

Notes of Decisions Taken and Action

FIRE SERVICES FORUM

3 April 2009

Room 8.1, Local Government House at 11.00am.

1. Update from the Fire Services Management Committee

The Chair, Cllr Anthony Duggan, updated members on issues discussed at the FSMC meeting held on 9 March and highlighted that:

- FRAs will have received a letter from CLG regarding the Fire Gateway which asks for a contribution of £6,000 per FRA for the 2009/10 financial year to ensure the portal remains in operation. A survey of FRAs is being conducted to establish the ongoing value of Fire Gateway to the sector before developing future plans.
- The Audit Commission's latest performance assessment results for FRAs were published on 12th February. The report finds that fire services in England and Wales continue to improve, but the gap between the best and worst services is widening. It also concludes that all fire services have the potential to improve further.
- The Audit Commission and partner inspectorates have published the final framework for CAA which will come into effect from 1 April 2009, taking over from the system of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

Cllr Fred Walker encouraged members to respond to the survey sent out by the NJC for Brigade Managers in January.

A member queried the position set out in paragraph 8 of the report, relating to FiReControl. Dave Webb (CFO Leicestershire) clarified that it is LACCs, not FRAs, which are able to sub-let their RCC building.

Several members stressed the importance of encouraging all members to sign up to the Equality and Diversity Charter. Cllr Michael Murphy explained that this will play a key role in both promoting fairness and dignity at work and in ensuring that authorities properly represent the communities they serve. The Chair also encouraged members to attend the first meeting for FRA Equality and Diversity Champions on the 21st April, 11.00 – 1.00 at Local Government House.

The Chair noted that the LGA's annual fire conference that took place on the 10th and 11th March had been very well received. He thanked LGA staff for their hard work which had made this event such a success.

2. FiReControl and Firelink

FiReControl

The Forum received a presentation from Madeleine Rudd, CLG, which is available on the LGA website at: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/1781923>. This presentation outlined the key elements of the new system and updated members on progress to date. The consultations on both parts of the business case have now closed and CLG is currently reviewing feedback. The timetable is challenging, but CLG are looking to engage with elected members to ensure that they have sufficient time and information to be able to take the necessary decisions.

Members commented as follows:

- CLG needs to do a lot more work to build confidence among elected members and to ensure that they have sufficient information. Individual authorities will need to have discussions with CLG to address their specific issues; it is not enough for CLG to consult only at a regional level.
- Hertfordshire and several other authorities have real concern over the proposed timing of the switchover, as the Olympics will be a great test of resilience.
- There is a general lack of confidence in the stated delivery dates and so members asked to see further details of the delivery plan and milestones.
- Despite the possibility of subletting RCC buildings, a member highlighted public concerns about the waste caused by these buildings being built so long before they are to be used. A member added that in his region a study had found that this facility could have been delivered more cheaply independently.

Madeleine noted members' comments and **agreed to feed the specific concerns back to CLG.**

Firelink

Ray Gray, CLG, gave a presentation outlining how the new system architecture will look and updating members on progress so far and the challenges faced. This presentation is available at: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/1781916>

Members expressed confidence in the new system and noted the generally positive feedback they had received from staff. Two members highlighted specific problems with the new equipment in their areas and Ray **agreed to follow these up.**

Members commented that local authorities have wider problems engaging with O2 in relation to planning applications for masts. The Chair encouraged Ray to keep members informed about issues related to planning, as many members have expertise gained through their membership of local authority planning committees which could be fed in.

3. Trading powers for Fire and Rescue Authorities

The Forum received a presentation from Anna Wadsworth, CLG, which can be viewed at: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/1781920>. She explained that the legislation on FRA trading needs to be reviewed before the current FRA Trading Order ceases on 29 September 2009. Consultation on new legislation is being combined with the wider consultation on proposed changes to freedoms and flexibilities following the introduction of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). This has been delayed, but the 12 week consultation will now be published in early May. Anna encouraged all authorities to respond.

In response to a member's question on whether County FRAs are covered by their wider Local Authorities trading powers, Anna provided the following response following the meeting:

The Trading Order which applied trading powers to local authorities states that it does not apply to county councils when acting in their capacity as a fire authority (article 1(3) of SI 2004/1705) - <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2004/20041705.htm>.

4. Comprehensive Spending Review

Ellie Greenwood, Senior Policy Consultant in the LGA finance team, updated members about the LGA's activity in preparation for the next spending review. Due to the current economic situation, the spending review is not expected soon, however, the work that had been done in preparation will feed into wider LGA work on local government finance. Broader LGA objectives include the reduction of waste and the data burden and lobbying for increased local accountability over people's money through greater local authority control, including the reduction of ring-fencing.

In terms of the recession, the LGA's key messages are to publicise the work that local authorities are doing to support communities through these difficult times and to emphasise the need for local solutions to meet the local variation in the impact of the recession. The LGA is now encouraging local authorities to think fundamentally about what will need to change to ensure that services can be delivered in the context of tough future funding settlements.

A member noted that at the previous day's meeting, the Fire Minister had hinted that there may be funding to support fire authorities in dealing with the loss of the opt-out from the European Working Time Directive. Ellie **agreed to raise this with colleagues.**

In response to comments from several members about the grant formula, Ellie explained that this is not something that LGA can be directly involved with, however there are CLG working groups looking at this. The group which deals with fire is meeting at the moment and Ellie **will circulate further details to members.**

5. Note of the previous meeting

The final bullet point at the top of page 10 needs to be reworded to read, 'the Chair reported that a letter had been received.....'

The first paragraph under Item 3 also needs to be amended to make it clear that it is FRAs that provide the political leadership; LGA acts on their behalf.

Subject to these amendments, the notes of the Fire Services Forum meeting on 6 February 2009 were agreed.

6. Date of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Friday 26 June 2009.

As this was the Chair's last meeting, the members of the Forum thanked him for all the work that he had done on their behalf during the past year. The Chair also wished all the other members who were either standing down or contesting the forthcoming local elections good luck for the future.