



Professor Pete Murphy, Nottingham Business School, says that a pragmatic and cautious approach to the first inspections reveals services in dire need of support and investment

Inspections reveal lack of support and investment

I have long been an advocate for the reintroduction of external independent inspections for the Fire and Rescue Service¹, but also a fierce critic of both the scope and strategic positioning of the new Inspectorate – Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services – and the parameters imposed by the government on the first tranche of service inspections².

I therefore read the individual reports and the Inspectorate’s summary of its findings from the first tranche with a certain amount of trepidation. What would they find? How consistent and evidence based would their judgements be and how robust will be their reporting?

Will they help services to improve, will they encourage mutual trust and respect between the inspectors and the inspected and will they justify the additional burdens on the fire and rescue services?

In assessing the outcome, it is essential to remember that this is a new Inspectorate, a new inspection regime and relatively inexperienced inspectors with precious little in terms of financial or performance information upon which to build judgements or triangulate evidence. They will get better at collecting evidence, organising the process and simply knowing what is involved.

In the absence of comprehensive and objective performance indicators or standards, we knew they would inevitably have to be over reliant on both subjective judgements and relative rather than absolute performance criteria.

In terms of reporting, the reports and their presentation needed to balance the difference in the expectations of their varied audiences; the government, the public, key stakeholders and partners as well as the services themselves, their frontline staff and the media.

These stakeholders are all looking for slightly different things from the process, although they are united in their collective and individual need for both confidence and

reassurance. Could they be confident and have faith in the process, in the judgements and in their collective expectation that improvements to the services and to the safety of the public will follow from their efforts?

The Inspectorate itself needed to justify the government’s investment. It needed to balance its confidence in its judgements, with the realistic expectations for clear independent assessments and robust messages called for by all stakeholders. Could it provide recommendations and conclusions that will assist fire and rescue authorities to improve and deliver their individual services while constructively informing both national and local policy development and external regulation and assurance?

What are the Headline Findings?

To an extent, the big issues exposed by the reports are relatively well known and/or strongly suspected within the Fire and Rescue Service community. They are not that new. However, before these reports were published they lacked consistent, comprehensive, independent and (to a degree) quality-assured evidence.

The first tranche may be the results from a limited service inspection of only 14 services and 14 relatively small services, (as London and the metropolitans are in later tranches), but they still represent the most significant release of data, information and intelligence on the operational efficiency of our local fire and rescue services in over 12 years.

Just as Grenfell and Hackitt³ revealed the serious and unacceptable inadequacies of the national fire regulations and their enforcement, so these reports confirm what a lot of ad hoc, partial and informal evidence has been suggesting over the last nine years. It provides the detail to substantiate the highly critical NAO⁴ and the Public Accounts Committee⁵ reports of 2015 and 2016. It shows the implications on the ground of the DCLG and the Home Office’s inadequate stewardship of the Service.

Service Driven by Short Term Priorities

The picture that is emerging is of a Service that has drifted into a situation where decisions are driven by financial imperatives and short term priorities; where external considerations rather the improvement and development of a citizen centred service have become predominant; and where the infrastructure and information available to assist services in meeting their ever-changing challenges has been allowed to crumble, disappear and at times has been actively dismantled.

The Service has not drifted into this situation of its own volition; it has drifted into this situation through a lack of national leadership from government as clearly signposted by the NAO and the PAC reports. MHCLG’s culpability is beyond dispute, but there is no substantial evidence in these reports to suggest the direction of travel for the Service has significantly changed after two years under the Home Office.

The reports confirm that the data, intelligence and information available to make decisions at local service delivery levels is just as inadequate as it was at the national level in 2015, when the NAO reported and as it remains to this day. ‘Data needs to improve’ is the summary report’s big sign-off message.

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Inadequate data combined with the absence of national standards 'has resulted in local variations in almost every aspect of what each fire and rescue service does'. Too often staff are using 'antiquated and unreliable' systems with outdated technology and there has been 'poor investment in technology'.

Any comparative study of 14 services or organisations let alone the whole sector is going to show variations in priorities, investments, standards and performance.

Some variation is inevitable and reflects differences in demography, geography and risks, a reality acknowledged in the Inspectorate's summary report. This is what is referred to as warranted or justifiable variation. However, the inspections reveal far too much unwarranted variation in the local delivery of fire and rescue services, and that this unwarranted variation is almost ubiquitous across response, protection and preventative services.

Disconcertingly they grade only three out of 14 service as 'good' at looking after the people who work for them, when 'good' is defined as 'meeting pre-defined grading criteria, which are informed by any relevant national guidance or standards' ie standards that we

would normally expect them to meet. The inadequacy in the way that local services manage their resources and most importantly their people is one of the most startling overall findings and many commentators, not least the representative bodies, will quite rightly want to highlight the urgent need for action in this area.

Impact of Under Resourcing

The other huge but not unexpected finding is that protection and prevention services have been systematically under resourced. The causes are national as well as local and are common to many public services. Nevertheless financial reductions have disproportionately affected protection and prevention services, and the 'consequences

of long-term under-investment in this crucial area are too often evident'. Many services are not even attempting to evaluate the benefits of their prevention activities and services are struggling to recruit, train and retain staff with the specialist skills they need for more complex and technical protection work. Of the 14 services inspected the inspectors graded only five as good at protecting the public through fire safety regulation.

Stepping back and looking at some wider considerations, the Inspectorate have taken a very pragmatic approach to their first inspections, and to their initial reporting.

They have learnt some lessons from the piloting programme⁵ and from previous inspection programmes. In a very sensitive Service at a particularly sensitive time, they have prudently phased-in their first national inspection programme. They have acknowledged their own and the sector's resource limitations, while adopting the modern approach of 'inspection for improvement rather than for compliance'.

They have consciously focussed on a group of smaller services, some of which have had performance challenges

in the past but with some larger services included. In their first tranche they have avoided having to make judgements on potentially more high profile or contentious services such as London or the metropolitan services.

They have also been commendably cautious in the presentation of their findings and of the lessons to be learned from the first programme. They have communicated professionally and acknowledged and carefully calibrated their messages to the sensitivities, needs and expectations of their key stakeholders. No less than 11 of the first 14 services inspected receive positive name checks for commendable aspects of their service in the summary report.

Nevertheless, the reports have managed to convey some clear and invaluable findings as well as some challenging messages for all of their key stakeholders.

Their strong focus on understanding risk and the clear acknowledgement that fire and rescue services must deliver a risk based, rather than demand led, service, is a welcome relief after numerous government publications have started to make decisions and justify policy based on the latter.

In terms of collaboration between the emergency services, it is interesting to notice that, with the exception of collaborative work with the police on arson and fire setting in community safety partnerships, the vast majority of examples of good or innovative collaborative working come from initiatives with health, housing or local government, as well as work across borders and with other fire and rescue services.

The summary report commends ongoing work with key stakeholders such as the NFCC, CIPFA, and even academics on both standards and data and intelligence. It acknowledges that its findings confirm and reflect the concerns on fire safety regulations over both compliance and enforcement that are at the heart of the Hackitt review⁶.

Finally, although neither acknowledging the process nor the reports of the fire peer challenge and sector led improvement regime (there is no list of reports and publications referred to in the individual service reports), the findings clearly confirm the inadequacy of the previous process for ensuring continual improvement or for providing public assurance on the achievement of value for money.

Whatever else I may disagree with, I agree with the report's final comment – this situation needs to improve.

References:

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