Fire and rescue comprehensive performance assessment 2007 to 2009
The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

For further information about the Audit Commission, visit our website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk
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Introduction

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

1 This document sets out the Commission’s approach for fire and rescue Comprehensive Performance Assessment (Fire CPA). The arrangements will run from August 2007 to March 2009.

2 The approach provides an opportunity for fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) that can show significant and sustained improvement to apply for a re-categorisation corporate assessment. It also sets out how the Commission will identify FRAs experiencing a significant decline in performance and consider them for a corporate assessment. The corporate assessment score may result in a new Fire CPA category. The Commission believes the approach strikes the right balance. It will allow for rigorous assessment of those who have improved or deteriorated significantly, while minimising the burden of regulation.

3 Since November 2006 the Commission has consulted widely on its approach to Fire CPA. This has included regional events, regular discussion with a reference group of FRAs and meetings with many stakeholders, including government departments. We received 49 responses to our formal consultation exercise. In addition the Commission undertook three pilots to help evaluate its approach. Overall there has been a high level of engagement and a consensus about the way ahead.

4 This document does not cover single tier and county council CPA. For information on this assessment see www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

Future assessment

5 The Local Government White Paper and the resulting Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill (the Bill) set out a new performance framework for local services, including fire and rescue services. The new performance framework replaces CPA with a Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). CAA will focus on outcomes for local people, assessing how well local bodies work in partnership to deliver their local priorities, and how they perform on a reduced set of national targets. CAA will be in place from April 2009.

6 Meanwhile, it is important that a focus remains on continuing to improve fire and rescue services. We will ensure that both Fire CPA and performance assessment continue to support improvement in fire and rescue services in the period leading up to the implementation of CAA.
Background

7 The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 gives the Commission the power to assess whether FRAs are having due regard to the National Framework when carrying out their functions. The Commission will be able to carry out such assessments using its inspection powers under Sections 10-13 of the Local Government Act 1999 (Ref. 1). The Commission also has a duty to categorise FRAs according to their relative performance (Ref. 2).

8 FRAs are best value authorities. They have a statutory duty to put in place arrangements to secure continuous improvement in their functions having regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Fire CPA sets the baseline for this improvement against the government’s modernisation agenda outlined in the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services.\(^1\)

9 In 2005 the Commission carried out corporate assessments for all FRAs in England. The corporate assessment score determined the Fire CPA category. Each FRA achieved a rating on a five-point scale from excellent to poor. Since then FRAs have been seeking to improve and modernise their services based on a targeted and risk-based approach to prevention, protection and emergency response.

10 The Commission uses the fire and rescue performance framework (www.audit-commission.gov.uk/fire) to assess FRA performance annually. This includes scored assessments for use of resources, direction of travel and service assessment. The service assessment consists of performance information and the operational assessment of service delivery (OASD).\(^2\) The performance framework assesses if FRAs are improving their service. It reflects the need to:

- promote value for money;
- improve financial management and financial reporting;
- encourage improvements valued by local people, challenging FRAs from the perspective of service users and diverse communities;

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\(^1\) Fire and Rescue National Framework 2006-2008. This document establishes the government’s expectations for FRAs.

\(^2\) Undertaken by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG). www.communities.gov.uk.
• promote good governance, greater accountability, better decision making and the proper conduct of public business; and

• stimulate significant improvement in the use of performance information, data quality, data analysis, information management and the public accessibility of relevant information.
Summary of consultation responses

11 Between November 2006 and February 2007 the Commission consulted on its approach to fire and rescue corporate assessment. We received 49 written responses from FRAs and other organisations. We have also received feedback from FRAs in our reference group and from pilot corporate assessment FRAs.

12 We have considered all these responses and taken them into account in finalising our approach. The key issues raised in the consultation are summarised below.

Strategic regulation approach to corporate assessment

13 Most respondents agreed with our strategic regulation approach to FRA corporate assessment. They agreed that it was correct to concentrate on poorer performing FRAs. In particular, some suggested that it would encourage all FRAs to improve significantly before applying for a corporate assessment. A small number of respondents disagreed with our proposal. They were concerned about the fairness of an approach that gives priority to a small number of poorer performing services.

Information considered when selecting FRAs for a corporate assessment

14 Respondents supported our proposals for the information that we will consider and the test that we will apply when FRAs apply for a corporate assessment. They commented that the proposed evidence sources would help focus selection on improving services. We have refined the selection criteria to add clarity as a result of the responses received.

Restructuring of the key lines of enquiry

15 Almost 85 per cent agreed with restructuring the key lines of enquiry. Respondents were keen to see transparency in the restructuring and a removal of duplication.
Refreshing of the OASD assessment alongside the corporate assessment

Respondents were split equally about our proposals to update the OASD. Since the consultation CLG have determined that their OASD assessment is valid for three years. Because of the consultation responses and CLG’s decision on the duration of the OASD the Commission will not take this proposal forward.

Reporting corporate assessments

Most respondents agreed that the results of the corporate assessments should be reported publicly.

The rest of this document sets out our confirmed approach.
Fire and rescue corporate assessment

Overall approach

The Commission will adopt a three-stage approach to fire and rescue corporate assessment as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Overall approach to fire and rescue corporate assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection panel</strong>&lt;br&gt;Audit Commission identifies evidence of significant deterioration or FRA requests re-categorisation and is able to demonstrate evidence of significant and sustainable improvement</td>
<td><strong>Corporate assessment</strong>&lt;br&gt;Fire and rescue corporate assessment</td>
<td><strong>New Fire CPA category</strong>&lt;br&gt;Fire CPA category awarded:&lt;br&gt;- Excellent&lt;br&gt;- Good&lt;br&gt;- Fair&lt;br&gt;- Weak&lt;br&gt;- Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Audit Commission
Stage 1 – Selection panel

20 In line with our approach to strategic regulation (Ref. 3) the Commission will not undertake corporate assessment of all FRAs. FRAs that are able to demonstrate improvement will be given the opportunity to apply to the Commission’s Fire and Rescue Corporate Assessment Selection Panel. The Panel will consider whether the evidence demonstrates significant and sustained improvement. FRAs showing a decline in performance will be identified to the selection panel by their Audit Commission relationship manager (RM).

21 The Commission will convene a Panel on three occasions in the period to April 2009. The purpose of the Panel is to:
   • select FRAs for a corporate assessment, from those who apply for re-categorisation;
   • select FRAs, for a corporate assessment, from those nominated by RMs; and
   • prioritise the selected FRAs.

22 FRAs that wish to apply should follow the guidance and instructions contained in Fire and Rescue Corporate Assessment 2007/09: Guidance for Authorities available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

23 Should a Commission RM decide, by considering annual assessments and in the light of continuing engagement, that an FRA is deteriorating, they will refer the FRA to the selection panel.

24 Table 1 sets out the timing of the selection panels.

25 The Panel will assess whether there is a realistic prospect of a change in Fire CPA category should it recommend a new corporate assessment. If an FRA applies for a corporate assessment the Panel will assess whether the FRA can demonstrate:
   • significant and sustainable improvement in outcomes for local people since the 2005 Fire CPA;
   • significant and sustainable progress against the Fire and Rescue National Framework requirements; and
   • there is a reasonable prospect that the FRA might secure a higher CPA category if the corporate assessment took place.
The Panel will make their decision by using the FRAs application for a corporate assessment.

In the case of a referral due to deteriorating performance, the Panel will consider the RM’s briefing note supported by the latest performance assessments (direction of travel, use of resources and service assessment).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<td>Application dates</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Closing date for FRAs to make an application</th>
<th>Earliest date a corporate assessment will start</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>21 September 2007</td>
<td>November 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10 March 2008</td>
<td>May 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 July 2008</td>
<td>August 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Audit Commission

Stage 2 – Corporate assessment

Once a decision has been made to undertake a corporate assessment, the Commission decides the scheduling, planning and delivery in discussion with the FRA.

Corporate assessments will be undertaken by teams consisting of accredited Commission staff, an accredited peer FRA member and peer officer from another FRA.

The assessment will be made against key lines of enquiry (KLOEs). The Commission developed the 2005 fire and rescue corporate assessment KLOE specifically for FRAs. Since their development the Commission has refined its approach to corporate assessment and this is incorporated in the 2007 fire and rescue corporate assessment KLOEs. The KLOEs have also been restructured into five themes. In doing this the Commission has:

- kept track with changing legislation (such as the Regulatory Reform Act) and revisions to the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Authorities since 2005;
- taken account of FRAs’ duty of continuous improvement;
• improved the assessment approach by removing anomalies, duplication and unnecessary complexity; and
• maintained a focus on driving future improvement.

The Fire and Rescue Corporate Assessment 2007/09: Key Lines of Enquiry are available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

The evidence gathered in the corporate assessment will also be used to support the Commission’s annual direction of travel and use of resources assessments in the following year.

Stage 3 – New Fire CPA category

On completion of the corporate assessment the Commission will award a new Fire CPA category. The new Fire CPA category is based on the five theme scores in the corporate assessment. The Commission will apply the following rules to determine the Fire CPA category (Table 2).

The Commission will report new Fire CPA scores on its website and in a public report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fire CPA category</th>
<th>Scoring rules</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>No scores of 2 or 1. At least two scores of 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>No scores of 1. At least four scores of 3 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No score of 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>No more than two scores of 1. At least three scores of 2 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Any other combination of scores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Audit Commission
Appendix 1
Supporting documentation

35 This document sets out the Commission’s approach to fire corporate assessment. The following documents set out the detail of this approach:

- Guidance for authorities.
- Guidance for corporate assessment selection panels.
- Key lines of enquiry.
- Technical guidance for assessment teams.

36 FRAs should also refer to the Fire and Rescue Performance Assessment 2007 and 2008 for details of the Commission’s annual assessments.

37 All documents are available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/fire.
References

2 Local Government Act 2003, Section 99.
3 Strategic Regulation: Minimising the Burden, Maximising the Impact, Audit Commission, November 2003.
This report is available on our website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk. Our website contains a searchable version of this report, as well as a text-only version that can easily be copied into other software for wider accessibility.

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