



HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – EMBEDDING LESSONS LEARNED

1. Introduction

This document is a joint statement by the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisers in England and Wales, and HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland, in conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). It arises from our reflections on a number of public reports over the past decade on emergency incidents attended by fire and rescue services, in which health and safety has been a leading theme.

We intend to encourage reflection on the extent to which key lessons identified in these reports have been learned by fire and rescue services; and, where appropriate, to influence organisational change and support organisational learning across the spectrum of local procedures, policies and doctrine, training and exercising and organisational culture.

We hope that fire and rescue authorities will find this document useful, but the reader should understand that we cannot encompass all the different organisational and operational scenarios relevant to the fire and rescue service. It is always a matter for the dutyholder under health and safety legislation, using all sources of information available to them, to ensure that the arrangements required to secure and manage health and safety in their organisation are implemented.

We also encourage those who have responsibility for management of health and safety in the fire and rescue service to see this document as a starting point for their considerations – not a ‘how to’ guide. We encourage dutyholders to take a fresh and critical look at their organisation’s policies, processes and procedures, and how these are managed, to assess how far issues and lessons identified from recent incidents have become truly embedded and learned. It is our shared view that the fire and rescue service has made good progress in *identifying* issues and lessons from past incidents and near-misses. But those issues and lessons need to be effectively managed and integrated throughout fire and rescue services, with partners if necessary, before we can say that they have truly been *learned*.

2. DCLG national health, safety and welfare framework

The *Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974* and the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999* require fire and rescue services to have arrangements for the effective planning, organisation, control, monitoring and review of preventive and protective measures. We think that it is important that fire and rescue services establish effective arrangements for embedding significant learning in their organisations. This involves having processes

which enable matters to be identified and raised as issues, escalated as necessary, priorities managed, and new learning turned into business-as-usual. This requires an organisational culture which encourages the robust management of these processes, and which views health and safety as enabling. This view is consistent with the HSE guidance document *Managing for Health and Safety* – available as a free download from the HSE website www.hse.gov.uk.

In 2013, the Department for Communities and Local Government published a *Health, safety and welfare framework for the operational environment*. Although intended for fire and rescue authorities in England, the document was broadly consulted on and represents a significant consensus, so our view is that the principles within it are also relevant in the devolved administrations.

We encourage fire and rescue services to revisit their established systems for performance measuring, auditing and review, and verify that the management of processes for ensuring that issues and lessons *identified* become lessons *learned* is both rigorous and robust.

The *Health, safety and welfare framework* confirms the importance of sharing best practice across fire and rescue authorities and other agencies, to enable lessons to be learnt from safety incidents both regionally and nationally.

3. Common themes

Below we draw out some of the significant lessons taken from post-incident reports in recent years. The list of issues set out reflects the view of the authors – the intention is for this document to provide a reminder and aide memoire on some of the common themes identified. This is not presented as a comprehensive list, nor should the order be seen as a representation of priority. Many practitioners will have their own views on what is important and this is to be welcomed.

Compliance with health and safety legislation is an active learning process. Our intention is for this list to stimulate thinking on the major issues and lessons identified for UK fire and rescue services in recent times. Each of the themes described below has been shared widely, and should already be familiar to fire and rescue services. We encourage the focus to be on management of effective processes for integrating issues and lessons identified, rather than the identification of the issues in isolation.

Operational risk information

The 2009-10 HSE programme of inspections of fire and rescue services found that the adequacy of policies and procedures for identifying risks varied between services, as did the effectiveness with which these policies and procedures had been implemented.

A lack of information about premises and how stored information is accessed at the incident has been noted as an issue in a number of recent post-incident investigations. Each service should have effective systems in place to ensure that it has collected and made available sufficient information about premises that present particular risks, and should also have systems in place to maintain the currency of information held. The availability of site-specific information should be supplemented where practicable with site familiarisation visits by firefighters, and collaboration with partner services and site owners to ensure a consistent and joint approach to preparedness, response and recovery.

Operational discretion and professional judgement

Operational discretion refers to incident commanders making a calculated and risk-assessed decision to depart in some respect from an organisational policy or standard operating procedure, because adherence to the procedure in question would be likely to lead to a poor outcome in the particular circumstances of a given incident, or to the use of *professional judgement* where incident commanders and personnel develop approaches to novel or unusual situations which are not covered by established operating procedures. Both capabilities are important to effective delivery of service and are referenced in the revised incident command guidance released by the National Operational Guidance Programme in 2015.

Fire and rescue services should consider how operational discretion and professional judgement are integrated into their training and exercising for incident commanders, and in particular should review their incident commanders' understanding of the implications of deploying these capabilities for their organisations and for partners. The joint decision making model described in the JESIP Joint Doctrine and explained in the revised incident command manual may support and assist an understanding of these techniques.

Incident command: competence

There are now clearly understood national occupational standards for incident command, and each fire and rescue service should have in place a rigorous process to demonstrate that incident commanders are trained and assessed, exercised, and their skills maintained accordingly.

Incident command: ensuring effective control of crews

Effective control of crews by managers at all levels of an incident is safety-critical, and 'followership' is important as well as leadership at operational incidents. The 2015 incident command guidance notes that:

Fire and rescue services should be aware that the culture of their organisation can influence behaviours both on and off the incident ground. This may affect the way in which incident commanders lead the incident to a resolution and the way in which crews respond. Fire and rescue services should consider their organisational culture and its influence on incident command.

All operational staff should be aware of the prevailing tactical mode, incident objectives, and required actions to resolve the incident.

Communications

Fire and rescue services are encouraged to maintain an ongoing focus on communications issues including radio discipline and sufficient channels being available at incidents, radio effectiveness in the built environment, communication being maintained between crews and incident command, incident commanders receiving comprehensive handovers, and communications between fire control and incident commanders on scene.

Fire behaviour and ventilation

All firefighters need a practical understanding of fire development particularly in compartments. At incident command level, a sound appreciation of the science behind this subject underpins safe command decision-making. Compartment fire behaviour training is a well-established concept. It is important, in the context of the declining number of incidents, that firefighters and incident commanders continue to maintain their skills and knowledge of the purpose, effects, and risks associated with ventilating compartment fires and the related appropriate selection and use of firefighting media.

Heat stress

Heat stress is increasingly understood as a risk for firefighters in terms of affecting their judgement and decision-making ability in other areas. Fire and rescue services should therefore ensure that all operational staff are aware of the causes, signs and symptoms of heat stress so they can act decisively to avoid negative health and safety consequences.

Basement firefighting

Whilst they are a subset of structural fires, basement fires are recognised as presenting unusual risks such as increased propensity to heat build-up, limited escape routes, building collapse, complex layout and risks to firefighters on the floor above. Fire and rescue services should ensure incident commanders are familiar with the practicalities of dealing with basement fires, and their unique characteristics should be reflected in dynamic and analytical risk assessments.

4. Next steps

We believe it is important to recognise the significant progress made by fire and rescue services in recent years in the understanding of health and safety. There have been developments throughout the sector in personal protective equipment, policies and procedures, training and equipment, and partnership working. This has not been achieved in isolation and we recognise the efforts and support particularly of the Chief Fire Officers Association, which in our view has been very proactive and supportive in this area, representative bodies, and partner agencies in this regard.

In our view continued improvement in this area requires an ongoing commitment by all fire and rescue services and partner agencies to prioritise health and safety and to work together to positively manage this improvement. We think that where there may be health and safety issues and lessons to be learned, it is incumbent on those who have identified them to share them as widely as possible so that they can be embedded across the sector, and among partner agencies as well. We are committed to information sharing to the limit the law allows, and we will continue to engage with organisations in the fire and rescue sector and beyond to encourage this.

Fundamentally, good health and safety management relies on rigorous and robust processes that are utilised, reviewed and actively managed by competent and diligent staff. By increasing their focus on ensuring lessons identified become truly lessons learned, our fire and rescue services can continue the work they undertake in protecting our communities, and offer the best level of protection for their staff.

5. Sources of further information and guidance

Fire and rescue services are encouraged to consider sources of information available, both internally and externally, and consult with professional organisations, colleagues and partners.

Additionally, services should consider available guidance to assist embedding lessons identified. Important work is being done to bring together sources of incident learning, both fire and rescue service specific as well as joint operational learning, driven by the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme. Additionally the following resources may be of assistance.

Health, safety and welfare framework for the operational environment, Department of Communities and Local Government, June 2013

Leading health and safety at work: actions for directors, board members, business owners and organisations of all sizes, HSE, 2013

The Management of Health and Safety in the GB Fire and Rescue Service, Consolidated Report, HSE, 2010

Striking the balance between operational and health and safety duties in the Fire and Rescue Service, HSE, 2010

Operational Assessment and Fire Peer Challenge toolkit, CFOA and Local Government Association, 2014

Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme Joint Doctrine, JESIP 2013

Joint Organisational Learning – Learning Interoperability Lessons Guidance Document, JESIP, 2015

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