

Notes of Decisions Taken and Action

FIRE SERVICES FORUM

22 June 2007

Room 8.1 Local Government House at 11.00a.m.

1. Update from the Fire Services Management Committee

Cllr Les Byrom proposed that in future a written paper would be included with the agenda which gave an overview of the discussions held at the FSMC, as opposed to the oral update that was currently given. Members agreed that this would be helpful.

Members were then briefed on discussions at the previous meeting of the Fire Services Management Committee, which took place on the 14th May:

- There are still issues that need addressing with regards to the firefighter selection test and application form, as a result of which CLG has frozen plans to implement this across all Fire and Rescue Services. In the meantime, CLG commissioned consultants to carry out a validation study consisting of a questionnaire to FRAs. Cllr Byrom encouraged FRAs to respond.
- A letter has been sent to CLG seeking clarification about ongoing funding of the New Dimensions programme.
- The FSMC discussed how communications with members could be improved, and it was suggested that an e-bulletin be produced which would provide a regular update on relevant issues. Members were asked to encourage colleagues from FRAs to attend Fire Services Forum meetings, and it was also proposed that a database of member's e-mail addresses is set up which will allow for more rapid communication when necessary.

Members queried the power of well-being in relation to combined fire authorities, and noted that legal advice suggested they did not have this power. Members asked whether this issue could be raised at a future Fire Services Management Committee meeting. Cllr Les Byrom explained that this issue had previously been discussed with the Minister and officials. Cllr Les Byrom encouraged members to write to him setting out their concerns, and he would take these forward with CLG.

Whilst a date for the next CLP meeting had been set, this would be subject to ministerial changes following Gordon Brown's appointment as Prime Minister.

2. FiReControl

Cllr Les Byrom told the forum that the LGA is liaising closely with CLG on FiReControl. Following lobbying by the LGA, CLG had now clarified in writing that they only required a signatory in each FRA as a point of contact for the project, and this did not confer any personal or legal responsibility and have amended the governance annex accordingly. This is a successful outcome for the FSMC and Cllr Byrom has written to FRA Chairs.

Steve Whitby of EADS gave a presentation on the FiReControl project, and the next stage of implementation. He made the following points:

FiReControl is a fully integrated system which will increase resilience and provide a more robust infrastructure. There will be a need to capture local knowledge and make better use of this, but the system will provide a consistent approach across England. Some of the technology that will support FiReControl is already in place, whilst other parts are still emerging, however, calls will still come into the new regional control centres via traditional means.

The robust communications structure has no single point of failure, and isn't reliant on any single location. Much of the technology that will support FiReControl has been used in the banking sector for many years, and this use of existing technology reduces the chance of the system failing.

Review groups which include officers from FRSs are involved in the implementation of the project. This will help to identify problems and provide solutions on an on-going basis. There is also a test facility in Newport which shows the functionality of the system, and also allows for the testing of new ideas.

The deployment of FiReControl is a challenge; this needs to be completed in a timely manner whilst allowing for a flexible approach which also takes account of detailed local planning.

Fire and Rescue Service staff from all levels will require training in the use of the new system. Both CLG and the review groups have agreed to take an incremental approach to training. Once the FiReControl system is running, a number of 'floor walkers' will be deployed by EADS to fire and rescue services to ensure that training has been assimilated.

Members pointed out that previous government projects of a similar size had not always delivered what had been promised. Steve Whitby explained that a new approach had been taken which saw the specifications of the system being designed in consultation with user groups. Key elements of the system are already in use, whilst EADS is working with market leaders to supply much of the technology. The old control centres will not be switched off until FRAs and FRSs are satisfied with the functioning of the new regional control centres. The lessons of previous projects have been learnt, and steps have been taken to minimise risks as much as possible.

Members asked which systems were in place to protect data, and whether FiReControl could be susceptible to computer viruses. Steve Whitby told the group that government had afforded the project a 'national critical status'. A system of 'non-stop computing' which does not use databases to store information would be used. Similar systems have been used successfully in the finance industry. Work on firewalls is on going, with a government accreditor validating the security infrastructure.

Members suggested that some FRAs had faced problems with recruiting suitably skilled managers to take charge of regional control centres. Richard How (CLG) explained that

he was aware of this, and that discussions were taking place to see whether the salary for these posts could be increased to attract other candidates.

John McCarthy (CLG) responded to a query regarding the costs outlined in the recently updated business case by saying that the existing costs are estimated and that further dialogue was needed with FRAs to add detail. The business case can then be updated accordingly. Collecting information from 46 FRSs had shown discrepancies and differing accountancy procedures, but it was hoped that firmer figures would be available by the end of 2007.

Cllr Jerry Willmott told the forum that he was pleased to see senior CLG officials present at the Fire Services Forum meeting. The importance of a high turn out of members at forum meetings was again noted.

CLG has invited FRAs to specify when and where regional seminars on FiReControl should be held, and Cllr Willmott encouraged FRAs to respond, and to arrange for Chairs and Chief Fire Officers to attend where possible.

Cllr Les Byrom told the group that FiReControl would be discussed at future Fire Services Forum meetings, where there would be a greater focus on non-technical issues such as human resources.

Steve Whitby of EADS, John McCarthy and Richard How of CLG were all thanked for attending the meeting.

3. NJC Update

Cllr Les Byrom told the forum that a constructive lead members and Secretariat meeting had taken place with the FBU negotiating team on the 13 June, and this was the subject of discussion at the LGA Executive meeting on the 14 June.

The main Employer's Side meeting with the FBU was held on the 15 June. At this, the FBU reaffirmed their commitment to sign off the new constitution, subject to the CPD payment being made pensionable. The government pension regulators have agreed to this principle, but there is still work to be done on how it will be implemented in practice.

The major issue of discussion at the main meeting was the 2007 pay round. The Employers' Side had previously decided that co-responding would not be an appropriate issue for inclusion in the 2007 negotiations. Three issues underpinned the Employer's Side position on pay:

- Central government's drive to keep a tight grip on public sector pay rises.
- Affordability and economic indicators
- The effect that the local government pay settlement would have on negotiations.

The deal that was agreed with the FBU comprised of a 2% pay rise, plus a further 0.4% in recognition of concessions that the FBU has made. To agree this without delay and without talk of ballots or strike action should be considered a success.

The LGA Executive agreed to support this position, with the full NJC doing the same at the meeting of the 15 June. No discussions were held with the FBU on the pay formula.

4. IDeA Fire Service Improvement Programme

David Armin (IDeA) explained to members that the IDeA Fire Service Improvement Programme had been developed to support elected members in their leadership role of FRAs and RM Bs.

A Leadership Academy workshop will be held on the 12 and 13 July aimed at FRA Chairs/Vice Chairs/portfolio holder. The programme is based on issues that were discussed at the Fire Conference held in March and aims to facilitate the exchange of information and experiences between members.

David Armin also explained that the IDeA was working with the Fire Services College to develop a 'Working with members' management development module focusing on developing officer/member relations to be included in future manager training courses.

Members were asked for their thoughts on how this work could be developed in the future. They were also asked to identify how the IDeA could be of greater assistance in developing FRA members.

Members suggested that training and development opportunities should be offered to opposition members as well as the Chairs, vice-chairs and portfolio holders. David Armin agreed that there was a case for this for any future leadership academies.

Members noted that the distinction between portfolio holders in county councils and chairs of FRAs should be highlighted. Members also suggested that officials from central government could also be invited to participate in future programmes.

Provision of training and development at the regional level was also discussed. Members noted that the south-east region had developed a programme of development with input from the IDeA. Comparisons between regions could be of assistance, particularly with CPA ratings.

It was suggested that CFOA members could be invited to attend future Fire Services Forum meetings to help them 'take the political temperature'

Cllr Les Byrom thanked David Armin for his presentation.

5. National Fire Safety Protocol – Multiple Occupied Housing

Richard Tacagni (LACORS) told members that a new fire safety protocol had commissioned by CLG in 2006 to look at issues raised in the Housing Act 2004 and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, and to set down a framework within which local housing authorities and fire and rescue authorities can establish effective working arrangements.

The protocol was developed by the Fire Safety Housing Working Group, which was comprised of representatives from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, National HMO Network, LACORS, CFOA, National Landlords Association and Westminster City Council.

This protocol provides fire safety standards for common parts of shared housing. Because it is a framework document, specific local problems and issues can be dealt with as appropriate. It was noted that the protocol is not a statutory document, although local authorities were encouraged to sign up to its principles and implement best practise wherever possible.

The National Fire Safety Protocol has been distributed to members and officers through LACORS (which represents local authorities, not FRAs) and CFOA, but Richard Tacagni encouraged members to place the document at the strategic level.

Cllr Les Byrom told the group that the protocol had been approved by CFOA, but that the LGA and FRAs, despite being the legally responsible bodies had not been involved in its development from the outset.

Richard Tacagni explained that LACORS was looking at arrangements for joint working with FRAs, whilst phase two of the protocol will look at sprinklers and fire suppression systems under the aim of improving safety standards.

It was agreed that links will be made between the work of the LGA's Fire Suppression and Sustainable Buildings Task Group and the work of the Fire Safety Housing Working Group.

6. Note of previous meeting

The note of the previous meeting was agreed.

7. Next Meeting

Members were encouraged to send any suggestions for future agenda items to Emma Varley (Senior Policy Consultant).

All members took the opportunity to congratulate the Chairman, Cllr Les Byrom, on the CBE that he had received in the Queen's recent birthday honours.

The next meeting would be held on Friday 19 October 2007 at Local Government House.