

Item 3 - Audit Commission National Study – rising to the challenge: improving fire service efficiency

Background

1. On 17 December, the Audit Commission published their widely anticipated national study report on the fire and rescue service *Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency*.

Key findings

2. The focus of the report is on efficiency and value for money. The key findings of the report include:

- The fire and rescue service could save £200m if all services adopted the good practice of the best (the current collective target is for fire and rescue services to save £110m by 2011);
- Four FRAs account for nearly half of all the efficiency savings achieved to date;
- Improved local and regional collaboration would increase efficiency and effectiveness;
- However the report itself recognises that 'not all changes that the pioneering fire services have made are feasible in all local contexts';
- The report challenges FRAs to consider those areas where they might improve efficiency and effectiveness further;
- There is scope for further efficiency savings by providing cover with fewer people, stations or appliances, or by changing shift patterns and crewing arrangements to more closely match cover to the time when it is needed;
- The picture on efficiency and performance is variable;
- There is no clear relationship between fire service type and performance. The report finds relatively good and relatively poor services of all types;
- Progress on equality and diversity will only happen with cultural change - especially changes in cultural attitudes on the watch;
- The role of the fire and rescue service is now about much more than just putting out fires;
- There is no evidence that the degree of broader community safety work is diminishing response capabilities – instead it is using the spare capacity available;

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- Regional Management Boards have not driven effective regional collaboration. The report suggests that the government and FRAs need to reform them or abandon them;
- The common factor in making changes is strong leadership by FRA members and CFOs - strong leadership is needed to overcome resistance to change;
- Many of the recommendations in the report have been made before in reports by the Audit Commission and others dating back over forty years. Implementing the recommendations could result in substantial reinvestment in prevention work or savings to the public purse.

3. The full report can be accessed at: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/NATIONAL-REPORT.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=EC882132-ECDD-4cae-9027-D7FC4760FF01&fromREPORTSANDDATA=NATIONAL-REPORT>

Alongside the report, the Audit Commission published a data tool primarily designed for fire and rescue authorities to identify where they are placed in the comparative charts published in the national report.

4. The specific recommendations for FRAs are to:

- challenge themselves and their CFOs to improve efficiency as well as performance;
- lead their communities by taking hard decisions affecting staffing levels and deployment in the interests of efficiency;
- ensure that they have the right information to justify those decisions;
- defend decisions publicly once they have been made;
- challenge their CFOs to improve the diversity of their workforce;
- define their objectives for RMBs, and participate in RMBs beyond where required to only where there is a good business case for doing so; and
- provide leadership on equality and diversity issues, supporting and encouraging effective culture change within the fire service.

5. At its meeting on 19 January, the FSMC discussed the need for the LGA to provide political leadership on fire improvement. Members agreed to a series of actions for the LGA in supporting FRAs to improve efficiency and performance in line with the recommendations in the Audit Commission report.

Specifically, members agreed that the LGA would support FRAs in addressing the above recommendations by:

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- Holding an early discussion with the wider membership at the Fire Services Forum on 6 February on performance to date and the implications of the report;
 - Holding an early discussion at RMB Chairs on 28 January on the general issues raised in the report and the specific recommendation relating to RMBs;
 - Publicising the data tool to FRAs and encouraging its use, and liaising with Audit Commission to produce a more user-friendly version;
 - Encouraging FRA members to use the 'questions for fire services to ask' contained in the report as a basis for discussion within their own authority;
 - Developing a specific programme of action on equality and diversity;
 - Leading on the development of a strengthened approach to sector led improvement; and
 - Working with the IDeA to expand the IDeA's sharing of good practice through the development of existing case studies, communities of practice and web pages.
6. Members are asked to:
- consider the recommendations in the Audit Commission report; and
 - share good practice about how their FRA will be responding.

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