



HM Fire Service Inspectorate

Local Area Inspection Aberdeen City



Integrity, Objectivity, and Fairness.

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Inspectorate**

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Duncan Smith, the Local Senior Officer for Aberdeen City, and those members of staff who provided us with information, helped us to organise visits, hosted us and contributed constructively to interviews. We also wish to thank the representatives of partner organisations who agreed to be interviewed and gave generously of their time.

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A quality assurance review of this report was kindly provided by Laura Paton of HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland. All the members of the inspection team contributed to the development of this report and the quality assurance reviewer provided a professional challenge to the contents, assumptions and conclusions made. However, the Chief Inspector takes sole responsibility for the report, its contents and conclusions.

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Contents

1_ The local area inspection programme	02
2_ About the area	05
3_ Our findings	07
3.1_ The Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement	07
3.2_ Improved service outcomes and protecting frontline services	09
• Prevention and Protection	09
• Service Delivery	10
• Workforce	11
3.3_ More equal access to specialist resources and national capacity	13
• Capacity within the area	13
• Specialist resources	13
3.4_ Strengthened connection between SFRS and Communities	14
• Knowing the community	14
• Working in partnership	14
• Local scrutiny arrangements	15
3.5_ Overall conclusions	16
4_ Matters arising	17
Glossary and abbreviations	18

1_ The local area inspection programme


The Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2013 sets out how Scottish Ministers expect the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to operate and how, in part, its effectiveness and efficiency are to be measured. We take the Framework as the starting point for structuring and prioritising our inspection programme. The Fire and Rescue Framework indicates that there should be strengthened connection between the SFRS and communities, which is itself underpinned by principles contained within the Christie Commission report on the Future Delivery of Public Services in Scotland (June 2011).

The *Fire (Scotland) Act 2005* requires the SFRS to appoint a Local Senior Officer (LSO) for each local authority area in Scotland for the purpose of carrying out its functions in that area. The LSO reports to the Head of Service Delivery for the relevant SFRS Service Delivery Area (SDA) (North, East or West). The SFRS is also required by the Act to have a Local Fire and Rescue Plan for each local authority area, which will set out the SFRS's priorities and objectives for that local area; why they have been selected; how the SFRS intends to deliver them, and (insofar as is practicable) outcomes by reference to which the SFRS's service delivery in the local authority area can be measured. The fact that the 2005 Act is structured in this way is a clear demonstration of the Scottish Parliament's intention that SFRS service delivery should be considered both at the national and local authority levels.

Inspections of SFRS service delivery within local authority areas, that examine the development and delivery of Local Fire and Rescue Plans, help to provide assurance about the way in which the SFRS is meeting this intention. By undertaking inspections of SFRS service delivery within local authority areas, HM Fire Service Inspectorate:

- can provide assurance to Scottish Ministers and the public that the SFRS is making adequate provision for local service delivery and that local areas have access to specialist national resources, and make suggestions for improvement if necessary
- can take a detailed look at the nature and quality of service provision, including working with partner organisations, within local areas and can draw attention to significant matters and areas of good practice
- can co-operate with other scrutiny bodies to provide collaborative, 'place-based' scrutiny of government service provision (the possible development of a place-based approach to Shared Risk Assessment is stated in the *National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government 2014-15*¹)
- maintains a good level of awareness of the Service's functions and builds a record of how the Service is functioning
- can gather intelligence that may inform, or cause to be undertaken, more strategic, thematic inspections of the SFRS.

¹ Local Government Scrutiny Coordination Strategic Group, June 2014
http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/as_140603_scrutiny_plan.pdf



Our local area inspections are intended to be closely tied to the Fire and Rescue Framework. For this reason we have adopted a structure for them which follows the structure of the Framework itself:

- The Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement
- Improved service outcomes and protecting frontline services
- More equal access to specialist resources and national capacity
- Strengthened connection between SFRS and communities

We look at a broad range of matters relevant to fire and rescue service delivery within the area being inspected, including any issues arising from thematic work carried out in that area; and in our inspection report we give an opinion on the manner in which the SFRS is carrying out its functions in the above respects.

In our local area inspections we aim to visit as many service delivery locations as we can, and speak to managers and a range of uniformed and non-uniformed staff. We look at premises and equipment, and view a sample of records to enable us to understand the way in which business within the area is conducted. In this way we aim to cross-reference the SFRS's written plans, and what we are told about the local area by SFRS managers, with our own observations and discussions with staff on the ground.

We do not, however, carry out our local area inspections as a comprehensive audit. The SFRS has a programme of internal station audits that involve a detailed look at station activity and records, and we do not want to duplicate that work. The sampling methodology that we adopt cannot be guaranteed to identify all potential areas for improvement: we intend that it should be a proportionate activity that provides an overview of the area, comparable with other local area inspections that we carry out.

A summary of our findings

- Our overall impression of the SFRS's work in Aberdeen City was positive. Local partnership working through the Community Safety Hub is, in our view, impressive and something which the Service should regard as an area of good practice and promote as an element of the Service's core business. The LSO's staff complement appears to be under particular pressures but the Service's performance remains relatively robust.
- There are some challenges with **staffing levels**, which might be specific to Aberdeen City. We heard anecdotal evidence that fire appliances are unavailable through lack of crew at greater frequency than in the past (although a recent overtime ban may have contributed to staffing pressures). Other specialist functions are also carrying long-term vacancies and the LSO has a limited ability to transfer people in from elsewhere. In relation to 'back office' functions, we found evidence in Aberdeen City that rationalisation has gone about as far as it can go, and that that statement may be true more generally across the SFRS.
- Fire safety enforcement (FSE) staff in the LSO area have been line managed by officers who are not FSE qualified and therefore have not been in a position to sign off work, offer technical advice or undertake quality control. This has required special measures to be introduced to enable the SFRS to deliver its statutory FSE functions, pending supervisory officers receiving the necessary training.
- Our assessment of the **Local Plan** is that it contains good content about the Aberdeen City area, but does not provide any argument for how this information shapes levels and types of services locally. Importantly, the Local Plan does not explain how national objectives and outcomes are being tailored to address local priorities. The Plan states throughout that it is aligned with the Aberdeen City Single Outcome Agreement, but beyond that statement of ambition the Plan does not contain the specific cross-referencing that would enable the user to read across between the two documents.
- Station-based staff are mostly unaware of the existence of the Local Plan, and there may be a benefit in an increased focus on targeted staff consultation during the development of the next version – thereby increasing staff awareness and improving 'buy-in'.
- Routine updating of **operational risk information** seems to be less structured than it had previously been. The staff we spoke to were uncertain as to the process they would use to update information and we saw no evidence of a programme of section 9(2)(d) (familiarisation) visits².
- Staff reported an increase in attendances to **automatic fire alarm calls** owing to changes in national SFRS policy on response to this type of call; and therefore an increase in the number of vehicle blue-light journeys being made in the city.
- We found that the policy in the SFRS's national Fire Safety Framework for carrying out **Operational Reassurance Visits** to care homes is being interpreted in Aberdeen City in a way that would differ from our reading of the framework document, and we think that it would be useful if this was clarified with the national Prevention and Protection Directorate.

In section 4 of this report we identify a number of matters arising from our inspection and findings, which the SFRS may wish to focus on in the context of its statutory obligation to 'have regard' to our report.

² A reference to the duty imposed by s9(2)(d) of the *Fire (Scotland) Act 2005*

2 About the area

Aberdeen is Scotland's third-largest city, and the Aberdeen City council area had an estimated population of over 225,000 at the time our inspection was carried out. There are estimated to be over 112,000 dwellings of which 60% are privately owned, 15% privately rented and 24% socially rented.

The city is well-known for the importance of the oil and gas sector to its economy, although other sectors such as further education and electronics are important as well. While there are some areas of Aberdeen that are affluent, the city also has socio-economically deprived areas, and the contrast between the two demographics is notable.

The LSO for Aberdeen City is based at North Anderson Drive in Aberdeen, as are his team of Service Delivery and Prevention and Protection managers. The LSO is responsible only for Aberdeen City (unlike some LSOs who are responsible for more than one local authority area) although some resources available to him, such as HR support, are shared with other local authority areas. There are three wholetime fire stations: North Anderson Drive, Central and Altens, with a Retained Duty System (RDS) station at Dyce providing cover in the north of the area.

While Aberdeen is a significant urban area, it is surrounded by the small towns and rural landscapes of Aberdeenshire, and is a significant distance from the nearest large urban areas of Inverness and Dundee. The closest wholetime fire stations outside Aberdeen City are Peterhead (30 miles) and Arbroath (55 miles). Resources from the city such as height appliances may be called upon to travel significant distances in support of neighbouring stations.

A look at some key statistics for the Aberdeen City area

Deliberate fires in Aberdeen City have halved over the past five years from around 200 per quarter to 100 per quarter. The largest reduction has been in deliberate secondary³ fires, with refuse fires in particular reducing from over 80 per quarter in 2009-10 to around 40 by the end of 2013-14.

Deliberate dwelling fires have remained relatively flat over the past three years at around 15 per quarter: the current rate per 100,000 dwellings of 41.8 remains higher than the national rate of 25.7⁴. Deliberate 'other building' fires have reduced slightly over the period but these are low in volume and consequently trends are hard to identify.

The rate of accidental fires as a whole per head of population has reduced over the past five years. The largest reduction has been in accidental dwelling fires, with an average rate reducing from around four per quarter per 10,000 population in 2009-10 to around 2.5 per quarter per 10,000 population in 2013-14, although the rate per 100,000 dwellings for accidental dwelling fires as at 2013-14 of 219.8 is higher than the overall rate for Scotland of 185.7⁵.

³ Secondary fires are the majority of outdoor fires. They include grassland and refuse fires unless they involve casualties or rescues, property loss or are attended by five or more appliances.

⁴ *Fire and Rescue Statistics, Scotland, 2013-14*, Scottish Government <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/12/2384>

⁵ Ibid.

The rate of accidental other building fires per 100,000 population of 62.5 is the second highest in Scotland behind Glasgow (71.2). The rate shows little change over the past five years. Accidental vehicle fires and secondary fires have risen slightly⁶.

Though the rate of fire casualties per million population has reduced slightly over the past five years there is no clear trend involved – there was a slight rise in the non-fatal casualties initially followed by a decline from around 2011-12 onwards. Fire fatalities in the Aberdeen City area are low, and it is not possible from the very few fatalities recorded to draw any conclusions on trends.

In Scotland as a whole, road traffic collisions (RTCs) have been falling over the past five years, and this is also reflected in the figures for Aberdeen City, where RTCs attended averaged around 25 per quarter in 2009-10 and are now at around 15 per quarter. Incident volumes are relatively low however, leading to uncertainty over potential trends. RTC fatalities remain very low in the Aberdeen City area. In line with trends in Scotland as a whole RTC casualties remain relatively constant, even though RTCs have been declining over the period.

In relation to other special service incidents⁷, Aberdeen City has the highest rate in Scotland per 100,000 population of 260 compared to the Scotland figure of 172. Lift releases accounted for 27% of all special service incidents in Aberdeen City, compared to 7% across Scotland⁸.

Overall, the picture shown by the statistics is of a typical urban demand for fire and rescue services, with many measures showing a higher rate of incidents than Scotland generally – as would be expected when comparing an urban area to more regional parts of the country. This implies the need for a particular focus on prevention activities, and indeed prevention activities receive significant emphasis in the Local Fire and Rescue Plan.

⁶ *Fire and Rescue Statistics, Scotland, 2013-14*, Scottish Government <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/12/2384>

⁷ Special service incidents are those attended by the SFRS that are not fire-related, for example road traffic collisions and flooding incidents.

⁸ *Fire and Rescue Statistics, Scotland, 2013-14*, op. cit.

3 Our findings

As discussed in the introduction to this report, we have structured our findings to be directly referable to the Fire and Rescue Framework 2013. The Framework sets the strategic direction for fire and rescue in Scotland, and has sections on governance and accountability (including planning and reporting); protecting and improving local services; equal access to specialist support and national capacity; and strengthening the connection with communities. The way in which we have reported our findings follows this structure – with an initial discussion of the Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement, which are the key planning documents for SFRS in each local authority area.

3.1 The Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement

In writing about the Local Fire and Rescue Plan for Aberdeen City (‘the Local Plan’) we note that this is the first Local Fire and Rescue Plan we have reported on. There are 32 such plans across the country, and a review of them shows that there are – as one would expect – similarities in the way they are structured. We have some observations about the lack of benchmarking and targets within the Local Plan, but believe that the same observations would hold true of many other Local Fire and Rescue Plans around the country.

For this reason, we do not think that the comments below should be read as a criticism of the Aberdeen City management team or the authors of the Local Plan. We will continue in our programme of local area inspections to comment on the Local Fire and Rescue Plans we see – and we would invite the SFRS as a whole to consider our comments in the context of the development of the next round of Local Fire and Rescue Plans.

Our impression of the Aberdeen City Local Plan is that it contains good information about the city but does not develop this into targeted conclusions on service delivery types and levels. Where statistics are quoted, there is little obvious benchmarking with other local authority areas – so we learn, for example, that lone adult households, and households headed by over-64 year olds, are projected to increase, but not whether Aberdeen is unusual in this respect, or whether this means that SFRS activity in Aberdeen City will be different from other locations in Scotland as a consequence.

There is also comment in the plan about diversity and immigration, which while informative as far as it goes, does not translate into specific actions or targets within the plan. If information of this nature forms part of the city’s risk profile we might expect that it would lead to some commentary about the implications for SFRS service delivery, and what specific measures will be taken to address them.

A notable feature of the Local Plan is that it does not contain targets – while there is good information about outputs (what the SFRS in Aberdeen City will do) there is much less about outcomes (what will happen as a result). On the face of it this does not sit well with the *Fire (Scotland) Act 2005*, which requires Local Fire and Rescue Plans to identify, so far as is practicable, outcomes by which delivery of local priorities and objectives can be measured. Again we observe that the Aberdeen City Local Plan is by no means unusual in this respect, compared with other SFRS Local Fire and Rescue Plans. In our view, however, the Local Plan cannot play a fully effective role as a tool to support local scrutiny of the SFRS if there are no clear targets set.

For example, there is some useful commentary in the Local Plan about the large number of Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals (UFAS) in the city and the Service's wish to reduce their impact. But the associated target is said to be 'to deliver a long term continuous improvement in the level of responses to Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals'. In our view this target is insufficiently clear or precise to permit the City Council to scrutinise performance in this area or to know whether things are getting better.

We think that it would be useful if the Local Plan was clear on performance indicators, highlighting trends over time and how that compares to national performance, which in turn would lead to a rationale for local priorities. Clarity could be achieved by structuring the Local Plan in two parts: the first discussing national SFRS priorities and targets, which the local area will be contributing to; and the second discussing what is specific to the local area, and what areas of service delivery will be focused on locally to provide the most effective contribution to local and national outcomes.

As part of that, we think that the Local Plan should set out clear local performance targets that the SFRS can have its performance locally measured against. To be clear, this is not just about repeating national targets. If an area has a very low secondary fire rate, it may make little sense to say that secondary fire reduction is a local priority. But to take an example relevant to Aberdeen City, if UFAS is a recognised local problem, there is scope for the Local Plan to highlight this and to offer a target of, say, a 5% reduction in UFAS per year. In this way, local areas can contribute to national targets but in a way which makes sense for that area.

Importantly, the operational staff we spoke to on stations were not well sighted on the Local Plan – being only vaguely aware of its existence. A greater awareness of the Local Plan could help focus staff on what they are trying to achieve, and we would encourage efforts to raise the profile of the Local Plan. We have been told of the steps that were taken to consult staff on the development of the Local Plan, and we do not suggest that staff consultation was ignored in that process. We would however encourage some reflection on the reasons for the low level of staff awareness of the Local Plan as it stands, and how the next version could be developed and publicised so as to achieve a strong feeling of ownership of it among staff.

The Aberdeen City Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) is a document created at local authority level which is intended to set out how all agencies will work together in the area to deliver outcomes aligned to nationally agreed priorities and the principles of public service reform. The SOA takes into account the contributions of various local and national bodies in arriving at these outcomes.

At a high level the Aberdeen City SOA notes the contribution of the SFRS to community safety and includes two fire-specific targets: reduction of wilful fires and accidental dwelling fires. These are multi-agency targets in the SOA and not for the SFRS alone to achieve. Equally the SFRS would contribute to other targets in the SOA such as improved death rates in the under-75 population and reductions in anti-social behaviour. The SOA promotes a 'team Aberdeen' approach and references the Community Safety Hub, which we discuss later in this report.

The Local Plan references the SOA at the outset, and in discussion of actions and priorities, so that it is clear that alignment with the SOA was a consideration in the Local Plan's development. In our discussions with representatives of Aberdeen City Council it was confirmed that its priorities are reflected in the SOA, and the local plans of other agencies such as the SFRS were perceived as feeding into the SOA and its targets. The Aberdeen City Local Plan includes a section on reduction of deliberate fire setting, which aligns with SOA targets on addressing anti-social behaviour including wilful fire raising – in our view, a little more specific discussion in the Local Plan about the links to SOA targets would be beneficial in highlighting the links between the two documents.

3.2 Improved service outcomes and protecting frontline services

In the course of our inspection we met with managers from the Prevention and Protection and Service Delivery functions⁹, spoke with staff who are responsible for carrying out community safety activities within Aberdeen City, and visited each of the four fire stations in the area, where we had the opportunity to speak with firefighters. We also spoke to other staff members such as the HR adviser and Community Action Team co-ordinator responsible for the area, and to local trade union officials.

Prevention and Protection

Our inspection showed that there are some pressures currently facing Prevention and Protection staff in Aberdeen City, but despite that, they are generally coping with the workloads placed upon them. The economic situation in Aberdeen is associated with a substantial amount of building work and this has caused extra Fire Safety Enforcement (FSE) work, specifically in relation to building regulation consultation.

There are vacancies across the Community Safety Engagement (CSE) (three vacancies) and FSE (two vacancies) teams. These vacancies are not having a major effect on managing workloads, although they have meant that CSE staff are reactively coping with referrals rather than proactively seeking to find new points of engagement with the community. We were advised by staff that we spoke to that targets for FSE and CSE were being modified to ensure that they are realistic within the context of staff capacity.

The Group Manager responsible for the Prevention and Protection portfolio in Aberdeen City also looks after prevention issues for neighbouring Aberdeenshire and Moray. For some time, Fire Safety Enforcement staff have lacked a line manager with the relevant qualifications and experience to provide technical guidance and to sign off documents, so that measures have had to be put into place pending the training of managerial staff. At the time of writing this report, one manager has acquired the relevant qualifications and another will be attending training shortly, although without on the job experience it may still be a challenge for them to offer technical support or carry out quality control. There are no staff locally with fire safety engineering qualifications although the local team has access to national capacity in this regard.

⁹ Prevention and Protection refers to the responsibility of the SFRS for Fire Safety Enforcement and Community Safety Engagement; Service Delivery relates primarily to operational response to incidents.

We were told that a review is in progress of premises' risk scores in Aberdeen City based on information previously held in the Grampian Fire and Rescue Service database. It was felt that some of the risk scores were not robust, as a consequence of the risk scoring mechanism and risk level default rules that had been used. We welcome this review as an example of a measure being taken to promote consistency in FSE activity across the country.

The SFRS Fire Safety Enforcement Framework 2013-2016 provides that all care home services should be visited annually by operational personnel for information gathering purposes and to provide for firefighter familiarisation with premises. We have been advised that operational personnel have recently carried out visits to all care homes in the Aberdeen City area for operational and risk familiarisation purposes, and that these premises will all be audited annually by FSE staff.

We understand that in the light of the annual FSE audit programme, it is not intended that operational staff should also visit these premises annually. This interpretation of the FSE Framework differs from our reading of the requirement (we think that the Framework contemplates operational staff visiting care home services annually in addition to the annual FSE audits) and it may be that it would be helpful for some clarification of the requirement to be obtained from the SFRS Prevention and Protection Directorate.

Station-based staff were strongly supportive of Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSV) being targeted at high-risk vulnerable individuals, rather than simply being based on numerical targets: we heard of dissatisfaction with what is perceived by some to be a target-driven quantitative approach. Having noted those comments, management within the Aberdeen City area have reaffirmed to us that their commitment is to target HFSVs at higher-risk individuals as well as meeting targets for numbers of visits, and we hope that over time, this will address any residual concerns that staff may have.

Discussions we had with staff indicated to us that networking with Prevention and Protection staff in other LSO areas is not strong. Understanding as we do the geographical and time limitations on networking opportunities, we would encourage management in Aberdeen City to consider ways in which networking might be promoted.

Service Delivery

Our station visits indicated that frontline service delivery has been maintained and has not been adversely affected by reform. Stations were well-maintained with well-kept equipment, and crews were apparently knowledgeable and well-trained to perform their roles. Where we sampled records that are kept on station, such as training and maintenance records, generally we found that these were complete and up-to-date.

We heard of some pressures on both uniformed and non-uniformed staff numbers. In relation to uniformed staff, the Aberdeen City area is running under complement. We were told by some staff that as a result, of the six wholetime pumping appliances that should be available in the city, one is often not available through lack of crew. We sought to follow this suggestion up with management and have been advised that there are no specific data that could confirm or refute that suggestion.

If there is a perception among staff that shortages are causing appliances to be unavailable we think that that in itself is something that management should investigate and address if required. Accordingly it would be beneficial if instructions were given for records to be made of all occasions on which a wholetime appliance is not available, and the reason on each occasion for that. If those records show that there is an issue with wholetime appliance non-availability then management will be in a position to identify and address the causes.

We also heard of issues to do with procurement of replacement equipment and supplies, with times to obtain replacements being significantly longer than had been experienced historically. While this may, to an extent, be understood as an effect of greater centralisation of supplies following the coming into being of the SFRS, at more than one fire station we visited the issue was considered significant enough for staff to want to raise it with us. We note the issue as one for managers to monitor on an ongoing basis to ensure that operational effectiveness and firefighter safety are not compromised by problems in ordering stores.

Staff we spoke to at fire stations reported an increase in attendances to automatic fire alarm calls owing to recent changes in SFRS policy. In the predecessor Grampian Fire and Rescue Service, control staff had had greater scope to make judgements on which automatic fire alarm calls required a response and how large that response needed to be, based on the risk profile of the premises in question. Under the new SFRS policy, a full attendance is sent to an automatic fire alarm call in most cases. The result is an increase in the number of fire appliance blue-light journeys being made in the city, which in our view carries an increased risk to public and firefighter safety. While this is a result of national, not local policy, it reinforces the need for action in Aberdeen City to drive down the substantial number of unwanted fire alarm signals being received.

Operational risk information (ORI) – that is, information available on appliances about premises and risks that firefighters can refer to on their way to, and at an incident – is recognised as important to firefighter safety and effectiveness. We have underlined the importance of comprehensive, up-to-date ORI in previous inspection reports. Routine updating of operational risk information in Aberdeen City seems to be less structured than it had previously been. The staff we spoke to were uncertain as to the process they would use to update information and we saw no evidence of a programme of section 9(2)(d) (familiarisation)¹⁰ visits at which ORI would be routinely considered and updated.

We have been advised that steps are contemplated to review all ORI specific to the Aberdeen City area for currency and comprehensiveness. We consider that it is important that this is done, and that out-of-date or incomplete ORI represents an unacceptable risk to the SFRS.

Workforce

Staffing generally

Non-uniformed staff roles have been cut significantly since April 2013, as part of the intent of fire service reform to achieve savings by reducing duplication in back office roles. The impression that we gained from speaking to staff in administrative and support roles is that

¹⁰ Section 9(2)(d) of the *Fire (Scotland) Act 2005* requires the SFRS to make arrangements for obtaining information likely to be required for extinguishing fires and protecting life and property in its area.

these reductions have gone as far as they can, and further cuts to administrative and support staff would not be sustainable. Some of these functions, such as HR and Health and Safety, are shared across more than one LSO area, so that what we saw in Aberdeen City may be true more generally across the SFRS.

Fire Brigades Union (FBU) engagement with Aberdeen City LSO staff is generally positive and we were told that there is a good working relationship. However FBU representatives did raise concerns about the impact that future staff movements (e.g. retirements/promotions) may have on this relationship, and also about operational staffing shortages within Aberdeen and the impact that this has on appliance availability. They are continuing to engage with the LSO and his staff, and via national forums, regarding these issues.

We note that Aberdeen has an unusual economy, strongly influenced as it is by the oil and gas industry. This puts pressures on staff retention in Aberdeen that may not be felt elsewhere. The SFRS should be aware that whereas the national picture may be of good staff retention rates, this may play out differently in Aberdeen. A shortage of operational staff may be significant in terms of the overall numbers in Aberdeen but insignificant when viewed nationally. Aberdeen should not have to wait for there to be sufficient vacancies on a national level before local staffing deficiencies are addressed.

The uniformed workforce is not, generally speaking, notably diverse but we received feedback about positive attitudes to diversity among the workforce. We did not note any evidence of problems such as bullying, harassment or discrimination within the Aberdeen City workforce.

We encountered some comment from staff on fire stations about the management structure of the area. Station Managers, who previously had been based in fire stations, now all work centrally from offices at North Anderson Drive. We were told that there is no regular programme of management meetings for junior officers to meet with middle management and discuss issues of concern and interest. There was a perception in some quarters that this made them more remote and interfered with communication.

In response, the LSO has detailed to us a number of measures that are being taken within the area to provide robust communication and feedback channels for staff. It appears to us that positive steps are being taken to address perceived communication issues, and we would encourage continued focus on this.

Health and Safety

Health and Safety statistics for the Aberdeen City area reveal injury rates in single figures. While the aim is always for zero harm in the workforce, the injury rates of which we were advised do not suggest any specific cause for concern. A new health and safety reporting system, Rivo Safeguard, has been rolled out in the SFRS North Service Delivery Area (including Aberdeen City) from April 2015. This system allows increased accessibility for staff to record details of injuries and near-misses, and for steps taken to investigate incidents to be recorded. This may in particular enhance the number of near misses being recorded, which is relatively low compared to the number of injury reports. Near misses are an important way of identifying problems before an injury occurs: we were advised that the SFRS will continue to encourage staff to record near misses in the Aberdeen city area and elsewhere.

3.3 More equal access to specialist resources and national capacity

Capacity within the area

Aberdeen City is a considerable distance from other wholetime stations. This presents challenges regarding the potential to draw in firefighters to maintain crewing levels and maintain appliance availability, and in this respect a degree of self-sufficiency is required. There are specialist resources based in Aberdeen which are available for a wider geographical area, and also a cadre of middle managers is based in Aberdeen. We have noted above the staffing pressures that make it a challenge to keep all of the Aberdeen City wholetime appliances available all of the time.

In the absence of specific data on this issue we are unable to say if Aberdeen is disproportionately affected as compared with other locations in Scotland where wholetime staffing may be an issue. We encourage the SFRS to ensure that the specific local needs of an area such as Aberdeen, which has unusual economic pressures on staff retention, are not simply submerged in the national staffing picture and lost to view.

Aberdeen has one Retained Duty System (RDS)¹¹ station at Dyce, which is the only such resource within Aberdeen City – the other stations are crewed exclusively by wholetime staff with no RDS component. In common with other RDS stations in Scotland Dyce suffers from some staffing pressures, but generally speaking manages to maintain its availability at around 75% and provides a valuable contribution to the area's fire cover.

Station activity ranges from over 2,000 calls per year (two of the wholetime stations) to around 200 calls per year (the RDS station at Dyce). This suggests to us that the capacity provided out of these stations is well-utilised.

Specialist resources

Aberdeen City is currently the base for specialist resources including Mass Decontamination, Detection, Identification and Monitoring equipment and Urban Search and Rescue capability. Under plans currently being adopted by the SFRS, these capabilities will remain in place, a water rescue capability will be made available at Central fire station and a new line rescue capability will be established at Altens fire station. As one would expect for an urban environment some distance from other urban areas, Aberdeen City has its own high reach appliance capability and this is used to provide support in the event of these appliances being needed in surrounding areas.

A specialist Fire Investigation team is provided by the SFRS Prevention and Protection Directorate for each SDA: the North SDA team is based at North Anderson Drive in Aberdeen City and is available for deployment across the whole of the north of Scotland. If a circumstance arose in which the North SDA Fire Investigation team was already deployed and there was a need for Fire Investigation in Aberdeen, the area could call on the services of either the East SDA or the West SDA teams. Feedback from managers in the Aberdeen City LSO area about the service provided by the North SDA Fire Investigation team was positive.

¹¹ A station manned by paid on-call firefighters, who respond from their homes or places of work to crew the appliance in the event of an emergency call.

We note that the response capacity based in Aberdeen City has not changed significantly since the days of the predecessor Grampian Fire and Rescue Service, and the new specialist resources referred to above will provide additional access to national capacity for the city and surrounding areas. As we suggest in the previous section, the SFRS should monitor the availability of the wholetime pumps in Aberdeen City and ensure that it meets the identified needs of the locality.

3.4_ Strengthened connection between SFRS and Communities

Knowing the community

In the course of our inspection we encountered a variety of evidence to support the conclusion that the SFRS in Aberdeen City knows and engages well with the community. The Local Fire and Rescue Plan sets out significant background information about Aberdeen City – although that comment is made with the caveat, noted above, that it does not always describe that in terms of benchmarking with elsewhere in Scotland.

At least one fire station, North Anderson Drive, has meeting rooms that can be booked and used by community groups. Our meetings with staff at fire stations revealed a good level of awareness of the socio-economic structure of the community. One watch discussed with us their ‘allocated communities’ in the city in which they carried out inspections of high risk premises such as high rise buildings, and took part in other community engagement activities. We were told of a well-established sports programme in the city, Project Fit, through which the SFRS works directly with young people in the community to reduce anti-social behaviour.

Our impression from the local plan and from speaking to staff at managerial level and in fire stations was that the SFRS in Aberdeen City does know its community, and feels part of it. This is in line with our expectation of the SFRS both here and across Scotland: the nature of the service that is delivered by the SFRS means that community engagement is fundamental to its business. The Local Fire and Rescue Plan plays an important part in placing the depth of this knowledge on record, which is why (as we have observed above) it is important for all staff across the LSO to feel that they have a stake in the Local Plan.

Working in partnership

As is the case across Scotland, the SFRS in Aberdeen City is represented on the Community Planning Partnership and Community Safety Partnership, and through its Community Safety and Engagement staff plays an important role in partnership working on harm-reduction measures. In Aberdeen City, joint Community Safety working has been greatly enhanced by the introduction of the Community Safety Hub in 2013.

The Hub’s implementation was brought about by recognition among key personnel in public services across the city that working on mutual goals independent of one another often meant that efforts were duplicated or disjointed. Outcomes could be improved and more efficient if done in partnership where data and expertise would be shared more easily among officers of partnership organisations and agencies.

The Hub has realised this vision with officers working daily in a single office to deliver on key partner priorities as identified through a Strategic Assessment process. With a number of public-facing partners, the Hub is able to listen to the concerns of the community and react timeously to problems.

Since the launch of the Hub, this shared approach has seen partners effectively tackling issues including Antisocial Behaviour, Community Fire Safety and Violence. The Hub has facilitated this through daily meetings with partners where issues are highlighted, addressed and resolved in a way that empowers ownership and fosters a culture of inter-partnership accountability. These meetings allow relevant partners to offer specialist expertise and intervene at an early stage before problems escalate.¹²

A representative from the SFRS works full-time in the Hub and attends the daily tasking meetings at which issues are shared and practical solutions agreed on with a minimum of bureaucracy, leading to effective local action by the SFRS and partners. Interviews we held with community safety partners and representatives from Aberdeen City Council were overwhelmingly positive about the contribution that SFRS makes to the Hub, and we were told that this positive attitude to partnership working pre-dates the Hub itself.

We think that the Hub represents an example of good practice which could be usefully replicated elsewhere in Scotland. We commend the participation of the SFRS in this initiative and encourage the SFRS to view this type of partnership working as a core element of its work. We will be considering in the course of our programme of local area inspections what equivalent arrangements exist elsewhere. We heard one or two comments to the effect that partners hoped that this high level of engagement could be sustained in the current budgetary climate – and recognising the issues faced by the SFRS in terms of reducing budgets, we would nonetheless endorse the relatively modest resources being allocated to the Hub as providing value for money.

We were advised that, in conjunction with partners, some targeted youth diversionary projects had periodically been undertaken in areas of Aberdeen City. Youth intervention has been credited in the past for helping to reduce instances of fire related anti-social behaviour in other areas of Scotland and the success of the projects delivered in Aberdeen City would benefit from being fully evaluated.

Another effective area of partnership working we observed is the temporary co-location of SFRS and Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS) facilities at North Anderson Drive. SAS has moved into the old North Anderson Drive fire station accommodation (a new station was opened in 2008 next door) while their headquarters premises are being re-developed, and discussions with SAS personnel indicated that this has led to increased understanding between the two agencies. Our meeting with a representative of Police Scotland underlined that blue-light service co-location was seen as a desirable development for the future.

Local scrutiny arrangements

The formal arrangement for scrutiny of the SFRS by Aberdeen City Council is that the Council's Communities, Housing and Infrastructure Committee (CHIC) has responsibility for approving the local Fire and Rescue Plan and holding the Service to account for its

¹² Dickson, *Community Safety Hub Evaluation*, Aberdeen Community Safety Partnership November 2014

performance. In the course of this inspection we attended a meeting of the CHIC and in our view, the large amount of other business that that committee undertakes in addition to scrutiny of the SFRS means that the time available for scrutiny in committee is very limited. The implication for the SFRS is that it needs to find additional ways to support the local authority to carry out its scrutiny function.

What became clear to us as we met with representatives of the City Council is that scrutiny of the SFRS is seen not as a one-off event taking place in a committee meeting, but instead it is an ongoing process taking place through the Community Planning Partnership, the Community Safety Hub, and ad hoc contact between the SFRS and the Council. As noted above, the Council's emphasis was on the SOA as embodying the principles of joint community safety working, and individual agency local plans were expected to complement and feed into the SOA rather than having to be read separately from it.

We heard that the SFRS Chief Officer and Chair of the SFRS Board had recently visited Council officials, and additionally the LSO was seen as accessible to Council members and officials, and willing to arrange events such as briefings for members of the CHIC to support them in their role. Although this report is foremost about service delivery in the local area, we think that the issue of local authorities being able to engage with the SFRS nationally is an important one – especially given that national decisions (for example, about the allocation of resources) can have local impacts for which the LSO is not responsible. We welcome the SFRS's willingness to engage with local authorities at this national level, while sounding a note of caution about the national resource burden this implies. The SFRS may wish to consider how it will maintain good national engagement with each of Scotland's 32 local authorities at this level above the LSO's responsibility.

3.5 Overall conclusions

Overall, our impression is of a local area providing effective service in both Prevention and Protection, and Service Delivery functions. Access to specialist resources is due to be improved in the area, and Aberdeen City plays an important role as a regional centre for supporting neighbouring localities with specialist capacity.

Partnership working through the Community Safety Hub is an example of good practice and is to be commended as a way of meeting the intent of public sector reform and the Fire and Rescue Framework. The local authority advises that it is well-engaged by the SFRS and considers that the SFRS is meeting expectations.

Aberdeen City has some particular challenges in terms of the cost of housing, and pressure on the labour market from the oil and gas industry, which gives rise to retention issues not experienced elsewhere in Scotland. But this has not as yet translated into adverse effects on service delivery. The SFRS needs to monitor the situation and, if necessary, apply targeted measures to ensure that staffing levels in Aberdeen remain adequate.

4_Matters arising

The 2005 Act requires that the SFRS must have regard to this report and, having done so, must take such measures (if any) as it thinks fit in relation to the report. We are therefore confident that where we have expressed a view on particular issues, SFRS will consider what we have said and will take it into account in its forward planning.

Given the risks associated with incomplete or out-of-date operational risk information (ORI), we wish to raise one matter by way of a **recommendation**:

1. We have been advised that steps are contemplated to review all ORI specific to the Aberdeen City area for currency and comprehensiveness. We **recommend** that this is done in a timely manner, as out-of-date or incomplete ORI represents an unacceptable risk to the SFRS.

We have gathered together below some comments on issues raised in this report which we do not put forward as specific recommendations, that we consider the SFRS may nonetheless wish to focus on:

- a) We think that it would be useful if Local Fire and Rescue Plans are clear on performance indicators, highlighting trends over time and how that compares to national performance, which in turn would lead to a rationale for local priorities. As part of that, we think that Local Fire and Rescue Plans should set out clear local performance targets that the SFRS can have its performance locally measured against.
- b) We would encourage some reflection on the reasons for the low level of staff awareness of the Local Fire and Rescue Plan as it stands, and how the next version could be developed and publicised so as to achieve a strong feeling of ownership of it among staff.
- c) Clarification of the requirement or otherwise for operational crews to visit care home services on an annual basis should be obtained from the SFRS Prevention and Protection Directorate.
- d) We would encourage management in Aberdeen City to consider ways in which networking for Prevention and Protection staff might be promoted.
- e) It would be beneficial if instructions were given for records to be made of all occasions on which a wholtime appliance in the Aberdeen City area is not available, and the reason on each occasion for that.
- f) Managers should monitor time taken to procure replacement equipment and supplies on an ongoing basis to ensure that operational effectiveness and firefighter safety are not compromised by problems in ordering stores.
- g) The SFRS should be aware that whereas the national picture may be of good retention rates this may play out differently in Aberdeen. Aberdeen should not have to wait for there to be sufficient vacancies on a national level before local staffing deficiencies are addressed.
- h) We were advised that, in conjunction with partners, some targeted youth diversionary projects had periodically been undertaken in areas of Aberdeen City. The success of the projects delivered in Aberdeen City would benefit from being fully evaluated.

Glossary and abbreviations

Throughout this report, at the risk of some repetition, we have minimised the use of abbreviations in the interests of readability. There are some exceptions, particularly where an abbreviation is used so widely within or outside the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service that spelling it out on each occasion would look unnatural. An example is 'SFRS' for Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. An explanation of abbreviations used can be found below.

CHIC	Aberdeen City Council Communities, Housing and Infrastructure Committee
CSE	Community Safety Engagement
FBU	Fire Brigades Union
FSE	Fire Safety Enforcement
HR	Human Resources
LSO	Local Senior Officer: by law the SFRS has to appoint a LSO for each local authority area in Scotland
ORI	Operational Risk Information: information available on appliances about premises and risks that firefighters can refer to on their way to and at an incident
RDS	Retained Duty System, in which paid on-call firefighters respond from their homes or places of work to crew an appliance in the event of an emergency call
RTC	Road Traffic Collision
SFRS	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
SAS	Scottish Ambulance Service
SDA	Service Delivery Area. The SFRS is organised into three SDAs, North, East and West
SOA	Single Outcome Agreement: documents created by Community Planning Partnerships in each of the 32 local authority areas across Scotland, which include specific plans for the delivery of improved outcomes locally
2005 Act	The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005



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ISBN: 978-1-910349-05-2

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PPDAS45187 (05/15)