

Integrated risk management planning in Nottinghamshire

Pete Murphy and **Kirsten Greenhalgh**, the joint directors of the research project, give their second of three reports on a unique collaboration with Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service looking into the IRMP process

Nottingham Trent University's Emergency Planning Research Unit has been carrying out research on the emerging new National Framework for fire and rescue services. This has been happening ever since former Fire Minister Bob Neill announced a strategic review of the previous framework shortly after taking office in June 2010.

NTU has been collaborating with NFRS and the fire authority on the implementation of the IRMP as part of its Fire Cover Review (FCR) project. The FCR was carried out between 2010 and 2012 and was based on the authorities first IRMP. Although the process started before the budget restrictions, it inevitably had to confront them after the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review.

The Fire Cover Review in Nottinghamshire

The overall intention of the Nottinghamshire Fire Cover Review was to examine the current deployment of the county's fire and rescue resources and consider whether these needed to be reconfigured and/or redeployed to best serve the community. Under the Integrated Risk Management Planning process, fire authorities are expected to map and reappraise the level of risk to communities, using the latest technology available, and reconfigure their services accordingly.

Nottinghamshire were acutely aware that when authorities choose to redeploy their services they often face legal or technical challenges which can result in lengthy and costly inquiries or judicial reviews. In most cases, judicial reviews have to consider whether the right decisions have been taken and whether they have been based on robust data and intelligence. As CFO Frank Swann explains: "The service wanted independent scrutiny and advice from a credible source that knew both the local and national contexts and understood the history, culture and antecedence of NFRS. We also wanted to avoid being the subject of a judicial review into the evidence or systems we used to undertake the Service Review."

IRMP and the Financial Crisis

The FCR was originally established to help deliver the authority's *Creating Safer Communities Strategic Plan*. It was intended



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to provide the authority with an evaluation on which to base the future deployment of resources to respond to the findings of the local risk assessments covering the county (whilst also taking into account the deployment of resources by other services located across the county's boundaries). The evaluation and report could then provide Nottinghamshire with a model that is capable of being re-calibrated to assess future changes in the county risk profile.

All of the FCRs that arise out of the IRMP process have to be based upon a comprehensive and contemporary local risk assessment that uses nationally-accredited and approved models of risk assessment, applied to robust and reliable local data and information sets. As part of the IRMP process, the government provided each fire and rescue service with a suite of software called the Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC) toolkit. This toolkit allows each fire service to undertake

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a risk-based assessment of their area using a common approach that has been thoroughly tested and independently validated.

Any use of alternative data sets, analytical tools or assessment models must be clearly identified and justified as 'fit for purpose' by the fire authority. It was clear in the procurement process that the intention of the consultancy project was to assure the authority that the data sets and information – the systems and processes, and any other information, analysis or intelligence used in the collection of the evidential base for the review – were as up to date, appropriate, and accurately and fairly applied to the Nottinghamshire context as the fire authority, the government and the public could reasonably expect.

The intention was to inform the fire authority's reconfiguration and redeployment of services so as to ensure that its resources were appropriate and targeted to be effective, economic and efficient at the point of need across the city and county. This was the overall objective for the Fire Cover Review project when it was established and, notwithstanding the announcement of the outcome of the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review and the subsequent financial settlement, it remained the overall objective of the project.

Stage 1: The Evidential Base

In our report to the authority we were able to confirm that NFRS used the latest and most appropriate analytical tools and information available for the project, and constructed a new evidential base that enabled them to undertake a robust, comprehensive and consistent review of the individual and community risks at various levels across the county. As might have been expected, the current configuration of services and deployment of resources had largely arisen from the historical remit and previous objectives for the service, which were now superseded.

As a result, the data, information, standards and benchmarks upon which the previous risk assessments were based were no longer "fit for purpose" and this resulted in a less than optimal pattern of resource deployment for current or anticipated future patterns of risk across the county.

The historical standards and the former key national indicators, were based primarily on incident response times, which have now largely been superseded. As part of stage 1 of the project, the risk assessment data for Nottinghamshire was cleansed, improved, updated and supplemented in order to meet the requirements of the FCR and the national framework.

These improvements were greatly facilitated by significant improvements to the mapping and computer technology available to the service and the development of the FSEC toolkit. It is quite clear that the exercise NFRS undertook would not have been feasible without this new technology.

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Stage 2: The Development and Appraisal of Options

It is hardly surprising that in a period of acute financial constraint, we found decisions on service reconfigurations became overtly politically contested, and continued to generate considerable public interest. This meant that finalising the proposals for the public consultation stage took longer and was more difficult than anticipated despite the urgent need for productivity improvements and efficiency savings.

The CFO presented three draft strategic options to the authority for changes to the configuration and deployment of services and resources across the county. As his report explained: 'Although many communities will view their local fire station as being "their" provision, the reality is that in terms of a county-wide service, management has to take a holistic view. It is therefore not feasible to present a series of recommendations, or indeed options, around individual units. The reality is that for every action there is a consequent reaction in the provision of fire cover. Changing the availability of one appliance or station will have a knock-on effect to the next nearest appliance or station. This is why it is so important to consult fully on any changes'.

The three options were presented as coherent and interdependent 'packages of proposals,' and the CFO identified a preferred option. All three options had over 30 (often inter-related) parts to their 'package'. To assist the decision and facilitate early implementation, the CFO broke these recommendations into three categories for each of the three potential options. Thus potential recommendations or changes involving 'management capacity' were differentiated from proposals or recommendations for 'stations and appliances'. They were also differentiated from other 'supporting considerations' which dealt with issues such as the non-uniform staff structure, consequential training requirements, estate review, and changes to the Fire Control Centre. Unlike many other IRMP projects, since the financial crises, the preferred option that the CFO recommended – and the FRA based the public consultation exercise upon it – was not the option based on the cost imperative.

Stage 3: Public Consultation and Engagement

The consultation exercise was the largest ever undertaken by NFRS with an unprecedented range of activities, levels of interest and number of responses. It was the first one undertaken in which social media and online responses were a major factor. NFRS and the fire authority were advised and assisted by Opinion Research Services (ORS), who are accredited by the government for the implementation of public consultations arising out of the IRMP process.

The consultation was originally intended to run for a period of 12 weeks, but the

authority decided to extend the consultation period by a further three weeks due to the unprecedented level of interest – and the volume of representations being received. By adopting a wide-ranging, inclusive and open approach to the public consultation, the FRS and the FRA undoubtedly reduced the risk of future challenges from Judicial Review and positively engaged and interacted directly with the public.

NFRS, very helpfully, presented their proposals in three policy ‘clusters’ – namely proposals for ‘stations and appliances’; ‘managerial capacity’ and other implementation or ‘consequential considerations’. They also identified and analysed the response in relation to four key stakeholder groups – ‘the general public and individuals’; ‘businesses’; ‘key delivery partners’ and ‘representative groups’.

The responses received:

- Favourable (✓)
- Neutral (–)
- Unfavourable (X)

The level of interest generated:

- Strong (✓ ✓ ✓)
- Average (✓ ✓)
- Weak (✓)

Overall, ORS concluded: ‘It is hard to escape the conclusion that there is in fact relatively little opposition to the Fire Cover Review’s draft proposals across Nottinghamshire. This impression is reinforced by NFRS’ experience in its local meetings and on-street information events across the county – and confirmed by the outcomes of the questionnaire survey, in which seven out of nine proposals were approved by absolute majorities’.

Conclusions and Reflections

In fact NFRS and the fire authority were able to develop a comprehensive evidential base that enabled them to undertake a robust and detailed review of the individual and community risks at various levels across the county and its boundaries. The quality assuring of the evidential base and the systems and processes adopted by the project team was critical to the efficient, effective and economic operation of the review and the confidence of key stakeholders in the outcome. The FSEC toolkit, the use of independent consultants and robust comparative data were all important components of this quality assurance regime, adding to the credibility of the exercise and its outcome.

The approach also benefitted from the clear distinction that was drawn between the roles of the service and those of the authority which is a distinction subsequently envisaged in the government’s *Open Public Services White Paper* and emphasised by the new national framework for England.

The general era of austerity and the constraints on public expenditure clearly



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influenced the response of some key stakeholders, most notably the public sector delivery agencies and the business community. The level of detail provided and the transparency of the process was greater than any previous exercises undertaken by NFRS. The service may not have anticipated the success of its consultation strategy but retrospectively it is clear that it was highly successful and widely appreciated.

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About the Authors:

Pete Murphy and Kirsten Greenhalgh are the Joint Practice Editors of the International Journal of Emergency Services.

Further details of the NTU Fire and Rescue Services Research Programme and all of the presentations referred to in this article can be found on the NTU website at www.ntu.ac.uk/ or directly from the authors Peter.murphy@ntu.ac.uk or Kirsten.greenhalgh@ntu.ac.uk