

Item 3

Business Continuity

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

At the Fire Services Management Committee meeting on 16 May 2011 Bob Neill MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, CLG addressed the Committee on a number of issues. In this discussion, he emphasised to Members the importance of ensuring up to date and effective business continuity plans are in place in every FRA.

Recommendation

Members are asked to report on what action they have taken, or are intending to take to test and review business continuity plans in response to the Audit Commission report and the Minister's concerns. Members are also asked to ensure that their own authorities have made necessary arrangements to fulfil their statutory duties in relation to business continuity.

Action

LG Group officers to progress actions as appropriate.

Contact officer: Helen Murray
Position: Head of Programme (Interim)
Phone no: 0207 664 3266
E-mail: helen.murray@local.gov.uk

Item 3

Business continuity in Fire and Rescue Services

Background

1. An Audit Commission report '*Business Continuity Management*' published in September 2010 <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/firerescue/firebcm/Pages/default.aspx> concluded that the FRS has a strong track record of dealing with large scale emergencies. Services are becoming more resilient, are aware of their legal responsibilities and have good systems to learn from actual events. However, the Report also pointed out that the FRSs do not always have the capacity to provide emergency cover for long periods and they could be better prepared with stronger regional and local collaboration.
2. Even though on the whole FRAs have good business continuity practices in place and there were a raft of good examples set out in the report, the report highlighted that some serious risks and inconsistencies to business continuity management remain, particularly when the size of the workforce reduces. It also reported that less than a quarter of services test and exercise their plans; there is little learning from other organisations, and not enough consideration given to considering effects on vulnerable people.
3. To help improve business continuity in the FRS the report made the following recommendations for FRA Members and their partners to take forward:
 - 3.1. More local people should be involved in deciding what an appropriate level of service means to them (and needs to be maintained during emergencies);
 - 3.2. FRSs should be clear about how emergency plans meet those needs;
 - 3.3. Further testing and exercising of plans needs to be carried out to ensure that there is enough capacity and skills to continue business as usual;
 - 3.4. FRSs should work with partners and other FRSs to build capacity and maximise resilience which ensures value for money and instils confidence in local people.

Statutory requirements

4. Fire and Rescue Authorities have duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 which states that Fire and Rescue Authorities should have plans in place to ensure the continuation of core business and functions in the case of emergencies. Since 2006 central government intervention and support to FRAs during emergency situations has been scaled back and there is no longer an expectation that FRAs can rely on central government to provide appliances, equipment and military support in place of operational fire service crews.

Item 3

5. The duty is therefore on FRAs to ensure that they have business continuity plans in place to enable normal services and functions to continue, as far as is reasonably practicable.
6. This has been clearly set out in the last two National Frameworks. The 2006-8 Framework clearly stated that FRAs had a “duty to put in place business continuity management arrangements to ensure that they can continue to exercise their functions in the event of an emergency so far as is reasonably practicable. It cannot be assumed that the Armed Forces will be available to provide cover in the event of industrial action by fire-fighters”.
7. The 2008-10 National Framework further confirmed this position and added “Government has worked actively with the Local Government Association and with the Chief Fire Officers’ Association to support self sufficiency in emergency cover across the country. It is the responsibility of the individual Fire and Rescue Authorities to keep under review the levels of emergency cover that they deem to be appropriate.”
8. Although the Audit Commission is now being disbanded, CLG have been keen to follow up some of the Report’s recommendations. Sir Ken Knight, CFRA, wrote to all FRAs in February 2011 asking them to submit details of business continuity plans. The Minister reported at the FSMC that although most of the returns were comprehensive, there appeared to be some gaps around regular testing of plans and it would be timely for the Committee and Commission Members to be made aware of this issue. Indeed CLG have followed this up further with the June 2011 Fire and Rescue Service Monthly Bulletin reminding all Fire and Rescue Services and Authorities of the need to ensure they have business continuity plans in place in case of emergencies. Those that already do are encouraged to review their plans and update if necessary.

Importance of business continuity

9. Aside from the statutory imperative to ensure that business continuity arrangements are in place, there are a number of reasons why business continuity arrangements are receiving increased emphasis at the current time, including:
 - 9.1. increased threat of terrorism result from world events
 - 9.2. the 2012 Olympic Games which will bring world attention and millions of visitors to the UK
 - 9.3. increased likelihood of large scale industrial action as a result of spending cuts and forthcoming changes to pension schemes which may be controversial.
10. There are good business reasons to suggest that FRAs need to make sure they have plans in place to allow them to deal effectively with any or a combination of

Item 3

emergency situations at the same time; and that they engage with a range of partners further afield; and have a wider range of alternatives to call on to ensure business can continue as usual. Widespread national strikes, for example, could mean that plans that are reliant on assistance from neighbouring FRAs will not be effective.

The fire and rescue sector response

11. As the Audit Commission report acknowledged, we believe that the sector takes business continuity very seriously and all FRAs have plans in place. However, it would be timely for Members to suggest that these are revisited and amended if necessary in order to provide confidence and assurance to Ministers.
12. The Audit Commission report set out some questions that Chairs and Members of FRAs may wish to ask officers in order to satisfy themselves about local arrangements.
 - 12.1. Does the service have a clear, practical plan to deal with a range of possible disruptions?
 - 12.2. Does the plan identify how essential services including mobilizing and operational support will be maintained?
 - 12.3. What does the service learn from testing and exercising its plans, and how is this used to make improvements?
 - 12.4. What has the service learnt from its partners and other organizations?
 - 12.5. How does the service engage community groups to take more responsibility for their own safety at times when services may be limited?
13. In our view, these remain valid, although given the current climate, business continuity plans showing how services deal with risks when resources are not available is a further important dimension.
14. Chairs and Members of FRAs may wish to conduct a review of local business continuity arrangements to ensure that they have full confidence in local processes and procedures. If FRAs are interested, the LG Group can explore with Members a potential peer review offer in health checking of existing processes. This peer review offer would be in line with the Group's approach of sector-led support and we would seek to work with CFOA and external partners.

Recommendations

15. Members are asked to report on what action they have taken, or are intending to take to test and review business continuity plans in response to the Audit Commission report and the Minister's concerns. Members are also asked to ensure that their own authorities have made necessary arrangements to fulfil their statutory duties in relation to business continuity.