Using Organisational Learning and Lessons Management to Strengthen Fire and Rescue Services

The 2024-2025 State of Fire and Rescue Service Annual Assessment reveals a sector at a critical juncture. While 73% of graded judgments across England's 44 Fire and Rescue Services achieved 'adequate' or better performance, persistent challenges continue to prevent sustained, sector-wide improvement. The assessment identifies three critical imperatives: strengthening leadership at all organisational levels, fostering positive and inclusive cultures and maintaining effective on-call systems... all while leveraging organisational learning to drive continuous improvement.

This paper explores how systematic Organisational Learning and Lessons Management (OLLM) provides the foundational infrastructure to address these interconnected challenges, transforming isolated incidents into strategic intelligence that strengthens operational capability, builds organisational resilience, and demonstrates regulatory compliance.

THE STATE OF FIRE AND RESCUE: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services' third round of inspections presents a nuanced picture of sector performance. Services have closed 416 of 695 outstanding areas for improvement, and 43% of all grades met or exceeded the benchmark for good performance. Yet progress remains inconsistent, with nearly half of all areas for improvement remaining uncompleted from previous inspection rounds.

This pattern reveals a fundamental challenge: the gap between identifying lessons and embedding lasting organisational change. Services know what needs to improve, but many struggle to systematically capture learning, translate it into actionable change, and verify that changes have been successfully implemented.

The machinery of government change that moved fire policy to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in April 2025 creates both opportunity and urgency. Services that can demonstrate systematic approaches to organisational learning will be better positioned to navigate this reform agenda while meeting heightened inspection expectations.

> *"Learning has truly been achieved only when some form of change is implemented that ensures actions will be different in the future. It involves the organisation embedding changes so that even if people leave, measures to prevent incident re-occurrence stay in place."*
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> National Operational Learning Good Practice Guide

CHALLENGE ONE: STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED DEVELOPMENT

The Leadership Deficit

The assessment identifies leadership as a critical weakness across the sector. Services received 'requires improvement' grades for managing performance and developing leaders in 17 of 44 cases. The Chief Inspector observes that "some senior leaders lack the strategic awareness and skills needed to lead effectively," while "many services weren't effectively succession planning."

This leadership challenge manifests in multiple ways: newly promoted managers are "left to learn on the job," services lack structured processes to identify and develop high-potential staff, and promotion processes are often based on "outdated models, such as time in service rather than capability and potential." The consequence is profound: weak leadership undermines services' ability to support their workforce and provide effective public service.

How OLLM Addresses Leadership Development

An effective Organisational Learning and Lessons Management approach transforms leadership development from an episodic training activity into a continuous, evidence-based process embedded within operational practice.

The National Operational Guidance framework recognises that participating in structured debriefs should be considered as command activity contributing to continuous professional development. Systematic OLLM operationalises this by capturing command decisions in context - recording the information available, rationale applied, and outcomes achieved during incidents to create rich case studies that reveal leadership competencies in action. Structured debrief templates guide leaders through systematic analysis of their decision-making, while accumulated participation creates evidence-based records of leadership capability development.

Rather than relying on tenure or subjective assessments, systematic OLLM reveals leadership capability through operational evidence. Analysis of multiple incidents shows which individuals consistently demonstrate strategic thinking, effective communication, and adaptive problem-solving. Alignment with frameworks like the National Fire Chiefs Council Leadership Framework allows objective assessment against defined standards.

One of the most powerful aspects of organisational learning is its capacity to compress experience. Leaders can study how colleagues handled similar situations, understanding decision rationales and outcomes without requiring direct experience of every scenario. Trend identification allows leaders to develop strategic awareness of emerging patterns before issues become critical.

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service's implementation demonstrates these principles in practice. By identifying trends in communications and incident command through systematic learning processes, the service initiated "additional officer training and implemented incident assurance mechanisms to monitor improvements." This approach exemplifies evidence-based leadership development, where specific capability gaps are identified through systematic analysis, targeted interventions deployed, and ongoing monitoring to verify effectiveness.

CHALLENGE TWO: BUILDING POSITIVE, INCLUSIVE CULTURES THROUGH TRANSPARENT LEARNING

The Culture Crisis

The assessment's findings on organisational culture are stark. For values and culture assessments, services received 1 outstanding, 13 good, 15 adequate, 11 requires improvement, and 4 inadequate ratings.

The Chief Inspector states unequivocally: "Poor values, negative workplace cultures and ineffective misconduct management have been persistent themes throughout our inspections." The consequences are measurable: 14% of staff survey respondents reported experiencing bullying or harassment, while 32% disagreed that senior leaders consistently demonstrated service values.

The assessment identifies specific cultural failures:

- Poor handling of grievances and misconduct eroding trust.
- Staff lacking confidence in reporting mechanisms.
- Limited progress on equality, diversity, and inclusion despite decades of sector focus.

How OLLM Builds Positive Learning Cultures

Organisations that create psychological safety around reporting and learning create the conditions for sustainable cultural transformation. Systematic OLLM provides the structural foundation for this transformation.

Cultural change requires visible evidence that learning is valued and acted upon. Systematic OLLM delivers this by demonstrating responsiveness, so that when staff submit learning observations and see documented actions taken, it confirms that their contributions matter, and therefore drives continued engagement. Complete records of learning identification, evaluation, allocation, and implementation then help to create accountability at every level.

As Northamptonshire FRS observes: **"One measure is the system interaction - while not a physical change, it clearly shows that staff are engaging with the platform and reading the learning."** This visibility - on its own merits - drives cultural change by normalising learning as a core organisational activity.

The National Operational Guidance emphasises that structured debriefs should be conducted "in an open and constructive manner" and reviews should occur "in an open, 'no blame' and constructive manner." Systematic OLLM supports this by separating learning from disciplinary processes through structured workflows, protecting the psychological safety required for honest reporting. Categorisation frameworks that align with control measures and organisational factors shift attention from personal blame to systemic improvement.

Moving on, cultural transformation requires democratic levels of participation throughout all organisational levels, and systematic OLLM breaks down hierarchical barriers by providing equal access where any staff member can submit observations, ensuring operational personnel's insights reach decision-makers.

> *An active learning culture will generate the raw material for learning from incidents. Taking action that leads to effective change encourages additional reporting. However, if action is not taken and change is ineffective, and in the worst-case individuals are blamed, reporting is likely to decline and formal learning from incidents will be challenging.*
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> National Operational Learning Good Practice Guide

CHALLENGE THREE: SUSTAINING ON-CALL SYSTEMS THROUGH KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND INNOVATION

The On-Call Crisis

The on-call duty system faces existential challenges. As at 31 March 2024, on-call firefighters accounted for 34.2% of the firefighter workforce, yet 29 services reported problems recruiting on-call staff, 32 services experienced difficulties retaining them, and 23 services faced challenges training them. In 2024/25, on-call availability decreased in 70% of services using the system, with one service reporting overall availability as low as 15.4%.

The Chief Inspector states clearly: **"I am concerned that the sector hasn't been able to improve the recruitment, retention and availability of on-call firefighters."**

The consequences are operational: **"In some cases, fire engines have to be sent from neighbouring stations, which can cause delays in the service's emergency response due to increased travel times."**

How OLLM Supports On-Call System Innovation

While systematic learning cannot directly recruit on-call firefighters, it provides the intelligence infrastructure to identify, test, and scale innovative solutions to on-call challenges.

The assessment highlights that "some services are trialling more flexible ways of working" including hybrid working at stations, alternative response models, and expanded recruitment geography. Systematic OLLM accelerates innovation by documenting pilot initiatives with clear outcome measures, enabling rapid evaluation through comparative analysis of availability data, response times, and operational effectiveness across different models.

The assessment specifically notes Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service's comprehensive on-call improvement program, which increased availability to 74% by December 2024. Systematic learning processes could capture the relative effectiveness of each program element - dedicated recruitment vehicles, hybrid working, employer engagement - allowing other services to prioritise the highest-impact interventions.

The assessment notes that "the time commitment to attend training can be a problem for existing on-call firefighters" and "can deter potential recruits." Systematic OLLM addresses this by identifying essential versus desirable training through analysis of incident data that reveals which competencies are most frequently required, and creating targeted micro-learning where lessons from recent incidents can be rapidly converted into brief, focused learning products.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE: TRANSFORMING DATA INTO STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE THROUGH SYSTEMATIC LEARNING

The Learning Implementation Gap

The assessment reveals a critical paradox: services are generating substantial learning, but then struggle to translate it into embedded organisational change. Services closed 416 of 695 areas for improvement, but nearly half remain uncompleted from previous rounds. "Some services hadn't made enough progress against AFIs that we issued in our previous rounds of inspections."

The Chief Inspector's conclusion is unambiguous: **"Learning has only truly been achieved when some form of change is actually implemented that ensures actions will be different in the future."**

This implementation gap manifests across multiple domains: protection departments experiencing "competing demands" that prevent prioritisation of high-risk areas, services struggling to maximise wholetime firefighter productivity, inadequate monitoring of working hours for staff with dual contracts, and inconsistent adoption of Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 recommendations.

How OLLM Closes the Implementation Gap

The National Operational Learning Good Practice Guide establishes that effective learning requires systematic processes to "capture, categorise, evaluate, allocate and share outcomes arising before, during and after any incident." Systematic OLLM operationalises this framework, transforming it from aspiration to daily practice.

Systematic Capture Across All Learning Activities

The Guide also identifies multiple learning activities: incident assurance, on-scene debriefing, post-incident reporting, and structured debriefing. Systematic OLLM ensures none of these valuable sources are lost by providing consistent capture mechanisms through standardised templates aligned with National Operational Guidance control measures, reducing capture friction through accessible interfaces, and integrating diverse sources by consolidating learning from hot debriefs, formal debriefs, command reviews, training exercises, audits, and external reports.

Northamptonshire FRS have experienced this transformation directly. Their previous system created "significant challenges" because "the lack of a stable, structured system hindered the efficient capture and sharing of lessons learned." Systematic OLLM resolved this by providing "a stable framework for capturing insights from both internal and external sources."

Structured Evaluation and Prioritisation

Systematic OLLM enables structured evaluation by applying a consistent risk rating through BRAG (Blue, Red, Amber, Green) categorisation. This provides appropriate urgency and escalation, thus allowing for the tracking of evaluation decisions with complete records of why specific actions were prioritised and who was assigned responsibility. This subsequently prevents learning loss, with items remaining in the system for future consideration rather than being forgotten.

Verified Implementation and Embedded Change

The most critical capability - and where manual systems most frequently fail - is verifying that identified changes are actually implemented and sustained. Systematic OLLM addresses this through defined action workflows where each learning outcome generates specific actions with assigned owners, target dates, and success criteria; progress monitoring through dashboard visibility; implementation verification through structured processes for confirming changes have been made and adopted; and effectiveness review through scheduled reassessment.

Northamptonshire FRS specifically values this capability:

> **The platform has significantly improved the capture, management, and dissemination of operational lessons. A transparent audit trail now ensures that lessons are tracked from identification through to implementation.**

The State of FRS assessment emphasises that HMICFRS expects services to demonstrate progress against recommendations. Systematic OLLM provides this evidence by mapping to inspection frameworks, generating compliance reports, and demonstrating continuous improvement through trend data.

The Northamptonshire Transformation

Northamptonshire FRS's journey illustrates how systematic Organisational Learning addresses the implementation gap. Their system created challenges: "Lack of a stable, structured system hindered the efficient capture and sharing of lessons learned" and "tracking trends and ensuring lessons were acted upon proved difficult."

After implementation,however, the improvements were remarkable: **"Significantly improved the capture, management, and dissemination of operational lessons,"** while **"transparent audit trail ensures lessons are tracked from identification through to implementation,"** and **"automation has reduced manual workload, allowing personnel to focus on high-value activities."**

The service's forward-looking summative statement captures the transformative potential: "In essence the system has met the challenges we were facing and with internal process changes will have a positive impact on how NFRS actions learning in the future."

THE STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE OF SYSTEMATIC ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

Building Organisational Resilience in an Era of Reform

The machinery of government change and renewed reform agenda create both uncertainty and opportunity for Fire and Rescue Services, and those services that have embedded systematic organisational learning will undoubtedly possess a fundamental strategic advantage in this environment.

As national frameworks evolve, services with mature OLLM capabilities can rapidly assess current performance against new standards, identify capability gaps, implement and verify changes, and demonstrate compliance through comprehensive evidence. Organisations that have captured and systematised their operational knowledge are less vulnerable to capability loss when experienced personnel retire or move on - their organisational memory persists in accessible, actionable form.

From Compliance to Competitive Advantage

Leading services are moving beyond basic compliance to leveraging organisational learning as a strategic capability. Rather than waiting for incidents to reveal vulnerabilities, systematic analysis of near-misses, training observations, and audit findings allows services to identify and address risks before they materialise in operational failures.

The State of FRS assessment highlights examples of promising practice across multiple services - from AI-driven risk profiling to 3D premise modeling to “Falls Response” teams. Services with effective learning systems can rapidly evaluate these innovations, pilot them in their own context, and scale what works.

The Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) process "exists to encourage closer interoperability between responder organisations." Services that have systematised their internal learning are better positioned to contribute to and benefit from multi-agency learning, strengthening the broader resilience ecosystem.

Services that embrace this approach will find themselves better equipped to navigate the reform agenda with confidence, meet heightened inspection expectations with evidence, develop leadership capability through structured experience, build cultures where learning is valued and psychological safety protected, optimise resource allocation based on operational intelligence, and demonstrate value to communities and oversight bodies.

CONCLUSION: THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF EXCELLENCE

The 2024-2025 State of Fire and Rescue Service Annual Assessment presents an honest appraisal of sector performance: notable progress in some areas, persistent challenges in others, and an urgent need for consistent, sustained improvement across all services.

The three critical challenges identified—strengthening leadership, building positive cultures, and sustaining on-call systems - are fundamentally interconnected. Each depends on the others; progress in one domain enables progress in all.

Organisational Learning and Lessons Management provides the connective tissue that links these challenges to their solutions. Leadership develops through structured reflection on operational experience, captured and analysed systematically; Culture transforms when learning is made visible, valued, and acted upon without blame; and On-call systems improve when innovations are documented, evaluated, and shared across services.

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service's experience validates this approach. By implementing systematic OLLM, they have created the infrastructure for continuous improvement - not as aspiration, but as daily operational practice.

The reform agenda ahead will test Fire and Rescue Services' capacity for adaptation and improvement. Those that have invested in systematic organisational learning will navigate this period with confidence, armed with evidence of their capability and commitment to excellence.

The frameworks exist and the business case is clear. What remains is commitment: which services will lead this transformation into truly learning organisations, and which will fall behind?

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