



Protecting local  
communities

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### **“Cleveland is becoming a safer place as a result of Fire Authority’s work” says Audit Commission report- but work needs to be done to make the inspection regime add more value, says Fire Chief.**

A recent independent overview of local public services has concluded Cleveland Fire Brigade is performing well and making the communities it serves safer.

Following an organisational assessment under the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) auditors found the Brigade to be performing well with a clearly stated vision described in a new strategic plan covering 2009/10 and beyond.

Overall, in the areas of ***Managing Performance and Use of Resources***, auditors were happy with the levels of expertise, focus and service commitment being delivered by Brigade staff on behalf of the Fire Authority.

The report, states that “Cleveland is becoming a safer place as a result of the Authority's work”. The report also praises the work of the Authority in reducing fires, arson and false alarms in the last year.

Auditors looked at the Authorities key strategic areas & priorities which are;

*Safer communities*  
*Children and young people*  
*Healthier communities*  
*Neighbourhoods*  
*Employer of choice*  
*Community engagement and partnerships*  
*Diversity*  
*Improvement and value for money*

Peter Porley Chair of the Fire Authority, said “I’m really delighted with the findings of the report that recognises the positive difference we are making to every local citizen's quality of life and the places where they live and work.”

Ian Hayton, Chief Fire Officer for Cleveland, said: “The Brigade continues to improve and is going from strength to strength. Equally, the thanks and recognition must go to our staff and our community partners as it’s their hard work which is helping us deliver the kind of results which this report has praised adding to our growing reputation as one of the best fire services in the UK.

“Our commitment is to make the areas we serve a safer place to live so for this to be highlighted by the auditors is a particularly pleasing point and clearly demonstrates that we are on the right path to deliver further improvement in community safety..

“However, we are not complacent and the report does give us some generic improvement areas such as the recruitment of more Black & Minority Ethnic candidates into the Brigade as well as an increase in the number of women we employ to make us more representative of the communities we serve. This is an area we will continue to address in the coming years and an area we have worked hard within in 2009 by achieving national recognition with organisations such as Stonewall.

“We also recognise that, even though we manage our money well in the view of the auditors, there is and will be an increasingly smaller public pot which means we have to be continually vigilant and stringent when making financial decisions.”

Mr Hayton, in echoing the views of other Brigades around the UK, did have some criticisms of the inspection regime particularly given the current financial climate for the public sector, with the main issues being the time taken to conduct the review and the need for better value and stronger improvement outcomes for the resources, both money and people, invested in the process.

He said: “While the report’s findings are welcomed and demonstrate staff effort we were disappointed that, despite assurances, the Audit Commission failed to deliver on their promises of a ‘lighter touch’ approach to inspection and assessment. We are concerned at the time and money required to gather and supply evidence to auditors, with audit reports providing little to point to, either by way of examples of excellence or of failure.

“Against a backdrop of tough choices Cleveland Fire Authority are taking difficult decisions, and making the best use of resources, to provide an efficient service that is all about saving and improving lives. At a time when staff time is at a premium we expected the investment we have put in servicing this process to yield more value.

“The new Area Assessments which appear on the OnePlace website have not fully reflected the many valued initiatives that Fire and Rescue Services deliver, in partnership with business, other public services and the not for profit sector, to prevent fires and other emergencies.”

Some findings quoted from the report are:

*“The Authority has a positive track record of improvement in most areas of its work. It has made big changes in the way it delivers services. It has successfully shifted its emphasis from simply responding to emergencies to preventing them from happening. It provides services aimed at protecting people at the same time as keeping the right level of response to emergencies.”*

*“The Authority has been very active in promoting improvements in the quality of life for local residents. It has worked with partners to encourage young people to turn away from risky behaviour and encouraged good citizenship.”*

*“The Authority performs its operational duties, such as community safety work and responding to emergencies, well. It has had a positive ‘operational assessment’ covering its services on prevention, protection, response and health and safety of its workforce.”*

*“The Authority has become good at identifying risks and ensuring that they share, understand and use this information. This means that resources and improvements are focussed on the right areas, to reduce these risks, which has made the area safer. For*

*example, the Authority has carried out home fire safety visits in about one in three homes in the highest risk areas. The number of fires has reduced significantly.”*

*“The Authority makes an important contribution to regeneration and making neighbourhoods cleaner and greener, not just by responding to incidents but through its work to reduce them.”*

The full report will be published via the Oneplace website and is available by logging onto <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/subwebs/caa/sitedemo/page1a.htm>