

## **Freedom to Lead – response from the LGA’s Fire Services Management Committee**

The Fire Services Management Committee, the LGA’s representative body for all 46 Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in England, discussed the Freedom to Lead publication at its meeting on 23 November 2009 as part of a wider debate about the early findings from the first round of the Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Local fire services are run by locally accountable FRAs comprising elected Members. These services range in size and configuration from the Isles of Scilly Fire and Rescue Service, serving just over two thousand people, to the London Fire Brigade, serving well over seven million people. Many services rely on on-call firefighters while others have all full time firefighters. This means that any future accountability framework must be flexible enough to reflect the diversity of provision – one size will definitely not fit all.

Along with responding to incidents, all fire authorities have two main responsibilities - enforcing fire legislation and promoting fire safety. Much work is done in partnership with local authorities, the police service and other agencies and, while this is important, FSMC members are clear that the main focus for FRAs is on delivering a comprehensive and effective fire and rescue service. Members also recognise that while the fire service does not always have a high profile in local partnerships, some partnerships are not delivering focussed and innovative results and such partnerships might themselves benefit from greater scrutiny and challenge.

Members’ experience of the supposedly streamlined CAA process was that it remained burdensome and process focussed; uncoordinated with other agencies, such as the Health and Safety Executive; and did not allow FRAs enough time to either feed back to the Audit Commission about their assessment or to action recommendations before the next round of inspections started. Members want these matters addressed before the next round of CAA gets under way.

Since the demise of HM Inspectorate of Fire Services, the fire service (supported by IDeA and the Chief Fire Officers Association) has developed its own operational assessment. This means that fire service performance is only subject to organisational assessment by the Audit Commission, yet even this process has been complicated by inconsistencies in approach by the Audit Commission. Some Audit Commission inspectors would not accept the operational assessment and brought along their own peer reviewers thereby duplicating work already done and increasing inspection costs. There is also some confusion about the role of CLG’s Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser’s Unit in assessing performance. The role of CFRAU is to provide strategic advice to ministers, civil servants and FRAs yet there is an increasing tendency for this part of CLG to get involved in issues on the ground. If there is a future role for external audit of fire services then the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies must be crystal clear.

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Members believe that where FRAs need support in improving services then the sector-led approach, currently being developed between LGA, IDeA and CFOA, should be allowed time to have an impact before threats of intervention are made. Members felt that sharing of best practice would help in addressing any disparities between FRAs and that the LGA Group would have a role in that.

Finally, the fire service is consistently held in high regard by the public and any future performance system should offer a lighter touch to high performing authorities.