

Notes of Decisions Taken and Action

FIRE SERVICES FORUM - Ministerial Meeting

21 February 2008

Room 8.1 Local Government House at 2.00p.m.

Cllr Fred Walker welcomed members, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Parmjit Dhanda MP and Pete Betts (CLG) to the meeting. It was noted that this was the first opportunity for the Minister to address the Fire Services Forum since his appointment as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State with responsibility for fire.

Ministerial address

The Minister outlined the current position of the fire and rescue service; fire deaths are at their lowest level since 1958 and this has been achieved through meeting challenges locally. Fire and Rescue Services are participating in proactive campaigns to reduce fire-related deaths such as the fitting of smoke alarms and working with schools and other education providers to increase awareness of the issues. The Minister said that the services should be given more credit for the outreach work it performs. Discussions were taking place with DCSF to investigate whether the relationship between the FRS and education and youth services could be formalised.

A number of projects will have an impact on the future working of the FRS, for example Firelink, FiReControl and New Dimensions. The public is now starting to see the benefits of the New Dimension equipment and understand that the role of firefighters has changed.

FiReControl is one of twenty mission critical projects that is being undertaken by the government and will give firefighters the appropriate tools for the job. There could be a lessening of local knowledge as a result of this, but this will be counter-balanced by the increase in resilience. The expectation is that FiReControl will allow the fire and rescue service to be the best in the world. It is vital for FiReControl to be implemented successfully; EADS has assured CLG and FRAs that this will be the case.

Diversity is still a key issue for the FRS and there is a need to change the nature of the service so that it more accurately reflects the communities that it serves. The introduction of a graduate recruitment programme is one measure that could be used to aid this cultural change.

The three year finance settlement will provide extra stability for FRAs. New capital will be available to continue the programme of building new fire stations that can be utilised by the communities that they serve.

There are issues concerning the pension scheme and ill-health retirement that need addressing. The pensions working group that includes representatives of CFOA, FRAs and the unions continues to work on this. It is important that a fair system can be agreed and implemented.

Co-responding continues to be an issue, especially for retained firefighters; how their skills can be best utilised needs to be agreed.

2007 was a difficult year for the FRS, but a combination of flexibility and good leadership mitigated the worst effects. There are challenges ahead, but there are an increasing number of skilled people who are becoming involved in facing these in both central and local government.

Questions and discussion

Members agreed that there was a need for stability that would assist with progressing future challenges. However there remained issues on the retained system, Firebuy, the finance settlements for county authorities and the implementation of Building Bulletin 100.

The Minister told members that he saw retained firefighters as being an essential part of the FRS and that it was necessary for government to work with the individual FRSs to demonstrate their value. More work could be undertaken to encourage members of emerging communities to become retained firefighters and this in turn could assist with community cohesion. Cheshire FRS's small graduate training programme was discussed as a means of fast-tracking individuals from minority groups into senior positions; any good practice that is developed should be shared with all FRSs.

The Minister suggested that it was necessary to develop the relationship and improve the communications between Firebuy and FRAs.

It was reiterated that CLG would meet all New Burdens costs, but the Minister encouraged members and FRAs to contact the department if they had any concerns regarding their individual settlements. It was suggested that more work could be undertaken in future to explain how the formula that is used to calculate the settlements works.

A great deal of good work had been undertaken in the field of fire suppression, led by the National Fire Sprinkler network and Bernadette Hartley in particular. The Minister and members agreed that her recent death after a long illness was a great loss but that incorporation of sprinklers in new build schools under the Building Schools for the Future programme would be a fitting legacy.

Developments in sprinkler technology have made them cheaper and more efficient. Pilot schemes are being developed to fit sprinkler systems in new housing developments. It will be important to work with the water companies to assist with the implementation of this and it was also noted that sprinklers are one of a number of fire suppression systems that should be considered. Altering building regulations was another alternative under consideration.

The Minister accepted that there were problems with renovating older fire stations to make them fully accessible, particularly to women. It was important for both CLG and FRAs to look at the capital spending programme to ascertain whether it could be operated more successfully.

Members suggested that a national campaign to highlight the successes of the FRS would be a positive step and could also help with the recruitment of minority groups. The

Minister highlighted the success of recent, more targeted campaigns and suggested that the national media was not always interested in good news stories.

The Minister said that he would like to know more about the planned awards evening to recognise individual fire employees' contributions to the fire service.

Members questioned the inspection criteria with specific reference to metropolitan FRAs; the use of 1.25 fire deaths per thousand test was too stringent and metropolitan FRAs always failed this. The Minister explained that CLG and the LGA were reviewing the inspection framework and that this issue would be part of the review.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on **Friday 22 February 2008** at Local Government House.