



Highlands & Islands Fire & Rescue Service

SPECIAL NEWSLETTER

8th December 2011



Introduction

Following the most recent Joint Board meeting I wanted to take this opportunity to issue a Special Newsletter to keep staff and our wider stakeholders informed of current activity within the Service.

Trevor Johnson
Chief Fire Officer

The information contained within the letters may not come as a surprise to many. For some of our communities a reduction in population numbers, ageing population profiles and modern work pressures all present issues of concern when trying to provide and maintain a fully functional Fire & Rescue Service. The demographic challenges must be considered in parallel with the necessity to train and support firefighters and ensure their safety in the hazardous environments they are required to work within.

Examples of the challenges facing HIFRS include:

- the need to further develop support structures that provide appropriate levels of training;
- the need for staff to be available for additional training;
- the need for staff to demonstrate their continued competence;
- ensuring an appropriate level of command competence can be secured for all incidents;
- the enhancement of supervisory command support at incidents;
- the provision of risk information for use at incidents;
- the delivery of additional duties such as flood response;
- full compliance with legislative requirements e.g. Working at Height.

Considering these issues, it is evident that HIFRS is logistically and financially unable to effectively support the current structure of the Service and as such, it is highly likely that I may have to recommend a different model to the Joint Board that is sustainable in the context of the enormous challenges that confront us.

Clearly between now and January, the focus of the Strategic Leadership Team is directed to defining an affordable and sustainable way forward, which balances community risk and firefighter safety.

My recommendations will be presented to the Board on the 27th January 2012.

Situation Overview

Over the last 18 months or so, the Service has made significant progress in enhancing the service we deliver but recognise that our Service faces considerable challenges to fully deliver every aspect of a modern Fire & Rescue Service.

Being aware of the scale of the issues that face HIFRS, the Service engaged with the Head of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit (SFRAU) and Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Authorities (Scotland) (CIFRA), Mr Torrie, to seek advice in developing solutions. Following initial discussions, Mr Torrie wrote to the Clerk to the Board, outlining his concerns over the scale of the challenges facing the Board.

A copy of this letter was provided to all Board Members and at a subsequent meeting between Mr Torrie, the Convener, Vice Convener and myself, it was agreed that Mr Torrie would again write to the Clerk, expanding on his concerns. Both letters from Mr Torrie are included in this newsletter.

At the Board meeting on 24 November 2011, Members received a presentation from Mr Torrie providing further detail on the points raised in his letters. Following discussion, Members requested that I bring a report to the January Board meeting, providing my professional recommendations as to how to proceed.

Peer Support Team

In recognition of our current workloads, including our commitment to reform and the quantity of additional work required to address the issues outlined above, I approached Mr Torrie requesting support. This request was accepted by Mr Torrie who has subsequently established a strategic Peer Support Team (PST), comprising Principal Officers from other Services.

The role of the PST is to assist the Fire Board and myself in re-aligning the Service's priorities to address the key corporate risks and produce an action plan with 'Safer Firefighters and Safer Communities' at its core. The action plan will be agreed with CIFRA but is entirely owned and driven by HIFRS.

The initial stage of the PST work will be to examine how HIFRS currently operates. This will be done through a recognised audit approach including a self assessment by the Service and consultation with HIFRS staff and representative bodies.

The Peer Support Team consists of:

Chief Fire Officer David Dalziel, Grampian Fire and Rescue Service

David Millar, Director of Corporate Services, Lothian and Borders FRS

Alasdair Hay, Deputy Chief Fire Officer & Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit within the Scottish Government.

Immediate Actions to Address Funding - Capital Build Programme

Work carried out prior to the November Board meeting had already identified a funding shortfall of £749,000 in the 2012/13 revenue budget. To help address this shortfall and assist in managing the Service's current year predicted revenue overspend, I advised the Board to delay expenditure on this year's capital build programme. This recommendation was approved by the Board.

This decision means that some of the new stations, previously planned for this financial year, have been deferred.

Letter dated 10th August 2011: From Steven Torrie to Michelle Morris

Dear Ms Morris

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2011/12 – 2013/14

I am writing to you in respect of Highlands and Islands Fire Board Service Improvement Plan 2011/12 – 2013/14. I am grateful to Chief Fire Officer Trevor Johnson for the briefings he has given me on the Plan, and the mini-tour of the Service area he supported in early June to develop my understanding of the Board's Plan and the context of issues facing Highlands and Islands. I am also grateful to Chief Fire Officer David Wynne for briefings prior to his retirement.

The Board's Service Improvement Plan sets out clearly a broad range of challenges for Highlands and Islands Fire Board most of which are fundamentally important to the delivery of an effective and safe fire and rescue service. I give a great deal of credit to the Board and Chief Fire Officers Wynne and Johnson for recognising these issues and setting out the intention to address those. At the same time, I am concerned that the scale of the issues which require to be addressed are of such a nature that they will make resolution extremely difficult to achieve within a reasonable timescale – particularly within the current economic climate.

You will understand that Ministers have an interest in the effective performance of Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service and are keen that the Board's Service Improvement Plan is delivered appropriately. The Minister has asked me to stress that she shares my concerns over the practicalities of addressing the Board's issues but that she recognises that these are properly matters for the Board

Given all of that, I feel it would be beneficial to explore a number of issues with the Board in relation to the delivery of the Plan, including matters such as:

- timescales for the various elements of the plan and the production and monitoring of an action plan,
- revenue and capital consequences of implementation,
- sustainability of operational provision,
- support from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit and the Fire and Rescue Services Division,
- support from other Scottish Fire and Rescue Services.

I would also be happy to be involved in discussions with the Chief Fire Officers' Association and individual fire and rescue services over the cross-service support mentioned above.

Given the above, I would be keen to meet with you at your convenience to discuss ongoing engagement with the Board.

Yours sincerely

STEVEN TORRIE
Head of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit

Letter dated 4th November 2011: From Steven Torrie to Michelle Morris

Dear Ms Morris

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2011/12 – 2013/14

I wrote to you on the 10th August 2011 outlining concerns over the challenges faced by the Board in the practical implementation of its Service Improvement Plan. Further to a meeting which I had with you, the Convener, Vice Convener and Chief Fire Officer, I set out here in more detail the nature and substance of those concerns.

In summary, my position is that:

1. A strategic decision by the Board a number of years ago which resulted in a total of 95 RDS operational units appeared in principle to be an appropriate response to perceived shortcomings in arrangements for volunteer units but insufficient consideration had been given at that time to the level of support required for the ongoing management, operational supervision and training of personnel. I believe that, due to a lack of an associated investment and development of the training capability within the Service and restricted provision of personnel to provide operational supervision, the level of operational competence potentially falls significantly below the level provided for RDS staff across the rest of Scotland. I also take the view that the gap which requires to be bridged to meet an appropriate level of provision is too great for HIFRS to address in isolation. Collectively these present significant risk to both the Board and the service.
2. The level of judicial scrutiny which is being applied to fire and rescue authorities across the United Kingdom has increased significantly in recent years. As a result I am concerned that Highlands and Islands Fire Board is carrying very considerable liability should any event occur which led to external investigation or scrutiny.
3. There is a fundamental issue for the Board where it has employed staff to perform operational firefighting and other duties in areas where operational activity is very low. There are subjective but natural limits in terms of population density and risk profile below which a modern operational fire and rescue service cannot be sustained. The risk to operational staff in these instances cannot be justified. In similar circumstances, fire authorities have applied a risk management strategy which is intended to reduce the risk further within those communities, for example by providing high-specification smoke detection, increase community safety education and so on. Board members will recognise that this approach is defined by the principles of Integrated Risk Management Planning.

4. In managing the risk to the community and to firefighters, the Board's stated objective of defining a sustainable operational cover model offers an opportunity to concentrate efforts to realign resources to build skills, knowledge and experience in core strategic, risk based units. I am proposing that the Board's Service Improvement Plan be tailored around the safety of firefighters and communities in the first instance and that, having received strategic approval from the Board, the Chief Fire Officer is given operational autonomy to manage that process.
5. In practice, 'operational autonomy' would involve matters relating directly to the safety of firefighters, including selection, information, PPE, equipment, safe systems of work, instruction, training and supervision. All of this would be allied to matching Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service IRMP to similar Scottish regions and the acceptance that firefighters in the Service must meet national role maps and standards of competence. In practical terms, Board members should be aware that the management of these issues has, in other fire and rescue services, resulted in the temporary suspension of operational units. I would propose that such an action would be a natural limit to the Chief Fire officer's autonomy and that actions beyond that, such as the permanent closure of units, would remain matters for the Board. I emphasise that it is my view that this is key to addressing the risks faced by firefighters; the Board and the Service. The approach would also allow the statutory duties in respect of best value to be met.

I have commended Chief Fire Officers Wynne and Johnson for setting out the Board's challenges in its Service Improvement Plan. In recognition of the scale of the challenge faced by the Board, I propose offering the Chief Fire Officer a peer support team made up of CFO David Dalziel, Grampian FRS, David Millar, Lothian and Borders FRS and Deputy CFO Alasdair Hay, Tayside and SFRAU.

It is hoped that the team will be able to offer both strategic and practical support to the Chief Fire Officer and informal discussions have already commenced in that respect. If the offer is taken up, we anticipate that the team will work with CFO Johnson to tailor the Board's Service Improvement Plan to reflect an emphasis on firefighter and community safety and develop a suitable gap analysis and associated action plans. I would expect to be consulted over the development of this work.

The Convener has requested that I meet with Board members prior to the Board meeting to set out some of the detail behind this thinking and to take questions. I would be very pleased to do so.

Yours sincerely

STEVEN C TORRIE
Head of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit

Alcohol fuel for fire

The majority of fire deaths in the Highlands and Islands involve alcohol - **don't be next**

DON'T GIVE FIRE A HOME

If you've been drinking...

...leave the cooker off!

Nearly two-thirds of domestic fires are the result of cooking.
The risk increases dramatically if you've been drinking.



...make sure your cigarette is out!

It's all too easy to fall asleep or not notice
a cigarette is still burning.



For more information on Fire Safety contact Highlands & Islands
Fire & Rescue Service on 01463 227000 or visit www.hifrs.org

Supported by

Highlands & Islands Fire & Rescue Service and the Drug & Alcohol
Action Teams in Highland, Western Isles, Shetland and Orkney

