



Essex Fire Authority

The Development Journey

Report produced February 2017

This is a report on the programme to develop political leadership within Essex Fire Authority. It is accompanied by a paper proposing an induction and development programme in 2017.

1. Context

In response to recommendations in the Lucas Report, Essex Fire Authority commissioned Solace (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) to provide a programme of activity to address the following

- Improving the effectiveness, accountability and relationships of the Fire Authority members and the Service Senior Management team.
- Developing the Authority's members enabling them to give effective strategic leadership to the Authority and Service through a period of significant change.
- Improving the Fire Service Managers' understanding of how to work effectively with Authority members and developing their ability to work across the political – managerial interface.

There was also the prospect of supporting work on light-touch revisions of EFA Constitution and Governance arrangements as a way of helping ensure that effective accountability and scrutiny arrangements are in place. This work was not taken forward by SOLACE as it was assigned to the Clerk and Deputy Clerk to the Fire Authority.

During the 15 months since the programme was commissioned, the Policing and Crime Act 2017 has received Royal Assent and with it the possibility of Essex becoming the first area in England where governance of Fire and Rescue would move to the Police and Crime Commissioner. This change could occur as early as October 2017.

2. Programme

The commissioned activities were delivered through a programme of workshops in February-March 2016 (Phase 1) and November-February 2016-17 (Phase 2). They took the form of the following:

Phase 1 – Member/Officer workshop: Improving Effectiveness, Accountability and Relationships; Member workshop: Developing Members' Roles in Improvement; Officer workshop: Working Effectively across the Political-Managerial Interface; Member/Officer workshop: Review and Planning.

Phase 2 – Member Workshops: Roles and Responsibilities; Scrutiny and Appropriate Challenge; Reflections and Next Steps; Officer Workshops: Political Awareness.

Each of the Phase 1 workshops ran once. For Phase 2, each of the member workshops was offered on three separate dates and members of the Police and Crime Panel were also invited to attend.

Concepts and approaches covered were: Fire and Rescue Legislation; Respective Roles and Responsibilities, Motivations and Behaviours of Members and Officers; Contested Space; Nature of Strategic Challenges; Kolb's Theory of Learning; Local Authority/Fire Authority Comparisons; Systems of Holding to Account: Check and Balance, Assurance, Audit, Performance Monitoring; the Scrutiny Cycle; examples of other Combined Authorities' scrutiny arrangements.

Phase 1 was developmental in terms of exploring what might be done and resulted in an action plan. This was reported to the Policy and Strategy Committee in June 2016. Phase 2 was a means of delivering part of the action plan and also resulted in a range of ideas for induction of new members as well as for the future.

3. Points and Issues emerging through these activities

Member leadership

The intention was for the work to be member-led. This was demonstrated in a number of ways. The initial scoping was undertaken with a group consisting of the Chairman and the Group spokespersons. Phase 1 concluded in the creation of an Action Plan formulated by members and senior officers working together. The report on Phase 1 to the Policy and Resources Committee produced a decision on what Phase 2 should include. Phase 2 included a continuing element of engagement with members to shape plans for the future.

The leading members were clear from the outset that, whatever was to happen in the future, the challenges in the Lucas Report should be responded to positively. Much had happened and was happening to demonstrate achievement. If the Fire Authority underwent radical change then they were committed to ensuring a positive legacy.

Member and officer relations

Throughout the workshops, the concept of contested space was one often referenced subsequent to it having been introduced as a useful theoretical description of political and managerial relationships. It became clear that, in Essex, the space between members and officers has had changing occupancy, the shifts being often complex because they are either unstated or unacknowledged. At its simplest, the officer perception has been of a need for them to fill most of the space.

Contested or uncontested space is a shorthand description covering questions of leadership, role definition, communication and clarity of responsibilities especially when these are shared. It is also pertinent when it comes to questions of boundaries or territory. An example of differing officer and member views on what it is reasonable for members to do is that of visits to Fire Stations where some members wish to have free access in order to carry out what is seen as a community leadership responsibility. The workshops produced a way forward which is for a protocol to be drawn up thereby ensuring clarity of purpose and consistency of approach.

A positive aspect of member-to-member and member-officer relations is that of the Chair and group spokespeople liaising cross-party and being briefed by the Acting Chief Fire Officer. This appears to be a relationship of mutual respect. On the other hand, views were expressed that some leading officers are disdainful of the ability of members.

Roles and Responsibilities

This topic is one which figured large in the programme. It was clear that members were searching for greater understanding and the workshops went some way to achieving this. Particularly useful was the production of an analysis of the difference between member and officer responsibilities – the Whats and Hows.

Members spoke of their interest in the Service not least because that is what is delivered to the communities which elected councillors represent. Both in the Fire Authority and in local government one of the challenges is to balance strategic decision-making with the need to understand the services as they affect people in localities without crossing into operational management.

The Constitution sets out terms of reference and collective responsibilities but has less on roles except for that of the Chairman. Members were looking for a clearly understandable and comprehensive approach to what is expected of them. There was reiterated concern about the need for clarity on specific roles of which Champions featured strongly. Member support officers seconded from Basildon Council began work on a Member Handbook which contains relevant material to form the background guidance for new members' induction.

Culture

The nature of the culture within the organisation was a major issue within the Lucas Review. It was not a feature intended to be covered in the workshops but it was touched on by some attendees.

Early in the Phase 1 workshops, members articulated views about a feature of officer culture which is the wearing of uniform in almost all areas of activity beyond the operational.

Discussions also revealed clearly the unique aspects of promotion within the Fire and Rescue Service, i.e. based on rank. These are symbolic of a certain culture for which Command and Control is a shorthand description.

While there are Command and Control cultures in some councils and/or political groups; that form of leadership is not universal in local government. Difference is not necessarily an impediment when there is understanding of what that represents and how it can be used productively. In this programme, the officer workshops were designed to support such a development. Discussion in those workshops also led to some reflection on progress with implementation of the Lucas Review recommendations such as communications, equalities and leadership.

Delegation

Queries arose in the workshops about the extent of delegation to officers. There was also some lack of understanding about what had been delegated. This is an issue that can be approached in a number of ways: publication of the scheme of delegation (referenced in the Constitution but only available separately and not easily so); as part of Roles and Responsibilities in the induction programme; reviewed as part of revising the Constitution; publication of designated officer decisions.

Compare and Contrast

Workshop discussions on the similarities and differences between the Fire Authority and local authorities identified significantly dissimilar approaches to governance. Those councillors who had previously experienced the committee system prior to the Local Government Act 2001 saw similarities with the Fire Authority. The introduction of the requirement for Forward Plans was one of the main developments viewed as helpful for the Fire Authority to adopt. Councillors also highlighted the need for dedicated member support in the Fire Authority in a comparable way to how the committee support system operates in councils, i.e. in an advisory as well as administrative capacity.

Holding to Account

Flowing from the Compare and Contrast discussions, members had varying views about the effectiveness of arrangements for holding to account both officers and the Authority's own decision-makers (who are, in fact, themselves). The governance structure in local government relies, in the Leader and Cabinet model, on a Check and Balance system in which Scrutiny plays a major part. In public sector governance without such a clear designation of responsibilities, it is possible for there to be a lack of clarity so other systems are used, e.g. risk-management and assurance frameworks. Where lay and non-executive directors are board members, the challenge role is essential. Although the second workshop in Phase 2 was intended to include a role play of a scrutiny activity, attendance was too low for this to be carried out. Instead the opportunity to plan such a meeting was useful in helping develop strategic thinking.

Other Fire Authorities

As part of designing the workshops, SOLACE drew on practice in other Fire Authorities especially on Holding to Account. This was in terms of alternative Scrutiny arrangements and on work undertaken, eg on readiness for a Terrorism Incident. The Acting Chief Fire Officer has encouraged member attendance at relevant conferences which has resulted in some useful cascading back. Interest has been expressed by some members in attending the LGA Leadership Academy for Fire Authority Members following on from the Chairman and Vice-Chairman having done so previously.

Communications

Internal and External Communications were debated in the Phase 1 workshops with many practical proposals arising and being captured in the Action Plan produced. Members rely on the Chair and Group Spokespersons disseminating information and stressed the need for support to ensure this is timely as well as for a protocol with the Communications Team to include what is copied to members and when. A further consideration is effective reporting to the constituent member authorities: Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock.

Member Engagement

Attendance at the workshops is recorded in Appendix 1. (Names have been excluded at the request of attendees as they were hesitant to name and shame non attendees) The picture is of serious commitment from a group of members, total lack of engagement from some and spasmodic involvement of others plus attendance from members of the Police and Crime Panel with some attending all sessions. Those who did attend demonstrated a high level of debate and positive engagement.

The Future

With all-out elections for Essex County Council this May and some members standing down, it is evident that there will be change in the membership of the Fire Authority. With the Police and Crime Commissioner's Local Business Case for changed governance of Fire and Rescue currently under public consultation, there is a need to continue development of the Fire Authority while ensuring preparedness for any changes. When it comes to the latter, matters forming part of the SOLACE programme will be pertinent, e.g. Holding to Account, Political Awareness for Officers.

4. Next Steps

Outputs from the development programme have been captured as practical recommendations in the form of the Action Plan from Phase 1 and the proposals for induction of new members and development activity in 2017. The Action Plan is attached as Appendix 2. Proposals for Induction of New Members and a Development Programme for 2017/18 are set out in a separate paper.

Feedback and outcomes for individuals are currently being reviewed by way of circulation of a questionnaire to members and officers involved in the workshops.

APPENDIX 1

SOLACE WORKSHOPS 2016/17

	SESSION 1	SESSION 2	SESSION 3
FIRE AUTHORITY	Roles and Responsibilities	Scrutiny and Appropriate Challenge	Reflections and Next Steps
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended		
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended		
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	
	Attended		Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Did Not Attend Any		
	Attended		
	Attended		
	Attended		Attended
	Attended		
	Attended	Attended	
	Attended		
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Did Not Attend Any		
	Attended		
	Attended		Attended
	Did Not Attend Any		
	Attended		
	Attended		Attended
	Attended		Attended
POLICE AND CRIME PANEL			
		Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended	Attended	Attended
	Attended		
			Attended
			Attended
			Attended
	Did Not Attend Any		
		Attended	Attended
			Attended

Appendix 2

SOLACE Workshops Action Plan Checklist

Theme & Issues	Ideas	What needs to happen?
<p>1.Role</p> <p>Need to understand role – as regards the authority, in representing areas, in relation to the service</p> <p>Clarity on who does what and scheme of delegation</p>	<p>Be clear to constituent authorities on the role and workload for FRA members when nominations are to be made. Will help bring about stronger commitment.</p> <p>Provide members with current list of what has been delegated.</p> <p><i>+Also to form part of Member development and training</i></p>	<p>Introduce one page job description for FRA members, which outlines commitment.</p>
		<p>Supply to constituent authorities (Leader and relevant officers) to use when considering which members to appoint to FRA.</p>
		<p>Review scheme of delegation and report annually on how these delegations have been carried out</p>
		<p>Review EFA Constitution as needed.</p>
<p>2.Leadership</p> <p>Need clarity on leadership roles of members and officers, distinctly and jointly</p>	<p>Align roles of FRA lead members, new SLT and extended leadership forum – develop clarity on responsibilities, metrics, reporting and linkages to other parts of the governance system</p> <p><i>+Also to form part of Member and Officer development and training</i></p>	<p>Annual or twice-yearly leadership workshop (members and managers)</p>
		<p>Provide development support for leading members, e.g. mentoring</p>
<p>3. Holding to account</p> <p>Clarify how Audit, Performance Monitoring and Scrutiny relate</p>	<p>Governance structure changes, e.g. fewer members on audit, task group approach to scrutiny.</p> <p>Review what assurance members need – revisit performance metrics, reporting to</p>	<p>Review Governance arrangements – right members with right skills</p>

<p>Clarify what sort of information and evidence is most useful</p> <p>Report performance against strategic priorities</p> <p>Members would like to see more pre decision scrutiny</p>	<p>cover all aspects of Authority's statutory role and members' effectiveness in governance roles.</p> <p>Need to link Business Planning, with Performance reporting, and members need to be more engaged in this. It needs to happen asap.</p> <p>-Link to statutory obligations. Focus on achievement against strategic direction. If operational matters need to be discussed then do so at workshops</p> <p><i>+Also to form part of Member development and training</i></p>	<p>Introduce Quarterly Performance Report - ensure it is simple and easy to read. Introduce when new AD Performance post is filled.</p> <p>Train officers in report-writing and responding to challenge questions, prepare reports differently, draft recommendations to encourage review of implementation of plans and impact.</p>
<p>4. Development and Training</p> <p>Induction and afterward, needs to be ongoing.</p> <p>Briefings needed.</p> <p>For officers also</p>	<p>Improve member induction – members should not be able to vote unless they have completed this training.</p> <p>Chair & Vice Chair to take overview of attendance at training sessions.</p> <p>Bring in planned (diarised) annual training programme</p> <p>Tie % of allowances to attendance at meetings and training sessions?</p> <p>For officers, training needs to be tailored to link to roles on EFA or roles within governance.</p>	<p>Provide a document that sits behind the induction of members which covers what the role of a member is and what the core service offer is.</p> <p>Develop forward programme of development opportunities.</p> <p>Introduce a system for logging and publically reporting attendance at meetings, briefings and mandatory training.</p> <p>Investigate introduction of mandatory requirement for essential training – link to allowances and job description.</p> <p>Officer training to include roles of members and statutory responsibilities</p>
<p>5. Member, Officer and Staff Relations</p> <p>Needs to go beyond 'Your Voice'</p> <p>Build on joint member-officer work</p>	<p>JNCC involvement, how?</p> <p>A champion for industrial relations?</p> <p>More contact between FRA members and middle managers (part of assurance)</p>	<p>Protocol for Fire Station Visits based on approach of councillors' visits to care homes</p>

Need to know how to manage lobbying		
<p>6. Member Involvement</p> <p>Recognise different levels of time and commitment members can offer</p> <p>Champions felt they could offer more support e.g. meet with Service Officers more regularly.</p>	<p>What is the role of a Champion? Should this continue? Needs better defining.</p> <p>Review which themes should be covered.</p> <p>Consider opportunities for members to be involved in events.</p>	<p>If Champions are to continue and more appointed, agree role description and responsibilities, including reporting back to FRA; also review which themes should be continued.</p>
<p>7. Information and Communication – Internal</p> <p>How the information to lead members is cascaded Communications need to be timely (monthly at least), particularly in a period of change.</p> <p>Improvement would support the engagement and participation of all EFA Members who would feel more informed and able to contribute appropriately</p>	<p>More structured approach to communication from officers to Lead Members to all EFA Members.</p> <p>Information taking too long to get through via Group Spokespersons to backbenchers.</p> <p>Briefings for members.</p> <p>Monthly meeting between Senior Leadership team and lead members – monthly members’ briefing from this.</p>	<p>Communications to be sent to all FRA members not just through group spokespersons, otherwise it takes too long to get info through to back benchers.</p>
		<p>Monthly briefings to be organised to allow members to raise questions at FRA meetings about issues in briefings.</p>
		<p>Briefing should enable Chair, Vice Chair, Lead members and Champions to report their activities regularly. Include all member engagements past and planned –for others to ask questions or for issues to be raised. Include it on member part of website.</p>
		<p>Briefings to cover key strategic issues – both reporting on what has happened & highlighting issues that are coming up in next month. They should include reporting on failure to meet response standards</p>
<p>8. Communication – External</p> <p>With member councils and</p>	<p>Improve FRA reporting to constituent authorities. At the moment it is only the Chair who does a report, could use</p>	<p>Introduce in May, with first report to constituent authorities from June</p>

<p>councillors</p> <p>Role of FRA members in external communication and representation</p> <p>Need to explicitly set out what we want to say to public and communities.</p> <p>Need to focus on how to improve communications with public.</p> <p>Need to improve relationship with media.</p>	<p>monthly briefings to produce a quarterly report to constituent authorities.</p> <p>Make more use of social media, currently using Twitter and Facebook.</p>	<p>Physically invite local media to a briefing prior to quarterly FRA meetings</p> <p>Members to receive copies of all press releases from Communications team</p>
<p>9.FRA</p> <p>Greater visibility</p> <p>Establish what good looks like</p> <p>Greater clarity on strategic direction and outcomes desired in order to inform the development of options which are then presented for decision.</p>	<p>Useful to compare EFA with how other FRAs are performing and operating.</p> <p>Members would like to look at similar FRAs (county plus unitaries) and want to talk to other FRA members.</p>	<p>Build member awareness of other FRAs and links to other FRA members</p> <p>Organise visits to other authorities</p>
<p>10.Lucas Review/Culture</p>	<p>Members want to hold officers to account on ensuring that equality, diversity and respect underpin all activity of ERA.</p>	<p>Cultural Review should be a standing item on FRA agenda, and councillors should formally challenge if progress is not happening</p>
<p>11.Networking</p>	<p>Members don't think this is really encouraged, but would like to see more of this</p>	