

# “Fire chiefs can adopt broadly three strategies to address cuts of the magnitude we are all seeing”



Atlanta, Georgia, USA

John Bonney, when he was Chief Officer of Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, wrote an article for a leading US-based magazine, called ‘Fire Rescue International’. The article, reproduced below, was based on a presentation entitled ‘Innovation in the UK’ delivered to the IAFC’s Fire Rescue International conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

## Innovation in the UK

“The UK fire and rescue service is funded by a mixture of local tax revenues and government grant. The split between the two ranges from 30:70 to 70:30 across the 42 fire and rescue services in England.

Her Majesty’s Government has signalled that over the next four years the overall government grant will reduce by 25 percent, with the burden of this reduction occurring in the tax years 2013/2014 to 2014/2015.

So, although we have some time, those cuts are coming and, barring a massive reversal in the fiscal position, they are inevitable. To give you some sense of scale this means an approximate \$14 million reduction on a budget of \$112 million for my fire department.

My belief is that fire chiefs can adopt broadly three strategies to address cuts of this magnitude. The first is what I call the “ostrich approach,” which is to deny (what is in the UK at least) the inevitable and gamble that something will come over the hill and save the day.

They can supplement this approach by layering on further denial. This manifests itself in statements

such as “the department is pared to the bone” or “cuts just cannot be taken without a significant and demonstrable effect on frontline services.”

### Devalues our profession

I have to say that I think such an approach rather devalues our profession. Anyone can adopt this approach as it doesn’t require any real expertise or professional commitment; it is merely a marketing approach underpinned by an unhealthy lack of self reflection.

The second approach I’d argue is no better and applies a simple mathematical logic. “Cut my budget by 15 percent/20 percent/30 percent (delete as applicable) and I will cut the service by 15 percent/20 percent/30 percent (delete in accordance with above).”

With the greatest respect to accountants, it’s as simple (and lazy) as just balancing a ledger. As with the ostrich it does not need a fire chief to do this, only someone with tenth grade mathematics able to cut sufficient trucks and stations to balance the budget.

I would contend that as fire chiefs we owe it to our profession and to our communities to do better than

this. Our job is to question the systems we use to run our departments and their real costs.

Nobody knows them better than ourselves and if we are truly honest we also know the shortcomings and inefficiencies of those processes.

My presentation to FRI explained how we had reviewed one of the biggest spending systems of my department. Unsurprisingly this is the crewing system, by which we staff our 13 full time professional shift stations.

Effectively, we swallowed our preconceptions that this couldn't be changed or that if it could we would reduce the service levels to the public.

### Forensic examination

First off we undertook a forensic examination of how many staff we have and how many we really need to provide the service. Then we examined four years worth of our data to calculate the numbers we would remove (or abstract as we called it) for leave, off station training, temporary promotion and sickness on an annual basis.

This quickly revealed that these abstractions were by some distance less than the buffer that we have in our global staffing levels for just such contingencies.

Simply put, because we weren't managing those abstractions well enough and because the buffer was greater than we needed, we had hidden costs and inefficiencies.

By managing more carefully training programs and sickness absence, and by training our shift commanders to better manage their rostering, we could reduce that buffer from 40 percent as it currently stood to 33 percent and then ultimately 30 percent.

It may not sound a great deal, but that will be in excess of \$4 million and that reduction will be achieved by turnover savings (we've already had a recruiting freeze for 18 months) without any reduction in the crewing levels for operational trucks and, importantly, without cutting those trucks or the stations that house them.

All of us will be more flexible in our working patterns, but the service to those hard pressed tax payers we serve will not be compromised.

### My job as a chief

As a chief of 29 years it's my job to find these types of solutions and not leave those tough ones to ostriches or accountants.

Indeed, to test out this concept in advance rather than just plunge headlong into staff reductions, we removed some of those frontline resources and redeployed them to undertake valuable community safety work. The results in terms of productivity, improved safety and, indeed, firefighter interest were all extremely positive.

Now as you can well imagine there's a lot more to this than I've been able to describe in this short article. It involved a change in our mindset about the staffing model we'd operated for many years.

It required some quite complex statistical analysis and forecasting so we could firstly understand what was going on in our establishment and then, vitally, predict with real accuracy what would happen when we changed the numbers.

Make no mistake, this involved some real effort but more importantly it takes professional and political courage. However, as a committed fire chief working in tough times that really is my job.

### Process Evolution

Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service were assisted in understanding the dynamic of their staffing arrangements and modelling the changes by the UK-based Process Evolution who exhibited at the conference — [www.processevolution.co.uk](http://www.processevolution.co.uk).

Process Evolution was established in 2004 by a team with many years of experience in working with the emergency services. Its clients include some of the largest fire and rescue services in the UK along with several ambulance services and the majority of UK police forces.

Process Evolution reduces the risk and uncertainty in implementing changes that deliver efficiency savings, helping its clients to explore the probable effects of a variety of scenarios — and then to implement change with confidence and broad support.

Process Evolution's work is underpinned by a suite of advanced analytical tools that provide quantitative evidence to complement its clients' professional judgement."