

Notes of Decisions Taken and Action

FIRE SERVICES FORUM

10 October 2008

Room 8.1, Local Government House at 11.00a.m.

The Chairman welcomed members to the Fire Forum meeting. He informed members that Cllr Terry Cooney (Tyne and Wear FRA) had recently died and extended his and the Forum's sympathies to his family and colleagues.

1. Membership of the Fire Services Forum and Office Holders 2008/09

In order to widen the membership of the Fire Services Forum, it was suggested that members of fire authorities other than nominated chairs, vice-chairs and portfolio holders could attend Forum meetings to contribute to help inform FRAs of developments at the national level and to communicate local issues to the Fire Services Management Committee. The Chair pointed out that the political groups had yet to fill their political balancing places and were encouraged to put forward names to officers as soon as possible.

Members noted that despite the Fire Services Forum not being a decision-making body, constitutionally political balance had to be taken into account when widening the membership. It was suggested that additional members could attend as member observers to retain political balance.

Clive Harris (Business Manager) explained that the Liberal Democrat group had now submitted a list of some balancing members but that there were still additional places available. Member Support Officers would ensure that the membership record is updated prior to the next meeting.

Members otherwise noted the office holders and membership of the Fire Services Forum for 2008/09.

2. Update from the Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC)

The Chairman highlighted the key issues arising from the FSMC meeting on 5 September and also gave an oral update on current issues as follows:

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- Parmjit Dhanda MP has been replaced by **Sadiq Khan MP as minister with responsibility for fire** at CLG. This unfortunately meant that Central-Local Partnership meeting scheduled for 7 October was cancelled. Arrangements are being made to set up a meeting with the new Minister. The Chairman expressed his thanks to Parmjit Dhanda for his work during his term of office.
- Shona Dunn has been appointed as the new Director of Fire and Resilience at the CLG, whilst Charlie Hendry is the new President of CFOA.
- The LGA is seeking views from Fire Services Forum members on the draft **National Procurement Strategy for the Fire and Rescue Service in England 2008-11**, which closes on 14 November. Members were encouraged to submit their responses to Clive Harris (clive.harris@lga.gov.uk) as soon as possible. These could then be used to inform the LGA's response.
- The FSMC received two detailed reports and presentations on the proposals for the **CAA and Sector Lead Improvement for Fire and Rescue Authorities**. A second joint consultation was published by the Audit Commission and other inspectorates on 29 July setting out proposals for CAA. The consultation will close on 29 October. The overall LGA response will be led by the LGA Improvement Board, and would incorporate comments on the fire specific proposals.
- Members also discussed proposals for an approach to **sector led improvement for the Fire and Rescue Authorities** and the need for the LGA to be proactive on developing proposals.
- The programme and booking form for the **LGA Fire conference on 10/11 March 2009**, which is taking place in Bristol, is now available on the LGA website: .
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/events/display-event.do?id=589991>

Cllr Fred Walker updated members on **project fireguard** and explained that Ministers have not accepted that this constitutes a new burden on fire authorities.

Cllr Mike Murphy reported that a number of fire and rescue authorities had not paid their subscriptions for the **Fire Gateway** and was concerned that this could jeopardise the future of the portal. This concern was echoed by other members.

Members suggested that Terry Brewer be invited to give an update on Firebuy at the February Forum meeting. It was also suggested that CLG officials were invited to the LGA Fire Conference to give an update on RCCs. The Chair suggested that LGA Officers explore the possibilities of holding a workshop on this topic.

3. Audit Commission national study on the Fire and Rescue Service

The Chairman welcomed Simon Mahoney and Stuart Deaton from the Audit Commission, explained the background to the Audit Commission's National Study on the Fire and Rescue Service:

- In 1995 the Audit Commission undertook a Study on the Fire and Rescue service – “*in the line of fire*”, no national study had been carried out since
- This year, the Audit Commission has undertaken a new National Study on the Fire and Rescue Service which is due to be published in December
- The discussion at Fire Forum is an opportunity for members to input into the conclusions, before the final draft is completed
- It was clear that whilst FRAs had made a great deal of progress across the board, there was scope for further improvement, and no room for complacency.

Simon Mahoney, Head of Studies, gave a detailed presentation on the key findings of the study.

He reported that within the last few decades, the risks the services had to manage have changed significantly; the service had undergone a major modernisation programme in an attempt to improve the way it deals with risk; performance has also improved but this varied across individual Fire and Rescue Authorities.

The Study also looked at equality and diversity, sickness absence; collaboration/partnership working and regionalisation. It was also noted that good progress had been made in fire prevention.

Members' views were sought on the safety aspects of their operations (number of fire fighters, pumps, stations) IRMPs and regionalisation.

The exact timescale for responses to the Audit Commission report was unknown but it was noted that the report would hopefully be published in December. Copies of the slides were circulated prior to the meeting and can be accessed at:

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelid=21407>

Members made comments as follows-

- At a recent regional management board meeting, the South East RMB was praised for its work on equality and diversity, but this was not mirrored in the Audit Commission findings. There were also a number of examples of collaborative

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working among the 9 FRAs in the South-East, for example sharing best practice and procurement.

- Inconsistency in the government policy is a hindrance to achieving equality and diversity. FRAs need stronger and more consistent policy/leadership from government.
- It may be difficult to meet government targets for equality and diversity because of an overall reduction in firefighter numbers and smaller recruitment campaigns, with some FRAs not recruiting at all for the next 2 years. The Audit Commission noted that the final report would highlight good practice in this area.
- It was felt that the Audit Commission's terms of reference for the report were too narrow. The data used in the presentation appeared to be from an auditor's point of view and did not take into account other factors. The Audit Commission should bear in mind that the modern fire and rescue service is attending a greater variety of incidents than a decade ago.
- The Audit Commission's criticism on appliance levels remaining static was too simplistic. It was explained that the FRS is a risk based service. Also, the FRS now deals with a range of incidents such as working with police to deal with anti-social behaviour.
- The Audit Commission findings appeared not to have taken into account the different needs in urban and rural areas which had led to variations in cost.
- It was noted that whilst FRAs are reducing costs, the safety of the communities is of paramount importance.
- It was acknowledged that there was room for FRAs to improve and to do better, but also that the Audit Commission recognises the good work that is already undertaken by FRAs.
- The Chairman asked members to copy any further comments on the Audit Commission's presentation to Clive Harris (clive.harris@lga.gov.uk).

4. Attendance Management in the Fire and Rescue Service: Managing Sickness Absence (oral report)

The Chair welcomed and introduced Ian Copeland, Project Manager, Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Ian Copeland briefed members on the work carried out on attendance management in the FRS and noted that the report could be accessed at the HSE Website.

The key messages from the report were outlined and these included reducing ill-health and sickness absence. It was explained that the aim of the report was to look

at good practice; policies and procedures and to work on barriers that impede improvement to sickness absence.

Work undertaken with relevant stakeholders on an inspection protocol would clarify the relationship between HSE and the FRS and this is being discussed between the Fire Service and the police at national level and a draft report would be produced in due course.

Ian Copeland summarised some of the key findings and the strategies necessary for managing sickness absence and concluded that those FRAs that took a holistic approach to health and safety noted that their levels of sickness absence were improving.

The Chairman paid tribute to Cllr Jim Mochnacz who had represented the LGA on this project.

5. Fire Suppression and Sustainable Buildings Task Group Final Report

Cllr Michael Murphy updated members on the final report of the Fire Suppression and Sustainable Buildings Task Group. He referred members to the paragraphs in the report detailing the task group's activities. He informed members that although the work of the task group had come to an end, he would continue to act as a champion on issues relating to sprinklers and fire suppression systems for the LGA.

6. NJC Update (oral report)

The Chairman gave feedback from the Annual General meeting of both the NJC and the Middle Managers' Negotiating Body on 30 September. He reported that:

- He had been appointed by the Employers' side as the Chair of both bodies for the forthcoming year
- An annual report had been received from Professor **Chatterjee**, the Independent Chair
- A progress report was given on the Part-time workers' (Prevention of less favourable treatment) Regulations
- The key issue discussed was the 2009/10 pay settlement. Progress would be reported at the next Forum meeting.

7. Future meeting dates

The future dates for the Fire Services Forum meetings for 2008-09 were noted.

8. Notes of previous meeting

The notes of the Fire Services Forum meeting on 27 June were agreed.

9. Date of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on **Friday 6 February 2009** at Local Government House.