Actual' expenditure as published annually by CIPFA based on returns made by Fire and Rescue Services across the UK. In particular, the column Expenditure per 1,000 population. This includes pension expenditure which all FRAs in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland now include.

27 The Service benchmarks with a 'family group' of 16 English fire and rescue services that have similar sized populations and levels of deprivation. The UK mean is based on data from the family group, from CLG actual data, and from figures for members of the comparator group were available to one decimal point.

comparison. For example, NIFRS is funded differently to England and Wales, it records its performance manually, and some aspects of fire safety legislation were introduced later than the rest of the UK. NIFRS also introduced a pension scheme for its retained duty staff and this has added to its costs in 2009/10. In addition NIFRS supports a relatively large geographical area and population but if these factors are considered in detail, the Service is still costing well above the UK average. The Service spent the fifth highest on firefighting but below the UK average on prevention work. In 2009/10 NIFRS spent £4.5 million on community safety work. The average in England was £5.5 million. Well performing fire and rescue services achieve much better results at a lower cost.

- 63.** The lack of emphasis on achieving value for money means that it spends too much on overtime. The overtime budget for the Service in 2008/09 was £2.7 million which is the highest in the UK. The Service reduced this by £400k in 2010/11 but it still represents 4 per cent of the staff budget. This is well above the UK average, and family group average of £322k. Further reductions are planned but not yet realised.
- 64.** The Service does not always know how many firefighters are available to respond to incidents. The Service does not actively monitor or record the availability of its retained firefighters. It has no performance measure for availability of appliances crewed by retained firefighters. The Service's best estimate is that the availability of retained crews regularly falls to 55 - 65 per cent. This is poor and not in line with other fire and rescue services across the UK. The average availability of retained crews in England is 80 per cent, and the family group statistic is even higher at 87 per cent.
- 65.** Local managers have to call in more staff than they need to compensate for those that do not turn in. As they do not know the availability of retained firefighters it can happen that too many appliances go to a call. There is one recent example of over 60 retained staff responding to one incident. Other fire and rescue services have more flexible and cost effective arrangements with staff and have more information about who is available. For example, more flexible staffing arrangements in fire and rescue services in Manchester, Merseyside, Cheshire, and Lancashire has resulted in significant efficiency savings.²⁸
- 66.** The Service lacks clear measures of success and could be more ambitious. Although it is meeting most of its targets this is because many are not challenging enough or relevant. In the past 18 months improvement has stalled in some key areas. The Service achieved a number of long-term targets in the first two or three years but did not review them to reflect this. For example in 2000 the Service set a target to reduce fires in the home by 33 per cent by 2010. This meant reducing the number from 1,324 to 887. It achieved this in 2006/07 when there were 829. The Service left the target in place and since then there have been no significant decreases. In 2009/10 there were 819 which is well within the 887 target. Similarly the Service achieved its target to reduce deaths from fire by 20 per cent over an 11-year period i.e. a target of 19

28 Please see pages 38-43 of the Audit Commission's national study - Rising to the Challenge - from 2008 on improving fire service efficiency.

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a year. It has exceeded this target for over five years. By stretching its targets the Service could drive more significant improvement.

- 67.** Performance reporting and opportunities for challenge are not well developed. The Service has a clear approach to business planning at corporate, area, district and station level. Staff follow this fairly consistently. However reporting progress including against Key Performance Indicators is not regular enough. Strategic Performance Management reports showing performance against the Key Performance Indicators go to the Senior Management Team and the Board every 6 months. The Annual Business Progress Report and Corporate Risk Register are also updated every 6 months. The Management Accounts Report presents a monthly summary of the current financial position. The Department reviews progress against key performance indicators at quarterly Accountability Meetings. This lack of opportunity to challenge reduces the scope for taking early action when areas are off track and from spotting what works well.
- 68.** Information is not used consistently to challenge performance and drive improvement with little scrutiny of how individual staff, area teams, and departments are performing. Public reporting of performance is limited to some annual statistics on the website and an annual report.
- 69.** UK fire and rescue services have become better at evaluating prevention projects to make sure that they are targeting the right people and getting the right outcomes for the investment made. However in Northern Ireland community development projects are not routinely evaluated to make sure that they have the impact that the Service wants at the appropriate cost.
- 70.** Project and programme management are still in need of improvement. The Service does not approach improvement planning well. This includes completing recommendations of previous reviews. Actions are not properly monitored and too many projects are not prioritised. For example the Service has not yet set up the Incident Recording System and Mobile Data System. The lack of clear programme management combined with poor prioritisation has resulted in an ever-increasing list of 'things to do'.
- 71.** In planning capital projects the Service does not always prepare good business cases to bid for capital funds from the Department. Too often it does not include a thorough options appraisal, for example for purchasing new vehicles or buildings. This makes it difficult for the Department to assess the case and often leads to a protracted debate about individual bids. This combined with delays within the Department itself means the Service has been slow to advance capital projects such as replacing unsuitable fire stations.
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The Organisational Assessment methodology

- 72.** The purpose of this assessment is to contribute to the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the management and delivery of the fire and rescue service in Northern Ireland. The work supports the Service in meeting its current priorities and helps it to plan more effectively to deal with the challenges it has identified. It aims to help the Service to use its resources in ways that represent better value for money and to make plans that are likely to succeed.
- 73.** The assessment considers how well the Service is delivering against the themes and priorities it has identified. It focuses strongly on outcomes - for vulnerable individuals and communities at risk - and on value for money - for taxpayers and for government. It considers how well the Service meets its duties to prevent fire and other emergencies, protect the public and provide an effective emergency response where both public and firefighter safety are paramount. It looks for clear, measurable impact from prevention and protection work.
- 74.** The report is written around two key questions:
- How well is the service delivering its priority services, outcomes and improvements that are important to local people?
 - Does the organisation have the leadership, capacity and capability it needs to deliver future improvements?
- 75.** The assessment team consisted of Audit Commission staff supported by a representative from Northern Ireland Audit Office and a senior officer peer from an English fire and rescue service. The team has significant expertise and experience in assessing fire and rescue services. The peer officer comes from a high performing service.
- 76.** The approach to this assessment is similar to that used by the Audit Commission in its assessment of the 46 fire and rescue services in England in December 2009. This involves KLOE tailored to the local context and circumstances. This enables the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to be compared with that of similar services in England.
- 77.** The team spent five days with NIFRS and collated evidence from various sources such as:
- performance data;
 - documents;
 - interviews and meetings;
 - focus groups; and
 - existing information and intelligence.
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Glossary of terms

- Appliance – services use this term to describe all firefighting vehicles, including the standard fire engine or pump (see below).
 - Community fire safety (CFS) – the range of fire prevention activities undertaken by the fire and rescue service, often in partnership with other agencies. Some activities are mandatory such as ensuring compliance with various legislation.
 - Control centre – usually contains the contact centre that deals with 999 calls. This centre must remain functioning so the service can mobilise crews and pumps to emergencies.
 - Crew – the firefighters needed to operate an appliance at an incident.
 - Incident Recording System (IRS) - in England, Wales and Scotland incidents are recorded electronically making the process quicker and simpler for managers. The definitions of certain incidents are also standardised and this makes performance comparison easier.
 - Integrated risk management plan (IRMP) – a fire and rescue service's plan to tackle existing and potential risks to their communities through a combination of fire protection and prevention work, and response.
 - Pump – fire appliances with the capacity to pump water for firefighting.
 - Resilience – is the ability of an organisation to deal with difficulties and still be able to provide an appropriate level of the service. The level of resilience depends on thorough assessment of risk, and matching resources to deal with and respond to them. In general terms, the more resilient the organisation, the more likely the public will be kept safe.
 - Retained duty system (RDS) – firefighters that are recruited to be available on call, close to their local fire station for a certain minimum number of hours a week, plus regular training. They are paid a retainer plus a call-out fee for incidents attended. The RDS is more widely used in rural areas.
 - Watch – the team of firefighters whose work rotas coincide so they are regularly on duty together at a particular station.
 - Wholetime – the usual term for full-time firefighter contracts that comprise a regular rotating pattern of day shifts, night shifts, flexible shifts and some off-duty time.
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APPENDIX 2: NIFRS Operational Statistics 2006-07 to 2010-11

Total calls received and mobilised by Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service			
Year	Received	Mobilised	% Mobilised
2006-07	52,988	32,183	60.7
2007-08	52,831	31,773	60.1
2008-09	50,115	30,409	60.7
2009-10	46,453	29,447	63.4
2010-11	48,632	30,784	63.3

False Alarm Calls made to Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service by Category					
False Alarms - All Calls	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
False Alarms with Good Intent	20,151	20,757	19,437	17,267	18,154
False Alarms Malicious (Hoax Calls)	4,412	4,188	3,744	3,179	3,036
False Alarms Due to Apparatus	7,921	7,601	7,891	8,167	8,233
Total	32,484	32,546	31,072	28,613	29,423

Mobilised False Alarm Calls by Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service by Category					
False Alarms - Mobilised	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
False Alarms with Good Intent	2,880	3,001	2,820	2,884	2,930
False Alarms Malicious (Hoax Calls)	1,279	1,204	1,099	1,000	819
False Alarms Due to Apparatus	7,761	7,459	7,643	7,957	8,018
Total	11,920	11,664	11,562	11,841	11,767

Attacks on Firefighters					
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Injury to Personnel	6	3	2	4	2
Damage to Appliance(s) and Injury to Personnel	1	1	2	0	4
Damage to Appliance	36	42	35	31	27
Hostile Crowd - No Damage or Injuries	242	217	170	156	145
Total	285	263	209	191	178

Source: NIFRS

APPENDIX 3: NIFRS Key Performance Indicators 2006-07 to 2010-11

Key Performance Indicators	Target	Performance				
		2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Number of accidental fire deaths in dwelling fires*	Reduce the number of accidental fire deaths in private dwellings.	13	7	9	7	11*
Number of serious civilian injuries in dwelling fires**	Reduce by 2 per cent year on year (10 per cent reduction by 2015) the number of non-fatal casualties in accidental dwelling fires (excluding precautionary checks and treated at scene) per 100,000 population from the 2009-10 baseline (131)	181	134	142	131	137**
Number of dwelling fires	Reduce the number of accidental dwelling fires by 2 per cent year on year (10 per cent reduction by 2015) from the 2009-10 baseline (819)	829	837	822	819	806
Number of deliberate primary fires	Reduce by 2 per cent year on year (10 per cent reduction by 2015) the number of deliberate primary fires from the 2009-10 baseline (2,039)	2,761	2,673	2,180	2,039	1,832
Number of deliberate secondary fires	Reduce by 4 per cent year on year (20 per cent reduction by 2015) the number of deliberate secondary fires from the baseline average figure of the last five years (10,571)	11,329	11,442	10,119	9,210	10,360
Percentage of working smoke alarms in private dwellings	Achieve and maintain a 98 per cent smoke alarm ownership in private dwellings	98%	94%***	94%***	99%	99%
Working days/shifts lost to sickness absence by all staff	Achieve an average of 7 days/shifts lost per year by 2015	11.8	10.4	8.2	8.6	9.1

Key:

* Figures subject to state pathologist report

** Figures subject to outstanding Fire Reports

*** NIFRS face-to-face survey by Millward Brown

Source: NIFRS

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Published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and available from:

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ISBN 978-0-337-09767-6



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