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Corporate Assessment

Lancashire Fire and Rescue Authority

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the FRA engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of FRA activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

What is the FRA, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

What is the capacity of the FRA, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Executive summary

- 3 Lancashire Fire and Rescue Authority (LFRA) has made good progress since its last corporate assessment in 2005 and is performing well in all areas.
- 4 The Authority is ambitious. This is demonstrated by a clear vision underpinned by objectives to improve operational services and address wider community issues that specifically impact on fire risk. These objectives effectively meet the requirements set out in the National Framework and reflect the specific needs of the communities across the county. The alignment and commitment of shared priorities with local partners is well developed and these are incorporated in all three Local Area Agreements in Lancashire. There has, until very recently been a lack of clarity on longer-term objectives within integrated risk management plans (IRMPs). However, the Authority's new Risk Management Plan (2008-2011) translates ambitions into long term achievements much more clearly but some gaps still remain. Strong leadership and commitment to the Authority's agenda for change has resulted in a sustained and methodical approach to corporate and service improvement. While LFRA is still on this journey and has more to do, it is well aware of the gaps and is committed to bridging them.
- 5 Ambitions are effectively supported by strong member and officer leadership, and are communicated well to staff and external stakeholders. Engagement with local communities is strong, established through a network of community advocates and good partnership arrangements - helping to ensure that service delivery closely reflects community risks. This is further supported by a thorough understanding of local risks gained from good operational analysis and other performance information, including some information provided by partners. This helps maintain a sustained focus and targeted effort on individuals, businesses and communities that face a high risk of injury or death from fire.
- 6 The Authority understands and balances national, regional and local priorities well to support its ambitions. There is a commitment and effective movement of resources to community safety and legislative fire safety activity. A risk based approach to fire cover, supported by a targeted approach to fire prevention; helps strengthen this change of emphasis from reacting to emergencies to preventing them. This addresses key objectives within new national fire safety legislation, uses resources more effectively and is reducing risk particularly in the most deprived communities of Lancashire. However, lesser priorities are not well articulated and there is a lack of clearly planned approach to road safety.

- 7 Capacity is used effectively to deliver strategic priorities. Corporate governance arrangements are sound and the decision making process is open and transparent. The FRA is matching officer skills to its priorities while recruiting new skills into the organisation to promote community safety and strengthen corporate systems. Internal capacity is developed through strong training and development and has also been increased through good use of partnerships. A good financial framework is in place and the FRA is improving its focus on value for money. However, project management arrangements are underdeveloped and current ICT systems, which are being modernised, limit the use of information available to effectively manage services. The FRA has developed a strategic approach to diversity and there are good examples of work with diverse communities across the county.
- 8 The Authority is well on its way to developing a performance culture. Performance management is integrated into day-to-day activity across all levels of the organisation, supported by a robust system and framework. There is effective exchange of learning and a number of strategic partners are engaged in data sharing. Members are part of the developing performance management process but the corporate appraisal system is not yet consistently applied to all staff.
- 9 The FRA is achieving against its own objectives and targets. Investing in priorities identified in the IRMP it is sustaining improvement in most operational areas including its response to major incidents. Standards of fire cover are appropriate to risk and response times are being met and are improving. Prevention work has helped address local and national priorities and levels of improvement compare well with other authorities. The numbers of fires and deaths and injuries from fires have fallen significantly over the last three years, but remain high in comparison with other fire authorities.
- 10 Effective engagement with the communities of Lancashire, particularly those which include some of the most vulnerable residents, has improved the public's perception of the Authority and the quality of the life of many individuals. Overall fire risk levels have reduced and most markedly in the high risk areas of the county. This has been the result of targeted prevention and education work for example with young people, older people, migrant workers and black and minority ethnic (BME) communities - in some of the most deprived areas of Lancashire. The FRA, often within multi agency partnerships, is achieving its overarching priority of improving community safety while also having a positive impact on wider social objectives.

Areas for improvement

- 11 In order to focus resources, the FRA should provide greater clarity on areas that are not priorities and take a more planned approach for dealing with lesser priorities such as road traffic collisions.
- 12 The FRA should develop a robust approach to project management and improve its supporting systems, including:
 - ensuring project management skills are in place at appropriate levels in the organisation and member oversight is sufficient for the scale and risk of projects;
 - centrally co-ordinating all projects, including those within the IRMP, to ensure the Authority has the capacity to deliver complex changes while maintaining high level services; and
 - improving and integrating ICT systems to make best use of partner's data and provide accessible, useful and reliable management information.

Summary of assessment scores

What is the Fire Authority trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	3
What is the capacity of the Fire Authority to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement and improvement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**	Good	
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance 2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance 3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well 4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

Context

The locality

- 13 Lancashire is a county in the north west of England encompassing 15 councils - Lancashire County Council, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen unitary councils and twelve district councils. The 3,000 square km of Lancashire is geographically and demographically diverse. The majority of its 1.4 million population live in the urban centres of Blackpool, Preston, Blackburn and Burnley but the county also has a significant number of dispersed rural communities. There is a wide range of industrial and commercial property and Blackpool and Morecambe are significant tourism destinations. Lancashire has over 400 kilometres of coastline, a number of major motorways and some isolated communities. As a result risk of fire and other emergency incidents is wide and varied.
- 14 Lancashire's economy overall is strong and buoyant with a mix of traditional and emerging industries. Unemployment is low at 5.2 per cent and there are areas of prosperity. However, the county also has real social challenges with four of Lancashire's districts in the 'top 50' most deprived in England. At the smaller 'super output area' (SOA) level¹, almost a quarter of Lancashire's 940 SOAs are in the UK's 20 per cent most deprived. Research strongly indicates a link between local socio-economic factors and the incidence of fires. Lancashire also has a significant black and minority ethnic (BME) community comprising 7 per cent of the total population. BME communities are centred mainly in a small number of locations. Blackburn with Darwen, for example, has the highest proportion (21 per cent) of residents of South Asian origin of any local authority area outside London.
- 15 A range of factors in Lancashire increase the risk of death and injury from fire. Health inequalities are significant with life expectancy and levels of chronic diseases significantly above the national average and levels of binge drinking in adults 30 per cent higher. In addition the county has seen a large influx of migrants from the newly expanded European Union. These migrants commonly live in houses of multiple occupancy which are often poorly managed. This combined with cultural differences and not speaking English as a first language increases their risk of being killed or injured from fire.

¹ Areas of consistent population size with a mean of 1,500 residents (minimum 1,000).

The FRA

- 16 Lancashire Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority or FRA) consists of 25 members drawn from Lancashire County Council (19) and Blackburn with Darwen (3) and Blackpool (3) Unitary Authorities. The current political makeup is 12 Labour, 10 Conservative and 3 Liberal Democrat members with no party having overall control. The full FRA, which meets five times annually, is supported by five standing committees (Planning, Resources, Audit, Performance and Standards) and a sixth Appeals Committee.
- 17 The fire and rescue service is managed by an Executive Board comprising of the Chief Fire Officer and five service Directors. The Board meets weekly, and is joined monthly by all Heads of Department to form the Service Management Team (SMT). The five directorates are Finance, People and Development, Policy Planning and Review, Service Delivery and Support Services.
- 18 The Authority is a member of a wide range of strategic regional and county bodies: including the Lancashire Road Safety Partnership and the North West Fire and Rescue Management Board.
- 19 Lancashire FRA has 39 fire stations containing 60 fire engines and a range of specialist vehicles. The Authority employs over 1,500 staff, of these 80 per cent are operational with the remainder undertaking a range of specialist or general support roles. Fire and rescue services are provided through a variety of duty systems. Over 50 per cent of the FRA's operational response is provided by retained duty system (RDS) staff. The FRA also has the largest fire training centre in the country and a dedicated emergency control centre.
- 20 Significant changes have been made, in the past three years, in the management of fire stations and fire cover in order to address budget pressures. New duty systems at stations with low levels of activity and risk have been introduced together with a more flexible and targeted approach to fire prevention and operational response.
- 21 The net revenue budget for 2007/08 is £58.831 million, utilising £0.6 million reserves, which equates to an increase of 4 per cent from 2006/07. The FRA has identified savings in excess of £1.3 million for 2007/08. Council tax increases for 2007/08 are 4.99 per cent, resulting in a band D council tax of £57.44, which is slightly lower than the national average of £59.03. Savings of over £5.9 million over the last three years have enabled investment in priority services such as community safety whose budget increased by £1.5 million during this period.
- 22 In May 2005, Lancashire FRA was rated as fair in its corporate assessment.

What is the FRA trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 23 Lancashire FRA is performing well in this area. The Authority is clear about what it wants to achieve for its communities, has good political and managerial leadership and is working well across a range of partnerships to improve the safety of the citizens of Lancashire. Ambitions are based on a good understanding of risk and are developing to address wider community challenges. However, longer term outcomes supporting most ambitions have only recently been developed.
- 24 The FRA's Risk Management Strategy (2008/11) sets out a clear overarching vision 'Working together to make Lancashire safer'. The strategy effectively articulates the balance between intervention, prevention and protection and the importance of all these elements in reducing risk. This vision is underpinned by corporate objectives which also encompass wider agendas these are; to reduce the number of emergency incidents and their consequences, ensure a healthy, competent and representative workforce, reduce the impact on the environment and help build stronger, healthier and more sustainable communities. The Authority strives to achieve these objectives through efficient and effective working that provides value for money. This clarity of direction effectively translates the requirements set out in the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Authorities (2006) as well as the central government priority to provide effective and efficient public services.
- 25 The alignment of ambitions with local authority partners is well developed. There are fire and rescue objectives included in all three Local Area Agreements (LAA) in the county. Supporting these are stretch targets for reducing deaths and injuries from fire in Lancashire County Council's agreement, and for reducing deliberate fires in Blackpool Unitary Authority's LAA. LFRA is committed to meet these targets in partnership with other statutory agencies such as the police. This is helping to strengthen the ownership of the aims and objectives of LFRA amongst its partners and is providing a more joined up approach to tackling a range of cross cutting issues that impact on fire risk.
- 26 The ambitions of the Authority are supported by strong leadership. Senior and middle managers are committed to the development of an holistic approach to achieving safer and stronger communities. There is a good understanding of the causes behind increased fire risk, such as social exclusion and poor health, and a commitment to work in partnership to address inequalities in Lancashire's population that exacerbate risk. The Authority is well represented on the Regional Management Board (RMB) and it is a key contributor to the Northwest Fire Control project. Leadership is also represented on other county wide partnerships such as The Lancashire Road Safety Partnership and Lancashire Resilience Forum. This demonstrates a strong commitment to partners in meeting shared ambitions and priorities.

- 27 Elected members champion the ambitions of the Authority and demonstrate effective cross party working in managing the change needed in order to achieve them. Members use committee structures to work collaboratively, engage with officers, challenge performance and make difficult decisions based on good management support. They have established durable and sustained relationships with each other and with officers empowering them in their decision making role. Members demonstrate a good understanding of local issues and provide strong leadership in partnership arrangements and in promoting the FRAs ambitions within their own authorities. The recent introduction of member champions represents a further commitment to meeting ambitions such as the protecting the environment and addressing equality and diversity throughout the Authority's work. This continuity of leadership provides a consistent and shared approach for achieving ambitions.
- 28 There is a good understanding of the FRA ambitions. Members understand their contribution to achieving the vision and objectives. The objectives are generally well understood by staff and partners and are communicated well. Staff know how their individual roles contribute to the LFRA's ambitions and this is being strengthened through the new Risk Management Plan, a developing appraisal system, newsletters and team briefings. Partners are clear about the current objectives of the Authority and its ambitions to further expand its influence in areas such as improving social cohesion and addressing wider community safety challenges. Engagement with specific neighbourhoods and groups, often in partnership, ensures good communication of fire safety messages to specific high risk groups - for example with migrant communities through the introduction of a Polish speaking advocate. However, partners highlight the Authority's reactive approach to the media and the FRA's corporate approach to communications is underdeveloped, weakening the promotion of achievements. The Authority recognises this and is investing in communications to improve its approach - the Burning Issues publication being a good example of recent improvement.
- 29 A comprehensive understanding of local risk and community needs helps accurately shape LFRA's ambitions. District profiles are in place and are regularly updated. They include operational data and detailed intelligence from home fire safety checks (HFSC) and map social economic and demographic information. These profiles are supported by good community intelligence, including that of partners, at district, ward and station level, which enhances risk mapping and informs local planning. Consultation on ambitions with stakeholders is well developed through a range of mechanisms such as crime and disorder reduction partnerships and a user forum. This contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the area and its communities that ensures that efforts are targeted at those most vulnerable to risk from fire and other emergencies.

- 30 Translating the Authority's ambitions into measurable long term objectives and outcomes has only recently been developed and some gaps remain. There are three-year targets in place, in the Authority's Best Value Performance Plan, for reducing the number and consequences of fire incidents and the new Risk Management Plan (2008-2011) has three-year targets for wider objectives such as reducing the impact on the environment and providing value for money. However, there are gaps in target setting for example in reducing the FRA's carbon footprint and for public satisfaction. The FRA does not have a track record of setting and achieving targets against all of its ambitions within its last three annual integrated risk management plans. While FRA ambitions are reflected in some partnership strategies there is no inclusion of joint targets within these or district and station plans. This weakens the communication of the FRA's ambitions and the ability of the Authority to measure success, and does not provide clarity on what difference the FRA's ambitions will make to the service and to the citizens of Lancashire.

Prioritisation

- 31 The FRA is performing well in this area. The Authority understands and balances national, regional and local priorities well in support of its ambitions. There is a focus on, and a commitment and movement of resources to, community safety and fire safety activity. A reorganisation of operational response to fire based on a sound understanding of risk has released resources for educational and other prevention activities. This addresses key national priorities and requirements, uses resources more effectively and is reducing risk particularly in the most deprived and high risk communities of Lancashire. However, clear planning to meet lesser priorities and links to partner's strategies are underdeveloped.
- 32 Priorities are generally clearly stated, linked and supported in corporate documents such as the new Risk Management Plan (2008-2011) and the last two Annual Integrated Risk Management Plans (2004/05 and 2005/06). The stated priorities of the Authority are to; reduce risk, enhance resilience, tailor services to local need, promote equality and diversity and improve value for money. The relationship between risk and prioritisation is well articulated in most plans and there is an emphasis on hard to reach groups and the importance of reducing their level of fire risk. Target setting to support priorities is inconsistent. There are some clear and challenging targets in place for operational response and fire reduction, but only very recently have targets been introduced to meet non fire related priorities. The strong link between the Authority's ambitions and supporting priorities in strategies, including those of partners, provides a sound basis on which to deliver an effective service.

- 33 Financial planning is effectively focused on key corporate priorities. Resources are directed away from areas with low fire risk in order to make efficiency savings and increase prevention activity. In setting its financial strategy members and managers have been willing to take, and stick to, tough decisions. The 2006/07 budget setting involved prioritising reductions in operational fire cover based on a sound risk profiling process as part of the review. As a result three fire engines were taken out of service and there was a reconfiguration of cover, through changes to shift patterns, at stations with lower risk. The Authority is meeting the demands of the National Framework, while addressing local risk priorities. This is being achieved in the face of difficult financial pressures.
- 34 Stakeholders have a good understanding of the FRA's priorities and are given the opportunity to influence and challenge them. Staff are consulted with at a number of levels through cascade briefings, newsletters and station visits by senior managers. Feedback from staff has resulted in additions or changes to procedures. Significant changes in operational fire cover have been consulted upon with staff, partners and the public and the changes made reflect this. This has been further supported by constructive union relationships, at which the Authority and the unions have worked hard. The Authority effectively targets its communication to inform and engage stakeholders in the prioritisation of its work. Strong engagement through community advocates helps understand the needs and priorities of vulnerable individuals, groups and areas of the community at greatest risk. Partners are involved in strategy development and share ownership of many priorities. This strengthens a culture of engagement and helps gain commitment to changes in service delivery.
- 35 Members proactively demonstrate clear leadership on priorities. They are involved in setting priorities and service planning through the committee structure, authority meetings and away days. As a result, members maintain their focus on priority issues and ensure that resources are targeted to key elements of service delivery that meet these priorities.
- 36 The FRA is effectively prioritising its prevention work through its area based approach. The level and type of prevention activity is largely influenced by detailed district profiles and local knowledge of officers and partners. Area protection managers are given control over budgets and use them to address areas of high fire risk and factors that influence the level of risk - such as anti social behaviour. Area, district and station plans reflect this flexibility. They highlight local issues while maintaining a strong link to corporate priorities. This helps allocate resources effectively to meet the ambitions of the authority to improve safety for the citizen's of Lancashire.

- 37** Strong partnership working is helping the FRA to address its priorities. The FRA is working in multi agency partnerships, such as Reassurance Plus in the Grange Park area of Blackpool, addressing some of the key causes of high fire risk in deprived communities. Wider partnerships, such as the Lancashire Resilience Forum and the Regional Management Board, are addressing national priorities such as those contained within the Civil Contingencies Act. Data and local knowledge from partners is used effectively to identify those at risk from fire or other emergencies. Working with local councils the FRA targets community safety and legislative fire safety work on homes of multiple occupation, high risk business premises and in enforcing fire regulations in hotels, pubs and clubs. Working with the police the FRA is raising awareness about the dangers of excessive drinking through the 'Operation Nightsafe' initiative. This is helping to improve the safety of those living in and visiting the area.
- 38** Prioritisation and decision making is informed by detailed authority and partners' data. The Authority's performance management system is focused on, and informs, corporate priorities. Operational information is managed well with target setting at all levels, down to individual station watches, focused on improving performance in operational response. But targets for community safety staff are still developing and are not consistently measuring the impact of initiatives and activities. Performance is reported and challenged regularly by members, senior, district and station managers. This ensures that officers and managers stay focused on and have ownership of priorities.
- 39** A strategic approach to road traffic accidents, a major risk to public safety in the county is underdeveloped. The FRA's role in reducing road safety accidents and deaths, a priority for partners in the county is not clearly articulated. While senior managers and officers consider road safety to be a lesser priority this was not consistently expressed throughout the organisation. The Authority is undertaking some good targeted work such as educational and awareness campaigns with the police and through its Prince's Trust Volunteers Programme and provides leadership through the countywide Lancashire Partnership for Road Safety. However, a clear planned and resourced approach to the FRA's level of involvement is not in place. This lack of clarity weakens a co-ordinated approach internally, and in partnership, to address what is an important area for making a Lancashire a safer community - the FRA's vision.

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

Capacity

- 40 The Authority is performing well, effectively using its capacity to deliver its strategic priorities. Corporate governance arrangements are sound and the decision making process is open and transparent. The FRA is matching officer skills to its priorities and has brought new skills into the organisation to promote community safety. Internal capacity is being developed through strong training and development and is further increased through good use of partnerships. A good financial framework is in place and the FRA is improving on its focus on value for money. Project management arrangements are underdeveloped and ICT systems are weak and limit the use of management information. The FRA has a strategic approach to diversity and there are good examples of work with diverse communities across the county.
- 41 Members' skills and knowledge are used effectively. The reorganisation of the committee structure has assisted members in working in a more focused and strategic way. This is supported by clear accountability and decision making powers internally and within partnerships - strengthening partnership working. The sharing of committee chairs across the two larger political groups and increased training and development is helping to improve the engagement of members and their ownership of decision making. Strong leadership by members within communities, as advocates of the FRA, is strengthening the Authority's contribution to community cohesion. This ensures a consistent approach to policy development and implementation.
- 42 Business continuity planning is well established and working effectively. A framework is in place to deal with incidents that affect the FRA's ability to meet its statutory responsibilities. FRA members and partners have been involved in developing the plan which is tested on a regular basis, providing assurance that in an emergency situation the FRA will maintain services to the public ensuring public safety.
- 43 The FRA makes sure it has the people with the right skills to achieve its ambitions. A new appraisal system is being rolled out throughout the organisation. Gaps in corporate capacity in areas such as project management and expanding the community safety team have increased the ability of the organisation to address its priorities. Improved working arrangements have strengthened the retained service. The introduction of a salary scheme, short term contracts and a flexible approach to shift patterns and crewing arrangements is helping to retain part time staff and use a mix of whole time and retained staff more effectively. This is helping to provide consistent emergency cover for the residents of Lancashire and is strengthening the focus on prevention work.

- 44 The FRA has effective systems in place to manage people. Absence management procedures are robustly applied and have been effective in reducing staff sickness levels to 5.9 days per year, placing it amongst the best performing authorities nationally. Systems to support flexible working have been introduced and are being further developed. Arrangements such as home working, salaried retained staff and remote logging of availability all contribute to improving the work life balance of all staff and assist the organisation in recruiting people from a diverse background.
- 45 The FRA is developing its internal capacity through strong training and development processes. The Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) is well embedded across all types of staff and implementation has gone beyond the core elements. Examples of new supporting structures include; a process for identifying individual learning needs, methods of accrediting learning and equipping managers with mentoring and coaching skills. However, work is still ongoing to address succession planning through the strategic manager development pathway. Overall this ensures that training is focused on operational requirements and service development while also addressing individual development needs and value for money.
- 46 The Authority has good financial management frameworks supported by effective budget monitoring. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is aligned to revenue and capital budgets and supports the achievement of strategic objectives. Appropriate levels of reserves have been established and maintained since the Authority became a precepting Authority. Levels have been increased to meet future funding requirements. There is a clear policy on use of reserves. The MTFS and supporting budget reports set out how reserves are to be used to finance future expenditure which is mainly on capital projects. This approach provides assurance that over the next three years the level of service to the public will be maintained.
- 47 The FRA is continuing to improve value for money and makes effective use of procurement to maximise efficiency. Efficiency savings, in excess of FRA targets, have been achieved, with £1.9 million cashable efficiency savings and £2.6 million non cashable efficiency gains achieved in 2006/07. Joint procurement with partners in a PFI project will deliver four new fire stations starting in 2010. There has been a continuing resource reallocation from high cost areas through the IRMP process. This has allowed investment in prevention and protection on the basis of savings from the review of operational response, with improved outcomes on community fire safety.

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- 48 Project management outside of the IRMP is weak. The corporate project management system is underdeveloped, not consistently used and not well managed corporately. There is no central register of the 90 projects currently in progress which are managed on a departmental basis with no central co-ordination or inclusion on a shared database - reducing opportunities for learning and increasing the chance of duplication. IRMP projects are closely monitored and well managed but these too are not co-ordinated centrally. The lack of corporate oversight and management of projects enhances the probability of project slippage and stretching capacity at particular times, when a number of projects require resources.
- 49 The FRA makes effective use of partnerships to increase capacity. For example 10 per cent of Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSC) are referrals from partners including social services, Sure Start, housing associations, the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and Age Concern and other partners undertake assessments themselves including partners from the Department of Works and Pensions. There are clear arrangements in place for the effective management of partnership working. A Memorandum of Understanding is used for all partnerships which define the type of partnership it is, the aims and objectives of the partnership, and the scope of activities. The partnership register contains evaluation /review dates, and partnership protocols have been established. This ensures that partnerships are clearly linked to corporate priorities.
- 50 ICT information management systems are being modernised but currently do not provide effective management information to support the FRA's approach to performance management at every level in the organisation. Systems are not user friendly, management data is difficult to input and information analysis is not providing information in an accessible form to help front line services further reduce risk in the community. The Authority recognises the value of (ICT) in driving improvement, improving project management and strengthening performance management, and there is a clear resourced strategy to drive this forward. Joint procurement and partnership with other fire and rescue services aims to ensure that new ICT investments provide value for money and are fit for purpose. However, some of the planned improvements especially for improving performance management are still at an early stage of roll out and are not yet making a significant impact on service delivery and current systems do not use staff capacity effectively.
- 51 The Authority has a strategic approach internally to equality and diversity and there is a fully developed strategic framework of policies in place. A recent peer review has indicated that the Authority is operating at level three of the Local Government Equalities Standard and the FRA is aiming to achieve Level 5 before seeking official external validation of its progress. Equality and diversity training is included in induction processes for staff and members and annual up-dates are included in training programmes. Most buildings to which the public have access are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant and an action plan exists to achieve full compliance by 2011. The Authority has more to do to make its workforce fully representative of the community it serves, particularly amongst fire fighters. However, recent fire fighter recruitment and the expansion of the community safety team is addressing this in terms of ethnicity and gender.

- 52 Significant progress has been made to ensure services match community need. The Authority has achieved considerable success in consulting and communicating fire safety messages with hard to reach groups, such as BME groups and those with substance misuse problems, through its network of advocates. Examples of good practice exist in the joint working with the Muslim community in Burnley and with migrant workers through a dedicated advocate and the Migrants Communities Working Group. Overall the authority is working effectively to address the needs of the diverse communities of Lancashire.

Performance management

- 53 The Authority is performing well in this area and is well on its way to developing a performance culture. Performance management is integrated into day-to-day activity across all levels of the organisation, supported by a robust system and framework. There is an effective exchange of learning and a number of strategic partners are engaged in data sharing. Members are part of the performance management process but further work is required to ensure they are fully engaged. The corporate appraisal system is not yet consistently applied to all staff.
- 54 There is a rigorous approach throughout the organisation to the management of performance. Monthly meetings between the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DoSDP) and the three Heads of Service Delivery, who are directly responsible for performance outcomes in the 14 districts, monitor progress against objectives and identify actions to address underperformance. Increased resources have been provided to support the work of Community Fire Safety (CFS) teams and Community Protection Managers, who are aligned to the districts, and this is helping to provide more detailed performance information and analysis. Targets are set in line with risk, for example higher number of HFSCs in areas of high fire risk. This ensures that the work of the CFS and technical fire safety teams is coordinated with the prevention activities of operational crews, thereby meeting the targets set out in the District Plans and Station Performance Frameworks.
- 55 The FRA's approach to target setting is inconsistent. Target setting is based on three-year targets against actual results; however the FRA does not amend targets or set more stretching targets when performance shows an improvement. For example, the FRA exceeded targets for reducing the number of fires per 10,000 population in 2005/06 but did not adjust its three-year target to 2008/09 to reflect this and make it more challenging. This weakens the FRA's drive for continuous improvement.

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- 56** There is a proactive approach to managing service performance. Managers and staff have a clear focus on performance and use performance management as an integral part of their work. Performance information is reviewed on a regular basis and underperformance is addressed effectively. Quarterly performance reports are submitted to the Service Management Team using a traffic light reporting system, outlining progress against targets on all national and local performance indicators. Where performance is not meeting targets, joint actions are agreed and a performance issues log (PIL) entry is raised. The nominated lead officer is required to action the issue and report on progress until performance realigns with its target and is sustained.
- 57** Elected members are engaged in the management of the Authority's performance. Members have access to the Authority's quarterly performance management reports, and statistical information is provided on a monthly basis to members about their districts. Officers report to members about slippage in performance and there is a culture of challenging and tracking service performance. Records show a strong link between officer reporting and member decision making and that remedial action is taken in a timely way. Members and managers at all levels view performance management as part of their roles and responsibilities even though the protocols have only recently become embedded.
- 58** Financial management is well integrated with performance management. The Authority has effective arrangements for monitoring performance against budgets, taking corrective action where appropriate and reporting the results to senior officers and members. This has meant that there have not been any significant under or over spends in recent years.
- 59** The FRA works effectively with its partners in developing and monitoring key performance information. Performance information is shared with partners in the 14 district LSPs through the Multi Agency Data Exchange data warehousing system (MADE) and the FRA are key players in the existing Local Area Agreements having negotiated fire related indicators. Every CDRP has targets for reducing arson and deliberate fire setting whilst partnership activity is contributing to FRA objectives by generating referrals for HFSC visits. Over 10 per cent of referrals are now initiated through partners and importantly, many relate to particular 'at risk' groups.
- 60** The FRA uses knowledge to drive its approach to service improvement. The FRA has used the combined knowledge of the incident intelligent officers, CFS staff and fire fighters to drive new initiatives and share good practice. For example the use of intelligence gathering identified that homemade power adaptors for two pin plugs by migrant workers was providing a fire risk. Advice and support is being provided on the use of approved adaptors. There is a comprehensive debriefing process which involves partners and is appropriate to the scale of the incidents that occur. Staff are encouraged to use their experience and knowledge to improve services, to be innovative and to obtain feedback from customers and the public in the course of their duties. An evidence based approach is in place to ensure delivery of CFS is accurately and appropriately addressing risk.

- 61** There is a strong culture of learning from external and internal reviews and assessments. The Authority responded well its first corporate assessment and its improvement plan has resulted in stronger corporate management. Internal reviews have helping release resources and focus effort on priorities. However, benchmarking against similar authorities is underdeveloped. To address this in November 2007 the FRA agreed to compile quarterly comparative data on a range of key Best Value performance indicators within its Best Value Steering Group, to benchmark progress and facilitate more effective challenge regarding performance outcomes.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 62** The FRA is performing well in this area and is successfully achieving against its own objectives and targets. Investing in priorities identified in the IRMP the Authority is sustaining strong improvement in most operational areas. Prevention work is helping address local and national priorities and this overall picture of improvement compares well with other authorities. Progress in delivering the national fire and rescue framework is good with the FRA meeting or exceeding the majority of its targets around operational response while making more efficient and effective use of resources. However, the number of fires and levels of deaths and injuries from fire related incidents remains high.
- 63** Significant achievements have been made in reducing the risk of fire - the Authority's overarching priority. Importantly, fire risk is reducing in areas of high social deprivation. Using 2007 figures evaluation of the Authority's risk map shows an overall fire risk reduction of 5 per cent since 2005 and an 18 per cent and 17 per cent reduction in the very high and high risk category areas. Those most at risk from fire are now safer.
- 64** Good multi agency working has resulted in a wide range of initiatives addressing some of the specific safety risks within Lancashire's communities. In a number of Blackpool's social housing estates, identified as high risk, joint working with the council and other agencies has resulted in a sustained reduction in the number of deliberate fires. Educational and enforcement work within the leisure and tourism industry is creating safer visitor accommodation and improving safety in bars and clubs. Incidents of deliberate car fires have fallen by 30 per cent in the last 18 months through identifying and removing untaxed cars - in partnership with the police. The FRA is also working with Elevate, the housing market renewal pathfinder in East Lancashire, reducing the numbers of fires in empty properties. As a result, the Authority is perceived by its partners and the wider community to be improving its performance in reducing risk from fire and other emergencies.
- 65** There is an effective approach to dealing with major emergencies. The FRA play a leading role in the Local Resilience Forum and emergency planning links are well established particularly with the Police and Ambulance Service, with plans developed in conjunction with partners and regularly tested. This approach is underpinned by a detailed community risk register. The Authority's Urban and Search and Rescue Team and decontamination units, and high volume pumps have been deployed successfully within Lancashire and to other emergencies in the North West and beyond. Investment in mobile fire stations is further strengthening the Authority's ability to react quickly and manage incidents effectively in an efficient way. Response to incidents is backed up by good post incident analysis, which informs future operational planning and policy. The impact of major incidents is managed well and the Authority is well prepared for future emergencies.

- 66 The FRA is making adequate progress against its environment objectives. The FRA has strengthened its approach to environmental protection. In partnership with the Environment Agency it has joint funded a new environmental protection unit. This, with the joint operational assessment of high risk premises, helps front line crews to mitigate the effects of environmental pollution from emergency incidents. However, reducing the impact of the FRA's own services on the environment is at any early stage. It has carried out an environmental audit and some energy saving measures and sustainable purchases have been made, but there is no detailed planned approach to minimising the environmental impact of the service.
- 67 The FRA is meeting the needs of the most at risk groups and is contributing to improvements in their safety and general quality of life. Through its network of advocates the FRA focuses efforts on the most vulnerable such as substance misusers, older people and migrant workers. The cross agency Signpost initiative ensures that individuals' fire risk and other related issues, such as poor health, are referred to the appropriate agency following home visits. The FRA is working with migrant workers from Eastern Europe anticipating the barriers to effective fire prevention for this group, making links with housing agencies and employing a Polish speaking advocate to help engage and further understand the risks to this growing section of the population. The safety of disabled people is also being addressed, for example by enabling deaf people to report an emergency using text. These initiatives provide an effective approach to improving the safety and well being of vulnerable people.
- 68 Strong partnership work within BME communities is helping to reduce the risk amongst these groups. The FRA is working closely with elders in mosques in Burnley to address the fire risks and other challenges facing the deprived ward of Daneshouse with Stoneyholme - where there are large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Using mosque radio, the FRA's BME advocates are getting fire safety messages into households that cannot be reached by conventional media. Home fire safety checks (HFSCs) are targeted towards hard to reach groups in BME communities through this partnership approach. This innovative and focused approach is reducing fire risk within these communities.
- 69 Working with a range of agencies, the FRA contributes to projects that tackle local issues. Examples include blitzing areas of high crime and deliberate fires in Blackburn, and a similar area improvement project 'Operation Clean Sweep' in Lancaster. These reduce fire risk and improve the general environment of some the most deprived areas in the county. The Bright Sparx initiative, concentrated on reducing deliberate fires and illegal use of fireworks around bonfire night, resulted in 17 per cent decrease in arson incidents. Good analysis of the initiative has improved the understanding of causes behind incidents and the FRA, with its partners, is well placed to continue to improve public safety.

- 70 A range of youth engagement schemes, such as Flare, and a comprehensive programme of education within schools through the Child Safe programme, are helping to highlight fire and other risks to young people and the consequences of their actions on others. Working with the Prince's Trust the FRA is helping young people develop new skills and build confidence with 75 per cent of those on the course going on to further education and employment. Such community and diversionary work is helping improve public safety, addresses the causes behind fires and improves the lives of individuals and the communities in which they live.
- 71 Targeted community safety work is achieving good outcomes. The Authority has increased the number of HFSCs from 9,180 in 2003/04 to a targeted 39,864 in 2007/08. These are primarily focused on areas of high risk identified in its detailed risk profiling tool and resultant map. The Authority is working effectively with partners in cross cutting areas. Examples include reducing community safety risk from houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) and targeting efforts on high risk groups such as drug users. In Pennine and Western areas LFRA tenant advocates are communicating with some of the areas most vulnerable tenants to reduce the risks of death and injury from fire, these are supported, where required, by the migrant workers' advocate. The FRA's substance use advocate has undertaken 78 HFSCs in the homes of individuals with a history of substance misuse. As a result there has been a 17 per cent reduction in accidental dwelling fires amongst this group. This targeted approach is helping the FRA achieve its fire related priorities and is also helping to improve the quality of life of local people.
- 72 The Authority has shown consistent and marked improvement in reducing fire deaths and injuries, accidental dwelling fires and deliberate primary and secondary fires. Overall, 85 per cent of key performance indicators have improved over the past three years, ranking the service 13th most improved when compared to other fire authorities nationally. Between 2003/04 and 2005/06 fire deaths and injuries reduced by 43 per cent and 34 per cent respectively which is significantly better than most other fire and rescue authorities. The numbers of deliberate property fires and secondary fires fell by approximately 30 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07 and the number of deliberate vehicle fires has fallen by 40 per cent in the same period. The rate of improvement has generally slowed in 2006/07 but still remains higher than the national average - with the exception of deliberate secondary fires which have increased at a greater rate than the other FRAs nationally. Overall the people of Lancashire are safer as a result.

- 73 However, while improving, the FRA's performance in some areas compares poorly with other FRAs. In 2006/07 the number of accidental fires and resultant injuries was high, amongst the poorest performing 25 per cent of FRAs, and the number of primary fires is well above the national average (adjusted to take into account deprivation levels). The number of malicious false alarms and false alarms in non domestic priorities while showing a sustained decrease (2003/04 to 2006/07) remain high. Lancashire FRA is one of only six fire services in the country not to be on track to achieve the 2010 national framework target. There is a strong correlation between levels of deprivation and fire risk but the FRA recognise that more effort is needed to reduce the number people killed and injured in fires.
- 74 The service is making good progress in its ambitions for emergency response. In 2006 the FRA established a new set of emergency response standards, replacing the National Standards of Fire Cover, based on a good analysis of local risk. This has been enhanced by the introduction of standardised crewing levels for a range of incidents and a reconfiguration of resource allocation as a result of an emergency cover review. This ensures that the right resources are allocated to each emergency. The FRA is meeting or exceeding the majority of its targets around operational response while reducing the overall number of fire fighters by 10 per cent (135) since 2005. For critical fires in 2006/07 on 85 per cent of occasions a first fire engine was in attendance within the response time, exceeding the Authority's target. Overall, there is a downward trend in the number of incidents the Authority is attending. This shows the impact of prevention activity and the introduction of more effective crewing arrangements which have released resources to be further focused on reducing risk through community safety initiatives.
- 75 Good risk analysis informs the distribution of specialist equipment and appliances to further improve standards of fire cover and efficiency. Examples include introducing cutting equipment to all fire engines, locating aerial appliances in urban areas and introducing of specialist equipment such as an all terrain vehicle to deal with moorland and woodland fires. This improvement in specialist capability, facilitates a fast response, reduces risk to the community and provides better use of resources. In addition the FRA has replaced its incident command units with multi functional mobile fire stations. These are compatible with other emergency services enhancing incident command capabilities and resilience while also providing a dual educational role.
- 76 The health and safety of staff is improving. The level of accidents to staff has fallen significantly over the last two years and working days lost due to sickness are amongst the lowest of all authorities nationally. Equipment is of good quality, fit for purpose and is regularly replaced. The FRA has a good awareness of the needs of their workforce and addresses these needs through a range of mechanisms. For example use of the Salvation Army for refreshments has enhanced the health, safety and welfare of staff attending incidents for long periods of time. Officers are positive about the support they receive from the organisation and the opportunities for training and development. This helps in maintain good staff morale and a motivated workforce.

- 77 Communities, stakeholders and partners recognise the Authority's achievements. There are high levels of satisfaction from the public, users of the service and stakeholders and a low number of complaints. At 70 per cent the FRA has the seventh high satisfaction rating of all FRAs (2006). After incident surveys show that the FRA is responding effectively in carrying out home fire safety checks and is performing significantly above the national average when benchmarked against 32 similar FRAs in England and Wales. Initiatives focused on the BME population such as fire safety advice for pilgrims undertaking the Hajj, the introduction of BME advocates and support for self financing overseas aid projects have built relationships and created goodwill towards the service from these communities. This is resulting in increasing uptake of HFSCs and, along with youth diversionary and education programmes, less violence and abusive behaviour against fire fighters. As a result, higher levels of satisfaction are being expressed by service users among the BME community and fire risk is reducing among vulnerable sections of the community.

Appendix 1 – Framework for Corporate Assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The FRA's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the FRA Integrated Risk Management Plan and CPA improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Lancashire FRA was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 21 to 25 January 2008.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the FRA, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment.