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First fire ratings show 'encouraging start'

Every fire and rescue authority in England has been corporately assessed for the first time by the Audit Commission under a new Comprehensive Performance Assessment for fire services (Fire CPA).

The Commission has today (July 28) published scores for 45 fire and rescue authorities to set a baseline for improvement against the backdrop of the government's modernisation agenda. Individual authority reports, drawn up by teams of specialist inspectors and serving fire officers, judge how well they are run and their capacity to improve by rating them as either 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'.

They do not make a judgement on how well fire authorities respond to emergencies or other incidents.

Nationally, there are more than three times as many 'good' or 'excellent' authorities as there are 'poor' and 'weak'. The breakdown is: 'excellent' - 2; 'good' - 20; 'fair' - 17; 'weak' - 4; 'poor' - 2. Two reports will be published in August.

Audit Commission Chairman James Strachan said: 'These scores are an encouraging start and provide a benchmark for improvement in the future. The results show that nearly half the authorities have started well but there is room for much improvement across the rest.'

Firefighters are dedicated, committed and expert. Fire CPA helps drive improvement and is backed up with the level of support that will ensure the service performs as well as possible.

In local government, CPA has already proved a powerful tool for improving services provided by councils. Since we introduced CPA in 2002, more people are getting better services than ever before. We have the same aspirations for Fire CPA.'

The reviews assess how well an authority is being run at a corporate level and make a judgement on the strength of support services that contribute to the overall management of the organisation. They also look at the way the service works within the community to make it safer and prevent fires happening in the first place. As well as fire prevention and

education, the reviews look at a wide range of areas including staff training, rates of sickness, team leadership and how well budgets are managed.

Fire CPA was developed independently by the Audit Commission in line with the government's National Framework for Fire and Rescue services in England.

Work to support Improvement Planning by fire and rescue authorities is being led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which has also created a Support Team specifically to work with poor and weak authorities.

In addition, the Audit Commission plans to publish a national study later this year that will draw together findings from the individual assessments. It will be used to disseminate good practice and offer advice to poorly performing authorities on how to improve.

As part of *CPA - The Harder Test* a fire service assessment will be included in the overall CPA framework for the 16 county councils with a fire and rescue service. The Commission is also discussing the development of annual fire service assessments for all 47 fire authorities and there will be further consultation on the detail.

Copies of all published reports will be available on the Audit Commission website on July 28 (www.audit-commission.gov.uk/fire/firecpa)

NOTES TO EDITORS

A full list of scores is attached. For embargoed copies of individual reports, please contact the Audit Commission press office.

West Sussex and Wiltshire fire and rescue authorities will be published on August 18.

Fire CPA methodology was developed following consultation with the fire service and its representative bodies, and eight full pilot CPA reviews. By August 2005, all 47 fire authorities in England will receive a CPA report.

The Audit Commission carried out Fire CPA inspections using its powers under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. Fire CPA reviews were conducted at each fire and rescue authority, using a team of specially trained staff. The CPA review teams include serving officers from the fire service and local councillors with responsibility for fire authorities.

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local and national services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure that public services are good value for money.

For further information about the Audit Commission, visit our website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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