

LG Group Fire Futures draft submission

Summary

The Fire Services Management Committee agreed at its meeting on the 10th September that the views of the Fire Services Commission should be sought on the content of the LG Group's submission to Government's *Fire Futures* review of fire policy.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- Consider the draft submission and comment as appropriate

Action

Officers to work Member's comments into the draft submission.

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LG Group Fire Futures draft submission

1. The Local Government Group welcomes the opportunity to respond to Communities and Local Government's *Fire Futures* project that will determine the future shape of the Fire and Rescue Service. The LG Group is however concerned by the limited timeframe of the project and how workstreams have been allocated; these factors could have a detrimental effect on the outcomes of this exercise.
2. The LG Group is made up of six organisations that work together to support, promote and improve local government. These organisations are the LG Association, LG Improvement and Development, LG Employers, LG Regulation, LG Leadership and Local Partnerships.
3. As the national representative body for all 46 Fire and Rescue Authorities, we hope this submission can be considered alongside the reports from individual workstream leads. Although a large number of detailed questions have been asked, rather than addressing each in turn, the focus of this submission is on some of the broader issues, outlining key principles which should be taken into account as further policies and recommendations are formulated, and to identify key areas where the LG Group can help with key challenges in the sector. As such it is designed to complement the reports of the workstream leads.
4. In developing this submission, views have been taken from the Fire Services Management Committee and an additional meeting of the Fire Commission which was held on 24 September.

Workstream 1: The role of the fire and rescue service and how it might be better delivered (led by Cllr Paul Shannon)

5. The LG Group does not believe that most of the areas suggested by the review are sufficiently ground breaking, expressing as they do existing issues that ultimately will be resolved by local adoption and the sharing of experience and good practice. The Group instead calls for a radical reshaping of the state through devolved place-based budgets.
6. The primary role of the Fire and Rescue Service is of course to improve levels of fire safety and this must be maintained. Whether FRS undertaken other pieces of work on behalf of, or conjunction with other areas of the public sector will need to be determined locally through discussions with partners and the community. However, it is clear that important and tangible benefits are currently realised from the sector's work across other areas such as community safety.
7. The Group believes that place based or area based budgets are the most effective way to manage demand for public services. We must strengthen the awareness that FRSs are part of this agenda and not a separate entity and CLG has an important role here.
8. The same statutory framework must apply to all Fire and Rescue Authorities. The current legal arrangements provide an unsatisfactory combination of detailed legal prescription about specific services, and uncertain about a general power. The LG Group urges the Government to ensure that the power of general competence is granted to all FRAs, including combined and metropolitan authorities. This power is essential to empower FRAs to charge for services. Furthermore, the general power of competence is not simply about doing new things but also about doing existing things differently. Most importantly it is about a culture change which embeds confidence in local decision making and would reassure FRAs that they can act in the interests of their communities without fear of legal challenge. This is more important than ever at a time of public spending pressures.
9. As the National Framework is due for revision in 2011, the LG Group would argue that this needs to set out a longer term strategy and be less prescriptive than at present. FRAs must be given the freedom to focus on their key role of protecting the public, whilst having the flexibility to enter partnerships where appropriate, with partner organisations pooling their budgets and resources to best serve the needs of their communities. All of this is best agreed at the local level.
10. As regards co-responding, the same principle applies. This is an issue for individual FRAs where the LG Group and CFOA have a role in identifying and disseminating good practice.
11. We ask the Government to ensure that the work of the fire and rescue service is embedded in the thinking of all Government departments. A joined-up cross-Whitehall approach to fire safety must be at the forefront of ministers and officials thinking when legislation is drafted and policies implemented to ensure unintended consequences are avoided and maximum benefits can be realised.

12. FRAs have been overwhelmed by the emergence of a large number of surveys, consultations, initiatives, inspections and central government bodies in recent years; the LG Group asks that the government reassess the need for bodies including the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor's Unit and the Practitioners' Forum and streamlines their form and function as appropriate.
13. There are some strategic areas identified that would benefit from a thorough examination. These are:
- a single service provider for some or all emergency services;
 - a levy on insurance premiums for building and vehicle insurance to reflect the economic cost of fire;
 - greater opportunities for charging for discretionary services.
 - Whilst the LG Group has always been a strong advocate of localism, there is a need to ensure interoperability with regards to the technology and equipment used by FRSs to ensure effective and efficient cross-border working.

Workforce

Context

The local government workforce is changing. The number of staff directly employed by Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) is likely to decline. There will be more joint working and the skills we require will change. Councils, including FRAs, will need to manage and motivate their workforces to increase productivity and transform local public services.

Issues

14. FRAs do not work in isolation and are well aware of the big challenges that the public sector is facing and they are willing and able to play a full part in reshaping the organisation and delivery of services. National government needs to support and enable local government to make changes.
15. FRAs have shown themselves capable of developing a flexible and productive workforce, and delivered an affordable and flexible pay, reward and conditions system in line with the whole of local government. The significant majority of FRS budgets is spent on paying officers, but FRSs will need to explore how their assets can be utilised to the greatest commercial value.

The LG Group can help through:

16. Working with leading edge FRAs, develop practical advice and guidance on:
- an affordable and fit-for-purpose pension scheme
 - the implications of demographic change
 - breaking down barriers to staff flexibility
 - ways of joining up workforces across local authority boundaries and different parts of the public sector.

17. The LG Group believes that there is still a role for central government with regards to firefighter pensions, but the wider workforce agenda - leadership, skills, etc must be owned and led by Fire and Rescue Authorities.

The future of the NJC

18. The Government has made it clear that role of the National Joint Council falls outside the remit of the *Fire Futures* project, however in the current fast-moving and challenging times, the Employers' Side of the NJC will always wish to keep its continuing effectiveness under review.

19. Pay and conditions of employment of uniformed fire and rescue service employees are largely negotiated by the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services which is a voluntary arrangement. The NJC is committed to the local democratic control of fire and rescue services to the community and at present all 57 UK-wide fire and rescue services choose to apply its national framework of pay and conditions, which can be adapted at local level. Its current pay structure is clear, transparent and competency based.

Workstream 2: Efficiency, effectiveness and productivity (led by CFO Max Hood)

FRA face significant reductions in resources from central government and will need to reduce spending. Councils have been acknowledged as the most efficient part of the public sector but the opportunities to drive out further top-down efficiencies are narrowing. Increased productivity will only be achieved by doing things completely differently.

Issues

20. FRAs are willing and able to play a full part in reducing public spending. They have already achieved the efficiency savings set out by the Audit Commission in *Rising to the Challenge* (£185 million of cumulative, annually recurring, cashable efficiency savings equating to 9 per cent of total expenditure in 2007/08). To realise the full savings now required however we ask the government to remove the duplication of burdens and excessive guidance and circulars that FRAs currently have to deal with. FRAs must have the freedom to:

- identify the key productivity gains, achieved through national and local data combined with local experience
- develop their own proposals to make sure savings are delivered quickly
- provide sector-led support for those FRAs that are falling behind, without central government interference
- develop a sector-wide approach to benchmarking to drive down unit costs and improve productivity
- increase the skills of councillors and officers in reviewing and taking action on spend data.

The LG Group can help through:

- supporting and equipping FRAs to move to shared services between groups of public services and groups of FRAs at the back office, senior operational and political levels
- supporting FRAs in responding to longer term service pressures by advising on spending on prevention and early intervention
- developing a sector owned benchmarking tool to provide comparability on unit costs, productivity and outcomes
- creating an information exchange, networking and skills programme to build the skills of councillors and officers in understanding spend data (and local variations)
- promote existing efficiency techniques
- there must not be a centrally taken decision on the optimum number of FRAs, but the LG Group recognises that questions are and will continue to be asked about the viability of current number. On that basis the Group will be providing support for FRAs to develop business cases for voluntarily merging with neighbouring authorities

21. The CLG/LG Group's Productivity Programme involves working with over 60 councils who are exploring/implementing alternative service delivery models for areas such as shared services, procurement, capital and shared assets. This review should take account of learning from that programme.

22. With the abolition of CAA and the Audit Commission, the sector have asked the LG Group to develop a system of self improvement. FRAs are still keen to have comparative performance information and peer review will be refreshed and strengthened to include challenge from other sectors such as business and the voluntary sector. Finally, as part of this, the Group wants to put in place arrangements that enable the sector to offer support before things go wrong, by being able to identify the early warning signals.

Workstream 3: Localism and accountability (led by Cllr Andre Gonzalez De Savage)

Public services have to become more transparent, more effective, and cheaper. Councils have a key role to play in creating a smaller, more local state at reduced cost. There is growing recognition that the radical transformation of public services is best achieved through local budgets which make significant savings possible by getting rid of organisational silos to deliver the services people want in a joined up way.

Issues

23. FRAs will need to consider radically transforming the way their services are organised and delivered, ensuring savings to be made and, where possible and appropriate, for people to take more responsibility over their own lives.

24. The FRS is already a localised service that meets the needs of the communities that it serves. There may, however, be room for FRSs to engage more with their communities through:

- better consultation with the public on changes to IRMPs;
- greater use of modern marketing techniques;
- more effective use of stations as hubs of the community; and
- FRA members and Chief Officers developing their profile and accessibility to the communities that they serve
- Taking a role in participatory budgets schemes.
- FRSs are part of the wider local government family and they must use their linkages to learn from other parts of the sector.

The LG Group can help through:

- helping to bring together different parts of the public sector in an area in a local budget, using expertise of having undertaken this work in different areas before
 - developing new systems of governance that work well for local people where there are local budgets
 - helping councils and their partners commission and design services round people's needs, not institutional silos
 - supporting councils in operating transparently and sharing information with local residents in a useful way.
25. The LG Group strongly believes in and supports the existing FRA governance model. This model has cross-party political buy-in and facilitates a joined-up approach to service delivery. Other than devolved place based budgets, where we advocate an accountability direct to Parliament, we do not believe that this is the right time to consider changing governance arrangements. Public confidence is strong and now, more than ever, strong leadership is needed to inform challenging decisions around finances.

Accountability

Context

The government has signalled a radical approach to decentralising power and enhancing local accountability through transparent information. Inspection will be scaled back and CAA abolished, resulting in a significantly increased new role for local government, including FRAs, in leading and taking responsibility for its own performance, accountable primarily to local residents.

Issues

26. FRAs must become even more accountable to local people through:
 - taking responsibility for reviewing and challenging their own performance rather than through central government targets and performance monitoring
 - sharing knowledge, so that FRAs learn from the best and demonstrably takes responsibility as a sector for its own improvement and performance
 - proactively identifying FRAs who are struggling and providing councillor and officer peer support

26. Councillors appointed to FRAs provide a valuable and democratic oversight role. As the only democratically elected representatives of communities at a local level, who live and work locally, and know their communities and the issues facing them, they are already fully accountable to local communities. In order to reflect the diversity in our communities, ensure the widest possible pool of councillors and ensuring access to practical leadership training will continue to be important for FRAs. Supporting councillors to transfer their specialist knowledge is also important.

27. The Retained Duty System is a good example of how the FRS is already well integrated with communities and contributing to the idea of the Big Society, with paid members of the local community delivering a flexible and effective workforce. FRAs must also be empowered to decide how non-specialist tasks can be undertaken at the local level; the voluntary sector, commercial organisations and other parts of the public sector might be better placed to undertake these tasks efficiently and effectively.

Workstream 4: The national interest (led by Brian Robinson)

27. The question of a National Framework with localism can work but with the need to have a will to share best practice amongst and between elected members and between senior officers.

28. A number of national functions could lie with a new strengthened partnership between CFOA and the LG Group. Broadly, these fall into the category of supporting and promoting industry-wide standards and good practice, providing capacity to support the weaker services, clarity on future technological requirements and investment, and services which make local people safer.

29. The following individual functions could fall into this category:

- National safety campaigns;
- IRMP Guidance;
- Research and statistics;
- Workforce development;
- Operational guidance;
- National procurement;
- Equality and Diversity; and
- Long term capability management for national resilience arrangements.

30. CFOA/LG Group have written to the Minister setting out this proposal and this should form the cornerstone of this workstream.

CONCLUSION

The LG Group's challenge to government

31. Given the range of proposals that we can expect to be submitted to the *Fire Futures* review and the technical nature of some of these, the LG group has developed four key tests against which we suggest the Government judges the proposals. They are:

- Do the proposals build on existing experiences and good practise?
- Do they support an area-based budgeting approach?
- Do they ensure accountability to local communities?
- Do they ensure that public resources are directed to the areas of greatest need?

32. These tests will ensure that a considered localist approach to the fire and rescue service is taken by Government and will allow the sector to develop on the basis of mutual assistance and best practise.

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